BLOGGING RELIGIOUS CHANGE
IDENTITY, HEGEMONY, AND PLURALISM IN ITALY

by

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Blogging Religious Change: Identity, Hegemony, and Pluralism in Italy

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Italian national media tend to present Italian identity as homogenously Catholic. While the majority of Italians self-identify as Catholic, the Italian religious landscape is rapidly changing: for example, migration is increasing the number of Muslims; less stigma on atheism is motivating some Italians to self-identify as non-believers; and a more open critique of secularism compels conservative Catholics to defend traditional Christian values.

A number of alternative voices have recently emerged in the Italian religious public sphere to challenge hegemonic positions of religion and the secular. Through blogs and other social media platforms, they question the terms of religious identity in contemporary Italian society and push the boundaries of both the religious and secular fields. In studying the media practices of these groups, I ask the following questions: what kind of discourses are employed to challenge the perceived religious hegemony? What is the role of the Internet in the articulation of non-mainstream religious identities? Can the digital space create resistance, establish a media presence, and enhance participation?

This dissertation argues that the Internet can become a "third space" where hybrid religious identities are articulated in opposition to a perceived Catholic hegemony, as presented by mainstream media. The dissertation uses a qualitative textual analysis of three religious related-blogs, combined with interviews with bloggers and participant observation. The three blogs under analysis are 1) The blog of the UAAR, the national Italian atheist association 2) The blog of the Catholic group *Sentinelle in Piedi*, which protects traditional family values 3) The blog *Yalla*, written by young Muslim Italians.

The three blogs, while different in scope, similarly engage in dynamic media practices to compel Italian media and society to re-think identity in religious terms. By promoting secularism, a come-back to traditional Catholic values, or religious pluralism, the blogs problematize the lack of participation in consensual Western democracies and unveil anxieties that characterize late modernity in Italy. This analysis of blogs can add some much-needed complexity to religion and media debates in Europe, help define the role of religion in the Italian public sphere, and contextualize the re-thinking of the perceived hegemonic Italian identity.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Sister Cristina is a Catholic nun that became famous in 2014 for winning the Italian version of the singing competition "The Voice." She celebrated her victory by saying, "I have a dream, I want to thank who is above, I want Jesus to be here with us, I want to pray a *Pater Noster.*" She asked the audience of the show and the other participants to join hands and recite the "Our Father" prayer, even if the program was not religious in scope[i].

Sister Cristina brought a consistent number of Catholic messages to an entertainment program that airs on national television. The Italian audience is not unused to seeing representations of religion within mainstream media. In Italy there are a number of "liturgic" representations of Catholicism, exemplified by the Mass celebrated by the Pope and aired every Sunday on the national television channel RAI 1. Furthermore, Catholicism is embedded in "spectacular" religious programs, with the aim of entertaining (Martelli, 2004). For example, a popular TV show called "Don Matteo" features a Catholic priest that solves crime cases, and Italian television is rich in fictional drama based on the life of religious figures (Buonanno, 2012).

This representation of religion in Italy tends to take into account only Catholicism, the predominant religion of the country. In 2014, among religious programs, 95.5% of news, 88.2% of television dramas, and 73% of movies were

about Catholicism (Geca Italia, 2014). This unbalanced representation of religion is important in understanding how Italian mainstream media frame Italian identity.

Media are central in the formation of national identity. According to Benedict Anderson (1983), national identity is a "cultural artifact" (p.4). Nationalism is the result of the construction of a common identity and history that provides resources for shared meanings. Nation states are "imagined communities" because citizens are not bounded to each other by personal relations of knowledge, but rather by the construction of a common imaginary of belonging. Media can provide spaces for the creation of this identity. In the Italian case, the pervasiveness of Catholicism in mainstream media makes religion an important resource of national identity.

However, the connection between Catholicism, media, and national identity is far from being unproblematic. The lack of representation of non-Catholic religions and the connection between Catholicism and entertainment often result in an hegemonic portrayal of the dominant religiosity of the country that does not satisfy the totality of Italians. From exploratory interviews I conducted in 2013 and 2014 with media practitioners working for Catholic, atheist, Protestant, Jew, and Buddhist media outlets, two main critiques emerge.

First, minority religious groups struggle to find a space of expression within the Italian media system and the Italian public sphere. When non-Catholic religions are portrayed, they are usually described by non-members in a superficial way.

Similarly, the amount of Catholicism within mainstream media does not leave substantial space for the articulation of humanist and secular positions.

Secondly, some Catholics are unsatisfied with the portrayal of Catholicism done by national media, as well. While there is a great amount of Catholic-inspired entertainment shows and Catholic news, they often fail to engage deep analyses of the Church. On the contrary, religious information tends to focus on soft news, such as the personal life of the Pope, rather than sophisticated analysis of the Catholic Church. Certain aspects of Catholicism are preferred over others: for example, conservative positions that advocate against same-sex unions and abortion are often overlooked by mainstream media.

The performance of Sister Cristina at "The Voice" exemplifies both the predominance of Catholicism within Italian media and the superficial portrayal of religious values they operate. With Sister Cristina's continuous references to Catholicism, the program became a way to express a specific religious message. At the same time, however, Sister Cristina was part of an entertainment show and her religiosity was framed in a way that was compatible with the logic of secular media. Her final prayer, for instance, was probably a way to celebrate a victory more than a deep spiritual moment. From this perspective, Sister Cristina's performance is an example of what Martelli (2004) defines as "spectacular" religious programs, where religious and secular elements are presented together with the aim of attracting audience, and where the creation of religious messages is often secondary to the entertainment value of the programs.

During his interview, the blogger Oussama Mansur, who writes for *Yalla Italia,* one of the case studies of this dissertation, talked about Sister Cristina (Personal Communication, 06/09/2015). He recognized that a woman wearing a hijab has difficulties in being hired for certain jobs in Italy, and then he added that this does not apply to Sister Cristina, who became famous despite (or maybe because) her covered head. Mansur's consideration, however, was partially proved wrong by the 2016 edition of "The Voice," which features an Iranian woman wearing a hijab, Kimia Ghorbani. After being selected as a participant for "The Voice," Ghorbani explained that in Iran she had been beaten and arrested because women are prevented from singing. In Italy, she said, she could find freedom. After her performance, Ghorbani took off her hijab in a symbolic gesture that expressed her endorsement of Western values[ii].

Sister Cristina and Kimia Ghorbani's performances exemplify how Italian media are often not receptive of religious diversity. While Catholicism is perceived as a normal presence in Italian national media and it is embedded in entertainment programs, other religions, especially Islam, are seen as not compatible with mainstream media representations. Indeed, Ghorbani participated in the show removing her hijab, while Sister Cristina proudly wore her religious symbols and she was appreciated also because of her religiosity.

These unequal representations of religion in Italian media expose the limits of democratic participation in the Italian consensus: excluded from the national

identity-construction process, certain religious positions need to find alternative spaces of expression. A number of minority religious groups, indeed, employ non-mainstream media in opposition to the perceived superficial representation of Italian mainstream media.

Therefore, I argue that the digital space has the potential to contrast the hegemonic portrayal of Catholicism offered by mainstream media. The relationship of religion and media is generative of spaces to articulate values and potentially resist dominant meanings. Through the analysis of discourses produced by three religious-related blogs, I show how the Italian identity is more nuanced than presented by mainstream media and produces movements of resistance to pre-defined representations. I analyze the creation of discourses in relation to the religious and the secular in Western societies. By employing Habermas' definition of the public sphere (1962), I problematize the idea of participation in public spaces. In particular, I analyze the blogs as examples of counterpublics (Warner, 2005) and agonistic spaces (Mouffe, 2005). I take into account the Gramscian concept of hegemony (1929-1932) and the Cultural Studies re-elaboration of the idea of counter-hegemonies. The focus on space in relation to religion and media contextualizes the creation of "third spaces" within the Internet.

Third spaces are digital venues, such as blogs, that are generative of oppositional meanings and hybrid identities expressed through a set of media practices. The place religion occupies in Italy is related to physical and metaphorical spaces. The public sphere is concerned with the division of roles between religious

and secular spaces, where religious symbols create tangible religious spaces by charging them with meanings and values. Media constitute important venues for the articulation of mainstream and non-mainstream religious discourses that create non-physical spaces of discussion. The media space connects the private and the public sphere of religious practice, and allows for the articulation of media practices that can be resistive to a perceived hegemony. In particular, the digital space enables users to create third spaces that often put themselves in opposition to what they perceived as mainstream religious spaces, creating resistive venues for the articulation of religious discourses. With the analysis of three case studies, I explain how minority groups contest the lack of pluralism within democratic consensus and their exclusion from the process of identity creation in late modernity, trying to recuperate their voices in a hegemonic structure.

Religion in Italy

Media tend to portray Italian identity as Catholic, as exemplified by the case of Sister Cristina at "The Voice". Indeed, 87%[iii] of the Italian population self-identifies as Catholic, (Mazzoleni et al. 2011) and 97% of Italians received Catholic baptism (CESNUR, 2009, quoting the official data of the Italian Episcopal Conference[iv]). The tradition of baptizing newborns is a characteristic of the Italian identity that often involves people that do not consider themselves religious, or that do not regularly engage in religious rituals such as the Catholic mass. For example, 61% of atheists declare that they would baptize their children even if they do not believe in God (Doxa 2014). Similarly, Italians often perform Catholic weddings and funerals as part of their culture and tradition. As a result, while the majority of the Italian population

is undoubtedly Catholic, it is difficult to assess the exact number and the degree of religiosity of Italian Catholics.

This attitude about religion has been defined as "belonging without believing" (Marchisio and Pisati, 1999). While the majority of Italians self-identify as Catholic, they often feel a sense of belonging to the religious institution more than engagement with personal faith. As a result, Catholicism in Italy is often practiced within the community rather than intimately lived. The "belonging without believing" attitude can be explained with the important role of Catholicism in the public sphere. Italians belong to the Catholic Church because they often engage with the places of socialization it provides. For example, the Catholic Church organizes recreational activities and assistance for children, the elderly, and the disabled, and controls many healthcare facilities and private schools, often filling a role that the state does not provide for. More than 90% of the population, including non-Catholics, participates in activities organized by or connected with the Catholic Church (Garelli, 2007). Therefore, Italianness is often associated with Catholic identity because of the relevant role the Catholic Church holds in the country's public sphere and the importance of religious traditions at the cultural level.

However, the Catholic identity of the country, as portrayed by mainstream media, is ambiguously complicated by different elements. First, the Catholic Church had a controversial relationship with the Italian state after the unification, especially during the Fascist dictatorship. Secondly, Italy presents a peculiar secularism, where the role of Catholicism is often questioned. Thirdly, Italians tend to personalize their

religiosity through folkloric religious practices. Lastly, the Italian religious scenario has been changing in recent decades due to migration and an increased number of people that abandon the Catholic Church. These elements show how the construction of the Italian Catholic identity is complex and needs to take into account historical and social characteristics of the country.

History of Catholicism in Italy

The majority of the Italian population has historically self-identified as Catholic. However, the process of unification of the Italian state under the House of Savoy – *Risorgimento* — was inspired by secular principles. *Risorgimento* has been a crucial moment for the construction of the Italian identity, since it realized the imaginary of an intellectual elite that sought to unify the different independent states in the peninsula. The creation of a unified Italian state in 1861 was possible thanks to the confiscation of Papal State's lands, which occupied a substantial portion of Central Italy. The Pope reacted to this considerable reduction of its properties and power by forbidding the Catholic citizens to participate into the political life of the new Italian monarchy until 1905 (Samuels, 1997).

With the ascent to power of Mussolini in the 1920s and the period of Fascist dictatorship that preceded the war, the Vatican assumed a controversial role in relation to the politics of the country. On the one hand, in 1922 Pope Pius XI signed the Lateran Pacts with the Fascist regime, which decreed Catholicism as the state religion, granting privileges to the Catholic Church. On the other hand, the Vatican

was suspicious of the atheism of Mussolini and of the excessive sacralization of the fascist ideology, which found inspiration in pagan Ancient Rome (Gentile, 2006).

In 1947, the new Italian Republic recognized the previous 'concordat' between Church and State agreed with the Lateran Pacts. As a result, Catholicism continued to be considered the state religion (Toronto, 2008). This decision was in contrast with the state intention of breaking with the Fascist past, but was probably motivated by the central role Catholicism held in the post-war period in terms of political engagement. The Christian Democrat Party was, indeed, the political force that transitioned from dictatorship to democracy, with the Catholic Alcide de Gasperi as the first Prime Minister of the Italian Republic (Samuels, 1997; Diamanti-Ceccarini, 2007; Domenico, 2005; Salvati, 2003). Catholicism influenced some left-wing movements, as well: the Italian peace movement and Marxist-inspired secular left often overlapped with Catholic ideologies (Tosi and Vitale, 2009). The transition to the Republic created, therefore, a peculiar religious structure where Catholicism was considered as a state religion, and whose influence in the public sphere mirrored the American model of religious influence upon the state.

Furthermore, Catholicism provided a resource for shaping the Italian post-war identity. According to Lichtner (2013), the post-war period saw an effort by Italian media and politics to break with their Fascist past and portray Italians as *brava gente* ("good people"). Italians were framed as naïve and good citizens that did not actively support the dictatorship. Catholicism, and the continuity of its public influence upon politics during the transition to democracy, was a cornerstone of this

concept, because it provided moral and ethical resources to describe Italians as *brava gente*. This identity-construction process implied a selective reinterpretation of the past, which re-reads the country's history and overlooks both the secularist ideology behind the Italian unification and the controversial role of the Vatican during Fascism. This reinterpretation emphasizes the political role of the Catholic Church in the post-war period and legitimizes a certain model of religious influence in the public sphere upon others.

The current media portrayal of Italian identity as Catholic is partly the result of this post-Fascist interpretation. Therefore, the identification of Italian identity with Catholicism is complicated by the history of the country and the ambiguous role of the Vatican before and during the transition to democracy. Furthermore, the presence of the Catholic Church in secular spaces makes Italy a country with a controversial role of religion in the public sphere.

Catholicism as Privileged Religion in the Public Sphere.

The Italian Constitution sanctions the secular character of the state, despite the public role of the Vatican within the Italian republic. In 1984, the Italian government renegotiated the "concordat" with the Vatican. As a result of the process, the Italian government no longer considered Catholicism as state religion and removed Catholic clergy from the state's payroll. These decisions sanctioned state secularism and equal rights for all religions, modifying the post-war role of Catholicism. However, the principle of secularism and religious freedom in Italy are in contrast with the privileged role that the Catholic Church still maintains within the

state, exemplified by the institution of *otto per mille* ("eight per thousand") as an alternative of having the Catholic clergy on the state's payroll.

With the renegotiation of the "concordat", the Italian state instituted the *otto per mille*. Italians need to devote 0.8% of their annual taxes to a religious institution in the country, choosing from a list of eleven religious organizations. The *otto per mille* results in a reinforcement of the economic and social hegemonic role of the Catholic Church. As explained by the text of the law[v], taxes of citizens that do not express a preference are distributed with a proportional method. Because the majority of the citizens self-identify as Catholic, a great part of the *otto per mille* is devoted to the Catholic Church, including the taxes of people that do not express a preference for lack of religious affiliation. It is, indeed, possible to devote the individual *otto per mille* to the Italian state, but there is no possibility for a secular organization to be recipient of this tax percentage. Furthermore, the religions that can benefit from *otto per mille* are those that have an official agreement with the Italian state, and traditionally are all Christian denominations with the exception of the Jewish Communities. Only in 2014 the state recognized the Buddhist Union and the Hindu Union, but the Union of Islamic Communities still lack formal agreement with the Italian state.

The *otto per mille* exemplifies the peculiar character of Italian secularism. In addition to receiving the *otto per mille*, the Catholic Church does not pay taxes on the estates it possesses, including private schools and hospitals that grant a profit[vi]. Furthermore, every public and formally secular school offers a non-mandatory class

in Catholic religion. Non-Catholic students are often sent home or encouraged to study individually, without alternative classes on other religions or on secular topics. This often results in a marginalization of non-Catholic students and a substantial lack of interfaith dialogue in public education (Frisina, 2013). In addition, every public space, including schools, hospitals, and municipality offices, has to display a Catholic crucifix. The presence of this Catholic symbol in Italian public spaces kindles a number or political and media debates: on the one hand, non-Catholics criticize its presence in a secular state, and on the other hand, certain Catholic groups reiterate its importance as symbol of the Christian roots of Italian culture and civilization (Ozzano and Giorgi, 2013). The mediation of Catholicism is, therefore, complicated by the ambiguous relation it has with secularism and the difficulties these two positions have in re-conciling each other.

The identification of Italianness with Catholicism needs to take into account both the secular character of the Italian state and the controversial role that the Catholic Church occupies in the Italian public sphere. The polemics around the privileges and the role of Catholicism in the country question Italian religious identity, as will be analyzed later in this dissertation. Furthermore, Italian Catholic identity is heterogeneous and presents a number of local declinations.

The Heterogeneity of Italian Catholicism

The Italian identity is often presented as homogenously Catholic. However, Italian Catholicism is characterized by a number of internal differences that make the Catholic Church a complex institution with a number of local declinations.

According to Diotallevi, "In the Northern, Southern, and Central areas of Italy[vii] different models of Church, or to be more precise various doses of various types of ecclesiastical organization and various types of Church oriented religiousness can be found" (p. 78, 1999). The author explains how the Southern regions of the country have a higher level of religious identification, while the North is more secular. However, the North presents a more advanced ecclesial organization, exemplified by a higher number of clerical vocations, and a greater participation in religious events. The Central areas show the lower level of religious engagement and organizations in the country. This reflects the political and social heterogeneity of the country: the North is more industrialized, richer and more conservative, the Center is less industrialized and tends to hold liberal political views, and the South is prevalently rural, politically conservative, and holds tighter to traditions.

The internal heterogeneity of Catholicism is expressed not only in terms of local religious engagement, but also through a number of lay organizations. The Catholic Church endorses, indeed, groups of believers that have certain degrees of autonomy. An example is the group *Azione Cattolica* (Catholic Action), which is spread on the national territory and promotes social involvement. Another group is the Neocathecumenal movement, prevalent in the South, which focuses on common experiences of faith and prayers, and supports traditional family values. The Catholic Church recognizes these movements even though they create an "internal competition" between Catholic groups and can result in different understanding of

the official doctrine of the Vatican (Ballardini, 2011).

Furthermore, Italians often practice an "extra-ordinary" religiosity of Pagan heritage. This type of religiosity is expressed in the Marian cults or through devotion to specific Saints, often for healing purposes. These practices are considered "extra-ordinary" because they are often intertwined with folkloric traditions rather than conforming to the official doctrine of the Church. Particularly relevant in the South, these traditions tend to include superstitions, such as the concept of the "evil-eye.[viii]" The belief in magic and folk rituals to solve personal problems are often syncretized with mainstream religious practices. The Catholic Church usually tolerates these practices, and even incorporates a part of them in its liturgy, as happened with Marian pilgrimages for healing purposes (Pace 2007; Bader et al., 2012).

Therefore, the construction of Italian identity as Catholic needs to take into account the inner heterogeneity and syncretism of religious practices in the country that often result in very different approaches to the official doctrine of the Vatican. While self-identifying as Catholic, Italians experiment different levels of local engagement with parishes and belongings to lay groups, as well as alternative religious practices of Pagan and folkloric heritage. These characteristics of Italian religiosity show an active renegotiation of Catholic values that results in different identity articulations in the country. Furthermore, the Catholic identity needs to take into account the changing religiosity of the country.

Changing Religious Scenario

Only 5% of Italians belong to a non-Catholic religion (Doxa, 2014). The two traditional religious minorities are represented by Jews and Weldensians, a protestant sect founded in the thirteenth century in France. Each group counts for less than 40,000 believers (CESNUR, 2012), but they are historically relevant because they were subject to discrimination and persecution. Jews and Waldensians have, indeed, been forced to live in specific spaces of the Italian territory[ix] and were persecuted, especially during the Fascist regime (Campani, 2008).

However, these two minorities are not the only non-Catholic religions in the Italian territory. While Italy does not have the same immigration from former colonies that characterizes other European countries and has a population that is constituted by a 92,4% of ethnically white Italians (Mazzoleni et al. 2011), recent migration is changing its religious scenario, nonetheless. In the last two decades, an increasing flux of migrants from Asia and Africa are forcing Italy to re-think its culture and religiosity (Naso, 2012). A natural bridge from Europe and Africa, Italy is currently increasing its Muslim population, which is considered to be around 2%.[x] Furthermore, because of migration from Asia, the number of Buddhists and Hindus is increasing, as well (CESNUR, 2012).

Asian religions are becoming popular in the country, not only because of migration, but also because of the willingness of Italians to search for a different type of spirituality. There is an increasing attraction to Japanese and Tibetan Buddhism, especially to practices of meditation (Obadia, 2009). The Buddhist-inspired new religious movement Soka Gakkai is popular in Italy and attracts more

believers than in any other European country (Barone, 2007). A number of new religious movements are spreading in Italy, where there is a less hostile environment than in other Western countries in regards to controversial religions such as Scientology (Introvigne, 2015).

Furthermore, an increasing number of Italians have formally abandoned Catholicism and self-identify as atheists. There is less social stigma in distancing oneself from religion, and atheists constitute the most numerous non-Catholic minority of the country. The research institute Doxa (2014) estimates atheists to be around 10% of the population, with an additional 10% that self-identify as religious but do not formally belong to a religious institution. The phenomenon of abandoning religion interests in particular younger generations. The increasing atheist trend is supported by data on weddings: in the Northern and Central regions wedding performed with civil rituals were more than Catholic weddings in 2014 (ISTAT, 2014[xi]).

The complexity of the contemporary Italian religious scenario is to be considered in relation to social and cultural adaptations. Some religions are able to adapt to the perceived mainstream Italian identity more easily than others; Waldensians and Jews, for example, tend to be perceived as part of the Italian culture because of their historical presence in the country, and Buddhism is usually positively related to peaceful practices of meditation. On the other hand, Islam is problematically connected with episodes of violence and cultural incompatibility that connote it as a "non-Italian" religion. The predominance of the white Caucasian ethnicity in Italy further marginalizes certain religious and cultural groups as

"foreigners."

Different perceptions of religions in Italy are often related to the mainstream Italian identity: minority religious groups need somehow to prove themselves compatible with the perceived mainstream culture of the country. However, while Catholicism remains the majoritarian religion in Italy, the growth of non-Catholic groups compels the country to re-think this religious identity in an effort of mutual understanding. The complexity of the current religious scenario needs to be understood in terms of religious pluralism, instead of considering the Italian culture as static and unable to move away from a monolithic Catholic identity.

Therefore, when analyzing Italian identity, it is important to consider not only the relevant role of Catholicism in the country, but also the complexity of the relation between Catholic Church and Italian state. In particular, what is often considered as a "consensual Catholic" public sphere is in reality based on conflicts or absence of dialogue between Catholicism, non-Catholic groups, and secularist positions. Because of the controversial historical role of the Vatican, the peculiar secularism of Italy, the internal heterogeneity of Catholicism, and the changing religious scenario of the country, the Italian religious identity appears more nuanced than is often portrayed by mainstream media.

Media are able to reinforce certain representations and frame the idea of Italianness mirroring the mainstream characteristics of the audience. However, Italian national media are seldom able to grasp the nuances of Italianness in late modernity. Rather, the mediation of Catholicism tends to be limited to certain symbols and practices that reinforce the idea of the Italian identity as solely "white

and Catholic," and overlooks internal and external heterogeneity, as well as important historical and cultural factors. This problematic mediation and the lack of balanced dialogue between state secularism and religion is based on some characteristics of the Italian media system, which result in a problematic representation of a number of cultural and social aspects of the country.

Media in Italy

Media are an important space for construction of national identity, as analyzed by Anderson (1983). This is relevant in Italy, where national media had a central role in diffusing a standard language and educating a population tight to local traditions and identities. Today, a high percentage of the Italian population consumes mass media every day (92.2% watch television and 57.9% listen to the radio, ISTAT 2015). Television is more influential than the Internet, since only 64% of the families have a high-speed Internet connection[xii]. National mass media are, therefore, a venue that could be generative of shared meanings when it comes to articulate national values.

In order to understand how Italian media represent the reality of the country, it is important to take into account the peculiarity of the Italian media system. For a number of scholars, indeed, Italy is an "anomaly" in comparison to other Western countries because of political control on national media: "the landscape of mass media in Italy is idiosyncratic in that it is more centralized than in any other liberal, democratic society" (Ragnedda and Muschert, 2010, p.46). Indeed, the association "Reports without Borders" (2015) positioned Italy at only the 73rd position in the

World Press Freedom Index[xiii], showing how the country has a substantial lack of freedom of speech for a Western country. This situation is mainly due to the political and economical influence on media of Silvio Berlusconi, former Prime Minister of the country (Doyle, 2002). The structure of the Italian media system needs to be understood in an historical perspective, since the present media system is influenced by a number of historical factors. As a result of this situation, Italian mainstream media often tend to offer stereotypical representation of certain social groups and phenomena, which I will further explain. However, alternative and digital media can provide venues for articulation of non-mainstream social and political identities.

History of Media in Italy

Media had a central role in the identity-formation process of the country during the unification period – *Risorgimento* – that culminated with the proclamation of the Italian state in 1861. *Risorgimento* was the result of the political imaginary of an educated urban elite, and failed to involve the rural masses. The process led to the unification of a number of regions characterized by different languages and traditions and resulted in a lack of national Italian identity (Hibberd, 2007). The circulation of press had the aim of articulating a more homogeneous sense of Italianness. *La Stampa* and *Corriere della Sera*, two of the major Italian newspapers still published today, were indeed founded in 1867 and 1876, respectively. Until the first half of the 20th Century, media were employed in a project of linguistic unification to create a common language understood by every citizen beyond regional dialects (Hibberd, 2007). The famous Italian writer and

filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini declared that Italian language was born thanks to media (quoted in Tosi, 2004, p. 279).

National media were used by Fascism to diffuse Mussolini's ideologies. Himself a journalist, Mussolini saw the potential of media to glorify the achievements of the Fascist dictatorship and spread war propaganda among the citizens. The regime encouraged the construction of cinema theaters and the production of movies; as a result, the cinematic industry remained important for the Italian economy in the post-war period, as well (Baechlin and Muller-Strauss, 1952; Perrotta, 2008). Cinematic theaters were used to show newsreels produced by state-controlled agencies with the aim of glorifying the actions of the regime (Caprotti and Kaika, 2008). Fascism was a repressive system that censored voices that did not conform to the regime. For example, the intellectual Antonio Gramsci, involved with the Communist party and founder of the daily newspaper *L'Unità,* was imprisoned because of his political ideas.

In the post-war period, the nascent Italian Republic needed to break with its Fascist past and create a democratic Italian identity. Media were employed in the democratization process to help articulate a new sense of Italianness. The public radio broadcasting service, founded as EIAR [xiv] in 1928, was renamed RAI – Radiotelevisione Italiana[xv] – in 1944 to mark a rupture with the Fascist media system. In 1954 the Italian television broadcast service started, and was incorporated by RAI. The post-war period was characterized by an important role of media to articulate a

new and democratic Italianness, and to promote education among a population with a low level of school attendance.

In the 1950s and 1960s the Italian national media system started to be organized around the influence of political parties. While the Communists were suspicious of the mass media use, the Christian Democrats, the leading party in the post-war period, embraced national media to diffuse Catholic-inspired ideologies (Padovani, 2007). However, Ettore Bernabei, director of RAI from 1960 to 1976 and politically aligned with the Christian Democrats, tried to balance the influence of different political parties and of religious and non-religious positions within the public broadcasting service.

In the 1970s, the phenomenon commonly referred to as *lottizzazione*, which can be roughly translated as "allotment", began. *Lottizzazione* refers to a "Systematic division of political parties' influence on the organization and production of information" (Mazzoleni et al. 2011, p. 34, my translation). The phenomenon formally started in 1975 with the Law n. 103, which was aimed at enabling a plurality of political voices to officially exercise their control on the public broadcasting service. As a result, the two existing RAI channels were divided between the influence of the Christian Democrats and the Socialists, reinforcing the structure informally created by Bernabei. At the end of the 1970s RAI created a third channel, which was placed under the influence of the Communist party.

During the 1970s, a number of newspapers were founded, including the Communist *Il Manifesto* and the national liberal newspaper *La Repubblica*, today one of the most influential national daily newspapers. Traditionally, Italian newspapers are partisans and sometimes officially connected to political parties. The printing press had a delicate role in the period because of the "red terrorism"[xvi] : newspapers found themselves in the position of deciding whether to report news about the terrorist acts of left-wing groups, or censoring them in order to negate the publicity these groups were seeking (Castronovo and Tranfaglia, 2008).

In the same period, Italy saw the rise of private televisions, closely connected with the group Finevest, founded by Silvio Berlusconi in the late 1970s. The three private television channels of Berlusconi's group Mediaset gained increasing popularity during the 1980s. Different from the competitor RAI, Mediaset had no educational aims but sought commercial revenues through a high number of entertainment shows. This situation led to the creation of a "duopoly" (or "double monopoly") between RAI and Mediaset, which was legitimized and reinforced by the Law n. 223 of 1990, also known as "Mammì Law," taken from the name of the Minister who signed it. As a result, RAI became more similar to its commercial counterpart: during the 1990s the Italian public service was characterized by a limited production of news and movies, a massive broadcast of entertainment shows with populist aims, and an increasing import of TV shows from other countries, the U.S. in specific (Padovani, 2007).

While Silvio Berlusconi resigned from his role of Prime Minister in 2011, the current Italian media situation is heavily influenced by its historical characteristics. The duopoly RAI-Mediaset remains largely untouched. The national television channel LA7 and a number of local channels represent an alternative to RAI and Mediaset, but they do not reach the 10% of the audience share. Similarly, digital television does not modify the duopoly, since RAI maintains the 41% and Mediaset the 37% of the audience share (Mazzoleni et. al, 2011, p. 6-7). Newspapers are influenced by the public radio and television system and have been increasingly characterized by soft news. This peculiar media conglomeration and the deep intertwinement of media and politics resulted in a media system often connected to political agenda. Furthermore, the increase of commercial television lead to a representation of that tends to be superficial and connected to stereotypes (Ardizzoni, 2007).

Non-mainstream Identities and the Internet

The peculiarity of the Italian media system often results in a marginalization or an underrepresentation of certain social groups. Representations in Italian mainstream media, television in particular, tend to create a homogeneous image of Italianness. Drawing from Anderson, Ardizzoni (2007) identifies media representations of Italian identity in the four *topoi* of soccer, music, local traditions, and Catholicism. This non-nuanced image of Italianness leads to an unbalanced media representation of gender, ethnicity, and race, often inscribed within certain understanding of power. Some groups are, indeed, privileged in their media expression, while others lack agency of self-representation. For example, women

tend to be confined to supporting roles and to be the subjects of patriarchal and traditionalist discourses, with their sexualized bodies representing a homogeneous standard of "Mediterranean beauty." Furthermore, media tend to frame migration, especially when it involves dark-skinned people of non-Catholic religion, as an "invasion," "wave," and "flood" (Vaccari, 2009, p. 208). This superficial representation of Italian identity often results in a marginalization of what is considered "not Italian", such as non-white ethnicities.

In particular, the *topos* of Catholicism, exemplified by the on-air prayer of Sister Cristina during an entertainment show, leads to a general lack of space for expression for religious minorities, often considered as "not Italian." As exemplified by Kimia Ghorbani's performance at "The Voice," non-Catholic religions tend to find spaces only if they make an effort to present themselves as compatible with the Italian culture. Indeed, the only non-Catholic religions that have a space of self-representation in Italian mainstream media are Judaism and Protestantism, they being the two religious minorities traditionally present on the Italian territory and not falling into the category of "non-Italian." However, the limited amount of broadcasting space these two religions are accorded underscores how Catholicism is hold on a predominant position in media representations (Campani, 2008).[xvii]

As a result, religious mediation in Italy is, at the same time, pervasive and superficial, since it is limited to certain religious symbols and behaviors. Performances such at Sister Cristina's at "The Voice" reinforce a "white and Catholic" understanding of the Italian public sphere, where the Iranian Kimia Ghorbhani is

connoted as a "foreigner" whose identity is subordinate to a need for endorsement of Italian values. This representation passes though pre-determined religious categories in news and entertainment. Mediation of Islam , for example, remains confined to stories as Ghorbhani's and seldom depends on discursive production agency of Muslim Italians, but is rather subordinated to a monolithic understanding of the Italian identity and based upon upon pre-determined Catholic and secular categories.

Therefore, it is often challenging for minority groups, including religions, to oppose dominant media discourses or to find a space of expression within Italian mainstream media. It has been argued that the Internet can represent an alternative space of discursive production to contrast the superficiality of representations of the mainstream media system.

The potential of the digital space for the creation of discourses in Italy needs to be understood in relation to the diffusion of the Internet in the country. While Italy was one of the first countries in Europe to connect to the Internet in 1986, at the present digital technologies have a lower diffusion in Italy than in the majority of Western countries. A number of phenomena contributes to this situation: slow Internet connection, an aging population that is unfamiliar with digital technologies, lack of knowledge of English[xviii].

However, it is reasonable to expect that Internet use will increase in the near future, especially given the recent development of social network use. For example,

Facebook users are estimated to be around 27 billion every month, around 45% of the Italian population[xix]. In addition, the use of the Internet interests more educated and affluent Italians (Magistretti, 2000; Mazzoleni et al., 2011) who can be expected to have a role in influencing the public debate. While the Internet is still not a privileged medium in Italy for mainstream information, and increasing number of social and political groups see in the digital space an alternative venue to contrast national media.

Navarria (2009), for example, analyzes the case of the political engagement on the Internet of former comedian Beppe Grillo[xx] as a consequence of the fallacies of national media: "media empire of Berlusconi had two unintended consequences (1) the Internet has virtually remained untouched by censorship, (2) the silencing of mainstream media has pushed non-aligned audiences toward new alternative sources of information such as beppegrillo.it" (p 153). The case of Grillo exemplifies how certain people can consider the digital space as a more trustworthy source of information than the mainstream media, which they consider too superficial and biased. Even if Grillo's case of engagement with the Internet is presently the most resounding in the country, the digital space allows Italians to diffuse other alternative information sources such as Indymedia[xxi] (Padovani, 2015), to establish minority political voices (Gibson et al, 2000; Calenda and Mosca, 2007), and to support social activism through web-based radio and television (Ardizzoni, 2013). Not only the Internet can help the articulation of such voices, but minority groups could help the expansion of the Internet in Italy by compelling citizens to engage more with the digital space.

These Internet strategies are not able to radically subvert the Italian media system, and the Internet alone seems unlikely to change the perception of Italian identity in society. However, it offers an alternative to the mainstream media system and a venue for the articulation of discourses that contrast the hegemonic identity representation of the country. Certain religious groups use the digital space to contrast the idea that the Italian identity is represented by the *topos* of Catholicism, and in general to question the role of religion in the Italian public sphere.

Case Studies and Research Questions

This dissertation analyzes digital discourses of religious groups in Italy in order to understand how the Internet can provide a space of non-mainstream narratives that contrast the existing identity of representations in mainstream media. This dissertation focuses on three case studies.

The first case study is the official blog of the UAAR[xxii], the Union of Atheists and Agnostic Rationalists. The group represents the most established atheist voice in the country, and its blog frequently vocalizes the urgency of addressing change in the Italian religious scenario. While the UAAR is not a religion itself, its opposition to the hegemonic presence of Catholicism in the Italian public sphere creates debates around religion. The group contrasts the idea that Italian identity is Catholic and insists on the primacy of state secularism.

The second case study is the group *Sentinelle in Piedi* ("Standing Sentinels"), which advocates for the protection of traditional family values and against same-sex unions. The group's members consider Catholic values under threat in Italian late modernity. While the group is Catholic, its members do not feel represented by national media because mainstream Catholic discourses are allegedly influenced by secularism and do not take into account more conservative voices. They represent, therefore, an example of the inner heterogeneity of Catholicism and advocate for a greater emphasis on the "Christian roots" of Italy and Europe.

The third case study is the blog *Yalla Italia*, written by second-generation Italians who mostly identify as Muslims. The blog advocates for a greater religious pluralism and reiterates the Italian identity of its bloggers. *Yalla Italia* contrasts the idea that Italian identity is solely white and Catholic, and represents the religious change currently happening in the country and that is often overlooked by mainstream media.

The three case studies have been chosen because they represent different perspectives of resistance to representations of national identity, and they promote alternative models of religious presence within the Italian society. Atheists and Muslims represent the two fastest growing non-Catholic groups and their blogs are vocal in re-thinking secularism and religious pluralism. Conservative Catholics represent an alternative to the "belonging but not believing" paradigm of the Italian society and advocate for a greater role of religion in public sphere.

Even if they articulate very different discourses, the three groups have in common the self-perception of being a minority. They suffer from lack of recognition and lament what Couldry (2013) defines an "unequal distribution of symbolic power". This means that they do not feel that their voices are taken into account in the identity-construction process of the country and in the democratic process of civic engagement. As a result, they engage in a symbolic struggle over meanings of hegemonic identities. This lack of recognition leads, on the one hand, to a disillusion of the power of mainstream media, and, on the other hand, to the search for alternative venues to express ideas. The three groups, each in a different way, advocate for a different type of Italian society where their role would no longer be marginalized. In doing so, they force a re-thinking of Italian identity and they oppose structures of power. The purpose of these groups' blogs, indeed, is to seek a legitimate presence and to contrast the lack of participation within the Italian democratic public sphere.

The analysis of these blogs is focused on the following research questions:

- Which discourses do minority religious groups in Italy articulate online?
    - ✓ Do they contrast the hegemonic Italian identity?
    - ✓ What kind of society do they advocate for and what impact do they foresee?

- What is the role and value of the Internet for these groups?
    - ✓ Why did these groups choose the digital space to articulate their discourses?
    - ✓ How are digital discourses different from mainstream media narratives?
    - ✓ Are digital discourses able to create resistance, establish a media presence, and enhance participation?

In order to answer the research questions, I engage in a textual analysis of blogs and look for dominant patterns in relation to questions of identity and the construction of religious and secular spaces in late modernity.

Research Methods

Blogs usually create small communities of readers and are interactive forms of communication that involve the audience in a dynamic way (Wakeford and Cohen, 2008). Since they present an audience-oriented subjectivity, producers and consumers of blogs are not sharply distinct. Blogs allow for the articulation of meanings and identities that are not aligned with mainstream subjectivities.

In the analysis of blogs, I argue, it is important to avoid a potential pitfall, which Couldry (2000) mentions in relation to the study of media practices in general. Media studies often tend to create strict dichotomies between the ordinary world and media world. On the contrary, it is more relevant to consider digital practices in a fluid relationship with offline activities. Blogs are spaces often created to respond to certain social problems and to address the need for non-mainstream discourses. They do not exist only in the online space, but they constantly refer to the non-media world. Therefore, media texts do not exist autonomously, and it is necessary to consider the context from which they develop. In order to avoid this potential risk, I considered the set of relationships between society and written texts, as well as between authors and readers. I will explain how I collected my data, providing some reflections on critical discourse analysis. Furthermore, I will address my positionality in relation to the groups I focus on.

Qualitative Methods: Discourse Analysis, Interviews, and Observation

The data analysis of the three blogs is based on qualitative inductive analysis, which is an "[i]mmersion in the details and specifics of the data to discover important categories, dimensions and interrelationships" and "begin[s] by exploring genuinely open questions rather than testing theoretically derived (deductive) hypothesis" (Patton, 2014, p. 40). Employing qualitative inductive analysis, I started my data collection before elaborating any hypothesis. After having individuated relevant discursive patterns within the three groups, I put them in correlation to my research questions. I chose this approach in order for my research to be data-driven and to avoid influencing the study with my ideas before entering the field.

Qualitative methods offer a number of advantages when the aim of a research is an in-depth understanding of a specific social phenomenon, or the study of a small population. To better understand the connections between media texts and society, as well as people's agency in creating them, it is useful to combine different qualitative approaches. According to Patton, the three kinds of qualitative data collection are written documents, in-depth interviews, and direct observation. Cross-checking findings from these approaches can avoid the risk of relying on a single data source, making it easier to understand the relationship between media and society. I will here outline these three data collection methods and explain how they apply to my own research.

Content analysis of written documents is an unobtrusive method that involves no direct contact with human subjects. Qualitative content analysis can investigate how certain discourses are produced and articulated. There are a number of approaches to the qualitative study of written texts and I employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) for my inquiry. I chose CDA because it can help understanding dynamics of "othering" and marginalization within society, and therefore it is apt for the study of non-mainstream groups. Indeed, CDA is based on the idea that "Discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between groups of people" (Wodak and Bush, 2004, p. 108). The approach, therefore, involves an active participant reading that negotiates the meaning of the text (Souto-Manning, 2014). It takes into account ideology, gender, and hierarchies, it considers language in relation to power, and it draws from the Foucauldian concept of power within social structures. Furthermore, it is based on the critical linguistic assumption that language is never neutral:

> There are no "neutral" words and forms – words and forms that can belong to "no one"; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents (…) [L]anguage is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world (…) As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing (…) [t]he word in language is half someone else's. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293)

I employ CDA to emphasize discourses that minority groups articulate in relation to their social position and creation of identities. By doing so, the aim is to understand the dynamic connections between a text and the reasons and implications for its production and development within society. I performed a longitudinal CDA looking for relevant discursive patterns of three blogs from 2011 up to 2015.

The blogs are entirely written in Italian, so I translate the quotes for my analysis. While trying to maintain the original meaning of the quotes, I sometimes slightly modify the form in order to make an English-speaking public better understand the topics. In particular, I adapt the long-sentence structure of Italian to the less verbose English narrative style.

Interviews are the most widely employed qualitative method. They allow respondents' detailed articulation of experiences and thoughts. In general, an interview is defined as "a conversation in which the interviewer establishes a general direction for the conversation and pursues specific topics raised by the respondent. Ideally, the respondent does most of the talking" (Babbie, 2012, p. 346). Before starting my dissertation, I performed exploratory interviews with media practitioners working for Catholic, atheist, Protestant, Jew, and Buddhist outlets in order to understand the context of religious media production in Italy. Furthermore, alongside the blog analysis, I performed semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with the main authors of the blogs.

I was able to perform interviews with bloggers from two of my case studies, the UAAR and *Yalla*. This approach helped me assessing the intentions of the bloggers and the discourses they aim at creating with their media texts, and it allowed me to better understand the context of production of the blog texts. For my third case study, *Sentinelle in Piedi*, I encountered resistance from the bloggers to be interviewed. Since interviews involve a direct contact with participants, a potential weakness of this method is that people might not give consent to take part in the study. As I will analyze in Chapter Four, in this case the lack of formal interview represents an important data to understand *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s resistance against certain media venues. However, not being able to perform interviews prevented me to access some information about *Sentinelle in Piedi,* such as the motivations behind the blog production. To partially address this weakness, I performed participant observation of one of the group's protests.

Participant observation is the analysis of a specific social setting the researcher becomes familiar with (Patton, 2014). It is usually a discovery-oriented approach, that lets the researcher understand group interactions and people's viewpoints by immersing himself or herself in a culture. In the case of my research, participant observation provided descriptive notes and pictures of an event connected with the *Sentinelle in Piedi* case study. Since it gave me the possibility to informally talk with group members, participant observation has proven useful to understand the social contexts the media texts where developed into.

Qualitative methods may involve a contact between the researcher and the population he or she is studying. While discourse analysis is an unobtrusive method, interviews and participant observation put the researcher in personal relations with the subjects. Therefore, it is important to assess the researcher's position in relation to the study and the people that are part of it.

Positionality

Research, quantitative or qualitative, presents a certain degree of subjectivity (Patton, 2014). This happens because the researcher enters the field with pre-structured questions that are subject to his or her personal biases. It is therefore advisable to consider each inquiry a "perspective," rather than an absolute truth, and do not try to achieve complete objectivity (p. 479). Given the non-objective character of research, it is important to assess the researcher's positionality before approaching a field.

Positionality is the researcher's placement in the field of study; it "has come to be increasingly used as a means of exploring the variegated nature of the interaction which occurs during fieldwork between the researcher and the researched" (Dawson, 2010, p. 174). The attention to positionality in social inquiry draws from the tradition of feminism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism, being concerned with discourses of power relations and hierarchies. Reflections on positionality need to take into account the researcher's social identity, including gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion (Sanghera and Thapar-Bjorkert, 2008). The positionality of a researcher in relation to a study can be nuanced, but it is usually indicated with the

"insider"/"outsider" dichotomy. Both an insider positionality and outsider positionality can present strengths and weaknesses: "What an insider 'sees' and 'understands' will be different from, but as valid as what an outsider understands." (Merriam at al. 2001, p. 415)

Insider positionality means that the researcher is part of the culture under inquiry, and it is therefore able to both grasp aspects of that culture and to gain a privileged relationship of trust with the subjects (Giwa, 2015). Being born and raised in Italy, as well as an Italian native speaker, I consider myself as occupying an insider position in relation to the groups I approach, even if I am not a member of any of them. My knowledge of Italian society is a strength that allows me to understand many nuances of the discourses I analyze. I am part of an age cohort that has been familiarized with digital media while still in school, which gives me a better knowledge of how my Italian peers engage with the Internet. When studying my subjects, I felt they were questioning the religious homogeneity and the monolithic media representations of the country I often myself questioned. In performing CDA, which focuses on the active reading of texts, the knowledge of the social context is central.

However, the boundaries between the insider and the outsider position are not necessarily clearly designated. While certain social elements can make a researcher an insider, some others are not aligned with those of the subjects of the study. Positionality is therefore a complex status that can have different implications (Merriam et al. 2001; Rubin, 2005). Choi (2006) addresses the question of positionality when studying a teenage population in South Korea. Being Korean

herself, the author recognizes a number of advantages in studying her own culture, underscoring how the researcher's subjectivity is inseparable from the field. Nonetheless, she notices that, having lived abroad for a number of years and being part of another age cohort than her subjects, she sometimes felt like an outsider. Choi's analysis of positionality can apply to my own research, as well. My insider positionality is given by my own culture and language; however, there are some elements that make me an outsider in relation to the groups I study. For example I am not part of any of the three groups I analyze, and I do not feel that any of them fully represents my religiosity.

I spent part of my education and adult life abroad, and that gave me a different perspective on my subjects. It is not uncommon for Italian Millennials[xxiii] to work and study abroad, as they are increasingly leaving the country for better employment opportunities or for higher education degrees. Indeed, Italians born in the 1980s and 1990s are the generation that was most encouraged to do experiences abroad in order to build a sense of European identity along with Italian identity. This has been facilitated by scholarships to study abroad and the possibility of working in Europe without a visa[xxiv], and it is partially a consequence of the economic recession of the country.

My experiences abroad made me question Italian identity and its media representations, as well as try to understand the complexity of social and religious change in the country. I did exchange programs in Japan and France while in college, and I spend six years abroad, first in Belgium and then in the United States. These experiences exposed me to realities that are more religiously diverse than Italy and

compelled me to reflect my own identity in relation to the Italian identity: do I recognize myself in the mainstream Italian representations of a "white and Catholic" country? Is Italian identity as homogeneous as I was used to thinking while growing up? Living abroad is for me an occasion to define an identity that, before, did not need complex reflection. I always felt Italian, but only abroad did I start to think about what being Italian means, beyond the stereotypes that are usually associated with Italian culture. Having international experiences made me reflect on my own Italiannes and how it could adapt to a global framework.

In addition, in my frequent visits to Italy while working and studying abroad, I saw the country rapidly changing. I notice that the current social landscape is different from what I experienced while growing up in a relatively small city in the North of Italy that, during the 1990s, was ethnically and religiously homogeneous. The reflection on the complexity of my own experience as European and global citizen became a starting point for the analysis of the changing Italian identity, which negotiates its values in relation to modernity in a European and international framework.

Therefore, my analysis of the groups is informed by a half-insider and half-outsider positionality, to borrow Echchaibi's words (2011, p. 18). I felt cultural commonalities with my subjects, but I also sometimes felt detached from their discourses because I hold a different perspective on contemporary Italian society and on religion. I approached the three groups trying to understand their claims as part of the broader framework of Italian modernity, addressing my own questions about identity, as well.

Through the qualitative approach to the study of blogs and the meetings with the authors, I could offer my reading and interpretation of the efforts of the three groups to establish a media voice within the Italian public sphere. In particular, I focused on how digital discourses around religion employ media to create spaces of expressions. Chapter Two, indeed, focuses on the three terms "religion," "media," and "space" and analyzes literature on secularization, public sphere, hegemony, and alternative media in order to define how the blogs can become third spaces. Chapter Three focuses on the first case study, the blog of the atheist association UAAR, which rejects religion and imagines a more secular society. Chapter Four analyzes the blog and activities of the Catholic group *Sentinelle in Piedi*, which employs online and offline spaces to defend traditional family values against secularism. Chapter Five discusses the blog *Yalla*, where Muslim Italians create a model of "Islamic secularism" that is compatible with Italian culture and values. The concluding chapter addresses the research questions and discusses the ability of the blogs to create religious and secular identities, establishing an alternative presence that questions the existing Italian identity as presented by national media.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The interaction of religion and media is generative of new patterns of practice and beliefs that have the potential to challenge dominant values. The Muslim blog *Yalla*, the atheist group UAAR, and the Catholic movement *Sentinelle in Piedi* are examples of how religion finds spaces of expression within digital media, wherethey articulate identities and meanings. In order to answer my research questions, it is theoretically important to determine the meanings of the terms "religion" and "media," and analyze the implications the two have in relation to the notion of "space." in this way, I will explore the relevance of online religious discourses in creating non-mainstream spaces of action. In my analysis, these three terms are central not only in virtue of the relationship they have to each other, but also as independent elements. Religion provides social boundaries and creates values, media reflect social and cultural trends and promote venues for meaning articulation, and space is the framework where media and religious practices are enacted. "Religion," "media," and "space," therefore, represent broad categories that organize human experience within society.

"Religion" is a term that has been academically explored and defined from different perspectives, both in relation to monotheisms and non-monotheist traditions (Crockett et al., 1998). While exploring the various definitions of religion is beyond the scope of the present work, it is important to assess the implications the

term has in my analysis. Rather than taking into account solely, or prevalently, institutionalized forms of religion, I analyze religion and spirituality from a broader perspective. I aim at going beyond the received categories of "religious" and "non-religious," "sacred" and "profane," to focus on religious practices and discourses that find legitimation in the lived experiences they encompass. I see religion as engaged in a process of continuous re-definition of its own terms, both in traditional religious venues and in non-traditional ones. Religion is addressed in virtue of narrow and substantial definitions, but also in broader terms that encompass "seemingly non-religious phenomena" (Hoover and Lundby, 1997, p. 7). For these reasons, religion in the media, and the digital media in particular, assumes a broader character that cannot be confined to traditional views of authority and practice. In the present work, I employ the definition of religion in relation to the digital space offered by Hoover and Echchaibi (2014):

> The phenomenon we contemplate—"the religious"—operates in a number of registers not typical of all social forms and contexts. Religiously-inflected digital practice can be about individual as well as public action and about interaction between these spheres. It can be about promotion and expression, but also about reflection and individual ascetic practice. It can be about piety and about resistance to religious authority. The central logic of our inquiry is to see how this works in the unique instantiation of digital spaces (p. 24).

This framework, applied to my case studies, considers religious feelings as defined by people's agency. On the one hand, groups that do not align with an

institutionalized form of religious authority, and that do not follow traditional religious practices, are considered "religious" in virtue of the intentions of their actions and the meanings they attach to their practices. On the other hand, religious-like behaviors that develop in the digital space can be considered as religious because they mirror authorities, symbols, and rituals that characterize religious institutions. The three groups I analyze in this dissertation do not consider themselves solely in religious terms, but rather as doing cultural and social work. I consider them in a religious perspective because they are operating, consciously or un-consciously, a re-thinking of Italian religious identity. Through costant discussions about religions and a set of digital practices that recreate religious structures, these groups are examples of the fluidity and the heterogeneity of religious mediations in the digital space.

"Media" is the other term I hold central in my inquiry. During the last century, the development of media technologies compelled a number of authors to explore the effects of media on the audience. Instead of focusing on media effects, the present work aims at studying media from the perspective of practice. Following Couldry's idea of media practice (2012), the relevance of media is considered in relation to how people use them, recognizing the agency of the audience. I therefore aim at distancing my work from a vision of media as technologies, but rather considering them as social processes that enable discursive formation, as well as creation of publics around media centers. While focusing on digital media, I do not wish to create strict dichotomies between "old" and "new" media, nor between "mainstream" and "alternative" ones. These definitions are relevant as fluid

processes of discourse creation in relation to media practice. In my analysis, I consider "medium" a tool that enables the creation of meanings through actions; the term includes both material objects and technologies. "Media" are the sum of different tools that, serving as medium, provide venues for communication. "Mediations" are "the articulations between communicative practices and social movements and the articulation of different tempos of development with the plurality of cultural matrices" (Martin-Barbero, quoted in Hoover and Lundby, 1997, p. 300). In relation to religion, mediation indicates the action of employing media in the definition of behaviors and practices; it explains how religion employs media to define its relationship between immanent and transcendent, as well as how it communicates its messages through the use of media (Meyer, 2014).

"Space" constitutes the third term this work focuses on. Space is a complex concept that, in my inquiry, I intentionally consider as nuanced. I borrow this concept of space from Knott's work "The Location of Religion" (2005), which analyses space in social, mental, and physical terms. For Knott, space is a *medium*, a *methodology* and an *outcome*" (p. 3, emphasis in original). The notion of space presents a number of different dichotomies that are relevant for the study of both religion and media.

First, space can be imaginary or real, being articulated in physical location or the result of a process of social production. Imaginary and real spaces are not in opposition to each other: according to Lefebvre (1992), they are intertwined in the process of space signification, where space is charged with meaning. Foucault

(1984) explores the relationship between imaginary and real spaces in his concept of "heterotopia;" while utopias are purely imaginary spaces, heterotopias are real places where utopias are lived and enacted. This dichotomy encompasses the distinction between online and offline spaces, which I consider in a fluid relationship: instead of seeing the offline as "real" and the online as "imaginary," I focus on the interplay between online and offline as generative of spaces of meaning.

Second, space can be public or private. This distinction is important in relation to social spaces where public opinion is formed, as Habermas' theorization of the public sphere suggests (1962). The idea of public and private is important for the definition of the individual in society, as a product of structures of cultural and power dominations. The Cultural Studies tradition, for instance, employs the concept of public and private to focus on cultural identities, such as race and gender. Debates on secular and religious spaces hold the notion of public and private as central in relation to the position religion should occupy in society. Furthermore, the notion of "public" helps redefine the idea of audience: it provides a framework to analyze the creation of multiple publics that define their identities in relation to media consumption.

Third, space can be mainstream or alternative. Social dynamics are based on the tension between dominant and non-dominant elements, as Gramsci's idea of hegemony exemplifies (1929-1935). Space is therefore connected with power. Theorizing mainstream and alternative spaces within society can help to analyze

practices of religious groups in opposition to a hegemonic religiosity, as well as to account for alternative media practices. It helps defining the idea of "minority" and "majority," both in relation to social stigma and the self-perceived marginalization of certain groups. Indeed, people form their own identities as subjects of power and hierarchical spaces.

The relationship between media and religion and the implications of the concept of space are central to my inquiry. By analyzing the three case studies, I explore how religious identities find spaces in between online and offline, public and private, mainstream and non-mainstream media. The literature review aims at presenting theories that can help define the relation between these three terms. In particular, it helps contextualize Italy as a discursive space where religions interact with each other and with the surrounding environment through the use of media.

In order to better contextualize my analysis, I will start by exploring the relationship between religion and media, explaining why these two terms should be considered together rather than separately. I will then discuss the debate around secularization and religious change, with a focus on Europe and Italy. I will explore Habermas' notion of public sphere and the implications it has for the creation of multiple publics and counterpublics, and for the understanding of minorities within society. I will articulate the concept of resistance drawing from the Gramscian concept of hegemony and its implications within Cultural Studies, in order to define how people engage in the creation of counter-hegemonies. I will then explore the idea of oppositional spaces in relation to alternative media, and how they position

themselves within society; in doing so, I will put emphasis on media practices. I will analyze the interplay between media, religion and space by presenting the concept of "third space," which represents the framework I employ to study religions in the digital.

Religion and media

The creation of religious discursive spaces needs to be contextualize by considering religion and media as intertwined elements that contribute to their mutual evolution: "They occupy the same spaces, serve many of the same purposes, and invigorate the same practices in late modernity. Today, is probably better to think of them as related than to think of them as separate" (Hoover, 2006). The relation between religion and media is neither recent nor limited to digital media; I will start my analysis by defining the concept of religious mediation and religion as communication. Then, I will discuss the implications the mediation of religion has in relation to forms of authority, explaining how this relates to my research.

Religion, Mediation and Communication

Religions have always been, to certain extent, mediated; they are based on dynamics of communication and hold media as central for their practices. It is theoretically helpful to consider religions both as forms of mediation as systems of communication.

First, religious mediation allows for the formation of religious communities. Religions, according to Meyer (2014), are continuously mediating between the

transcendent and what is beyond. Meaning-charged objects function as religious media in mediating between the ordinary world experience and the extra-ordinary one. Media are therefore conceptualized as a tool to transmit a message, verbal or non-verbal. These religious media create "sensational forms," which are "relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking and organizing access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between believers in the context of particular religious regimes" (p.27). Mediation enables the creation of communities of beliefs. Meyer employs the idea of "aesthetic formations" (2009) to indicate the imaginary of religions within the process of community making. She uses the term "aesthetic" as a sensorial experience and a logic that is associated with the sensorium. Therefore, the word "aesthesis" is employed in the Aristotelian sense, which refers to the sensuous knowledge of the world. The category of religious media encompasses any form of religious object, from tools employed during rituals to pieces of clothes, such as the widely discussed Muslim hijab. Morgan (2008), for example, includes images as tools for mediation, because "vision is a carnal way of knowing" (p.97). All such media are central in the formation of communities around a material object that allows for transcendental meanings.

Second, religions have the ability to communicate between different social environments. Morgan (2013), in describing how media shape the world around relationships in space and time, writes that "religions work as complex forms of communication" (p. 11). The idea of "religion as communication" has been articulated by Pace (2011). The author argues that religions are systems that constantly communicate between individuals and groups, as well as between

different traditions. Being systems that are never "pure," religions need to continuously communicate and interact with the surrounding environment, adapting to external changes and re-negotiating meanings.

These perspectives on religion focus on the material aspect of religious mediation. The relationship of religion and media passes through objects and communicative patterns that are inscindible from the religious practices. The presence of the Catholic crucifix, for example, becomes a material medium that connotes the surrounding space in sacred terms and carries meanings that are interpreted in different ways by different religious groups. The practice of religion in the digital space replicates materiality of religious mediation by creating aesthetic and performative spaces that enable religious communication. These religious communicative elements have characterized the historical development of religions and defined how religions are understood in late modernity; in particular, they are central in relation to religious authorities and symbols.

Changing Authorities

The contemporary study of religion and media is far from being limited to the presence of mainstream religiosity on national media. On the contrary, it is nuanced in taking into account people's agency and their ability to articulate religious discourses on various platforms. On the one hand, media represent a source of legitimization of religious power and knowledge; on the other hand, media offer to the audience the potential agency of determining their own religious meanings. According to Hoover (2006), media have a "horizontalizing" or "homogenizing" effect on religion. They do so by providing spaces for the creation of alternative

sources of authority and symbols, disrupting the traditional power hierarchies between who holds truth claims and who does not. As a result, traditional authorities lose their role of providing an interpretative framework of symbols, and believers gain greater agency in determining their own religious meanings. The relationship between religion and media, therefore, allows for the creation of non-traditional spaces of practice.

Media historically functioned as sources of religious legitimization within all religious traditions. For example, Christianity has always been defined by available technologies of mediation, which shaped practices, perceptions, beliefs, and authorities. In specific, Christian authority is connected to the practice of writing: the passage from an oral culture to the written one provoked a shifting in religious authority, determining a central role for religious texts in creating a hegemonic worldview (Horsfield, 2015). Sacred texts confer religious authority: the person who possesses the exegetic ability of interpreting them gains the authority of determining religious knowledge and experience. This creates a religious worldview that is hegemonic because it is linked to a dominant and fixed interpretation of sacred texts, where language practices and communicative practices are directly linked to structures of power. However, religious authority is not fixed in time and it is not confined to a single medium. This intertwinement of religious authority and media interests all religions and assumes new articulations in late modernity.

The proliferation of mass media and digital media caused a shift in religious authority, allowing for multiple religious symbols to compete in the same spaces:

Authority is put "in play" through the mediation and mediatization of its symbols. The media sphere has become the definitive context for the articulation, representation and circulation of cultural symbolism, and it is in media that symbols increasingly find their definitive meanings and referents (Hoover, 2009, p. 291).

Mainstream religions, therefore, tend to lose control on their symbols, that are made available to the believers. The public character of mediated religious symbols undermines the possibilities for religions and religious leaders to have private conversations and holding the exclusivity of interpretation. As a result, traditional religious authorities compete with non- traditional authorities in the interpretation and production of religious symbols. Hoover (2016) writes:

It is not just the capacities and characteristics of certain leaders and groups that connect authority with communities of shared meaning and action. Today, those communities themselves help constitute authority through the mediation of their participation in certain forms of practice (p. 21).

The shift in traditional religious authority is exemplified by the media discourses of a number of Catholic groups in Italy. Not finding themselves aligned with the Vatican, certain groups create parallel hierarchies that function independently and create discourses sometimes in competition with the Vatican (Ballardini, 2014). For example, the Catholic Neocathecumenal movement refers, among others, to the authority of the Spanish painter Kiko Arguello, famous for his discourses in favor of traditional Christian family. The group does not formally reject the authority of the

Pope, but employs media, and the Internet in particular, to advance discourses that do not closely follow the official doctrine of the Vatican, and that encourage a certain interpretation of texts and symbols.

Literature about religion and media is relevant to understand the need of non-mainstream religious groups in Italy to create a space of communication outside institutionalized religions. The mediation of religious authorities allows for different articulation of religious and non-religious spaces. The "horizantalizing" effect digital media have on religion has the potential of creating new structures of power and authority, as well as hybrid spaces of dialogue between religion and the secular. Not only it creates non-traditional authorities, but it also enables spaces to resist institutionalized religions. As a result, the study of religion and media is concerned with the position religion occupies, or does not occupy, in private and public spaces. Media discourses on religion often focus on the secular, in order to advocate either for a stronger religious presence in public spaces or for an increased religious privatization. The term "secular" is therefore central in understanding how people use non-traditional venues, such as media, to find religious meanings in a society where the role of religion is increasingly questioned and discussed.

Secularization

The mediation of religion produces a number of media discourses that center around the idea of secular: media are venues where the idea of secular is often endorsed, refused, or rethought. The term "Religion" is connected with the term

"media", and it is also related to the concept of "secular:" "'Religion' and 'secular'

are mutually constituted terms and should be considered in virtue of their relation"

(Calhoun, 2010, p. 1). Religion and secular, indeed, stand in a fluid relationship to

each other. To account for this dialectic, I will summarize the history, definitions, and

debates around the concept of the secular, focusing on Europe and Italy.

Secular in Europe

Europe is defined as an "exceptionalism" because it appears to be as more

secular than any other part of the world (Torpey, 2010). Historical and social

conditions in Europe contributed to a modern understanding of the term and its

implications in political and institutional contexts. The concept of "secular" derives

from Latin "saeculum," that means "century." The term indicated the passing of time

and, by extension, the affairs of worldly existence. (Calhoun et al. 2011). Initially,

secular was employed to create an opposition between religious and non-religious

activities within society. During the European Enlightenment, secular came to

indicate the separation of religious and non-religious spaces at the institutional level,

sanctioning the retreat of religion from public domains.

Together with this institutional role of the secular, European thinkers

developed a philosophical conception of the term (Braidotti et al. 2014). From the

17th Century, thinkers and politicians started to imagine a society where the public

sphere could be entirely secular, culminating with the concept of *laïcité*[xxv] during the

French Revolution (Taylor, 2007). The philosophical conceptualization of the secular

finds its intellectual resources in Classical Social Theory: thinkers such as Marx and

Weber analyze social organizations as secular institutions, dismissing the role of religious structures. Without negating the role of religion in European societies, these intellectuals consider religion as a "false consciousness," with a consolatory role for the oppressed working class: "Religion is the sight of oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people" (Marx in Callinicos, 1999, p. 83). Religion was, therefore, considered as an element that would be dismissed during modernity, with the realization of better social conditions. These convinctions largely persisted during the 21st Century in intellectual and political contexts. The Frankfurt School of Critical Thinking, for example, influenced by Marxism, theorizes religion as an ideology that is interchangeable with other social elements (Gorski, 2012). Similarly, the Cultural Studies tradition overlooks the study of religion, privileging that of race and gender. On the one hand, this intellectual legacy produced a general disinterest in the role of religion within the public sphere; on the other hand, the expectations of an inevitable religious decline marked the study of religion in Europe. In the 1970s and 1980s, religious scholars such as Wilson, Berger, and Dobbalaere acknowledged the progressive disappearance of religion from Western societies (Smith, 2003, p. 13).

Problematizing the Secular

The idea of religious decline in modernity produced an uncritical use of the term "secular," often negating the close relationship between religion and secular. However, I argue, this idea is problematic for two main reasons.

First, unlike what some scholars had foreseen, religion persists in Western contexts:

Religion persists, in spite of the triumph of rationality, neo-liberal economics and its valorization of the market as a moral force, and the emergence of what is argued to be a 'global public sphere' discourse (Berger, 2008; Stark, 1999). Of course, the form of religion that persists today is new and protean, adapted to the social and cultural conditions of the time including, non unimportantly, the public sphere (Hoover, 2011, p.612).

The phenomenon of "religious persistence" takes specific connotations in the European context. Religion in Europe attracts more and more attention in public discourses because of political decisions, such as the banning of the hijab in public places in France, or controversies, such as the Danish newspapers cartoons (Green, 2010). Terroristic attacks in 2015 and 2016 and the rise of anti-Islamic parties in many European countries confirm the idea that secularization is not happening the way it was expected. Herbert (2011) defines this phenomenon as "religious re-publicization," claiming that the alleged private character of religion in Western modernity needs to be re-though:

Religions are playing an increasingly prominent public role, both in Western Europe, which has experienced declining levels of religious activity and social function for some time (Bruce, 1998), but which now finds the public role of religions again contested, primarily (but not exclusively) by migrant groups, and in America, where levels of church attendance and religious philanthropy have remained relatively stable and high, but where religions have become more publicly

prominent since the 1970s (e.g. the rise of the religious Right)"
(Herbert, 2011, p. 632).

Second, secularization is not a linear process that can be found in every geographical and political context in the same way. Being a Western concept, it can hardly describe religious changes in non-Western countries, where articulations of modernity often do not coincide with secularization (Echchaibi, 2013). Even in the Western world, the secular has different nuances: for instance, Casanova (1994) argues, Western Europe is characterized by religious decline, privatization and differentiation; on the contrary, religious privatization in the U.S. lead to a religious revival. European countries are heterogeneous, as well, especially considering the Protestant tradition in Northern Europe and the Catholic one in the Mediterranean region (Green, 2010; Herbert, 2011).

The nuanced nature of the term "secular" produces different understandings. For Casanova, there is a distinction between secular as an epistemic category, secularization as a process, and secularism as a political ideology. Similarly, Asad (2003) distinguishes between secular as a set of historically constituted behaviors, and secularism as a political doctrine within the modern state. The distinction is useful to understand that historical processes of religious change do not necessarily coincide with the political will of creating social frameworks where religion occupies exclusively certain spaces. Following Casanova and Asad's analysis of the secular, it is therefore useful to distinguish the academic attention to the process of secularization from the political use of secularism.

The idea of secularization, widely accepted in academia during the 1970s and 1980s, has recently attracted new scholarly attention. For a number of thinkers, "secularization" is an academically inadequate concept to describe Western modernity: "Many scholars have become bored with or frustrated by secularization theory. They say, often with good reason, that it is too broad and analytically unhelpful to be worth paying much attention to" (Smith 2003, p. 5). This theoretical inadequacy produced a re-thinking of secularization; for instance Habermas (2008), exponent of the second-wave of Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, reconsidered his concept of the public sphere in more inclusive terms, creating the concept of "post-secular." This re-thinking derives from the idea that, first, social and cultural modernization is no longer bound to the dismissal of religion; second, religion is gaining more influence in the European national public sphere and, third, migrations are bringing religious change that Western societies cannot overlook.

However, the Habermasian idea of post-secular, while academically useful, fails to grasp the proliferation of political discourses around secularization (Meyer, 2005) and risks to reinforce the separation between secular and religious spaces (Gorski et al., 2012). A number of scholars redefined the nuanced meanings of secularism and its relationship with the religious in different terms. Casanova (1994) analyzes the role of religion in the construction of modernity and the reorganization of religion within Western societies in public and private contexts. For Casanova, secularization is characterized by three elements: religious differentiation, religious

decline, and religious privatization. The three terms define various articulations of the secular, indicating that religion no longer operates in institutionalized venues, loses its traditional role, and weakens its presence in the public sphere. These elements describe the position of religion in-between the private and the public, confessional and non-confessional institutions. They do not necessarily coexist but they can be declined in different ways in Western societies. Taylor (2007) defines secular as an historical process that changes the relationship with beliefs; while traditional societies were characterized by an unchallenged belief in god and an unproblematic presence of religion in public spaces, the secular re-dimensioned religion as one belief option among others.

The evidence of religious persistence and the inadequacy of the uncritical use of the term "secular" urge scholars to renovate attention to religion as a social element, avoiding strict dichotomies between "religion" and the "secular." Knott (2005) offers an analysis of religion and secular from a spatial perspective that refuses a binary thinking. Aiming at creating a spatial methodology to map religion in the West, Knott looks for religion in secular locations. She proposes that "religion," "secular," and "post-secular" stand in a dialectical relationship and influence each other. Distinctions between "secular" and "religious" spaces are abandoned to promote a model where the religious can be found in formally secular spaces and vice-versa. For example, the presence of religious symbols such as the Muslim hijab can be seen as a spatial religious presence within public spaces. Wearing the hijab in a secular space creates a dichotomy between religious and secular where the two terms define each other and the meanings they encompass. In traditional Catholic

countries such as Italy, thinking about "secular" and "religious" in dialectical terms can provide useful to address the position of religion. According to Thiebaut (2010), the ongoing secularization process changed the hegemonic ethical role of the Church. However, Catholicism maintains a public role and, at the ethical level, merges with political and social forces to enter the debate with the secular, in a fluid and dialectical relationship.

Media, I argue, can provide spaces for the enactment of the debate between religion and the secular. Instead of reinforcing the division between "secular media" and "religious media," religious mediation can provide a space where different elements merge. Religious presence in traditionally secular media, such as Italian national television, has the potential of reflecting upon the meanings of religion in a secular society. While thinking about the religious and non-religious in a dynamic relationship is theoretically helpful, it is important to consider the fact that a number of political discourses in Europe and in the West try to promote a model of secularism that relegates religion exclusively in private spaces.

Secularism as a political discourse

The concept of secularism and the reiteration of the secular character of Western democracy justify a number of cultural and political decisions in Europe. According to this idea of secularism, religion should be practiced in private spaces and not interfere with public, secular ones. European democracies are seen as rational, liberated from the former religious limitations of knowledge. This model

mirrors the secular attitude that Taylor (2007) defines, in a critical way, as "subtraction stories."[xxvi]

However, this political vision of secularism is neither unproblematic, nor always consistent: while aiming at separating religion from secular institution, it contradictorily considers the Judeo-Christian roots of Europe as the basis of Western humanism. Braidotti et al. write, indeed, "It could be argued, then, that the value system of European secular Humanism is intrinsically religious, albeit by opposition and negation" (2014, p. 2). The "European exceptionalism" is therefore characterized by a latent Christianity (Torpey, 2010; Meyer, 2014). This idea implies that Christianity is compatible with Western values and cultures while other religions are not. This inevitably creates an impact on national identities in the West.

Asad (2003) considers the modern nation state as based on the transcendence of the principle of identity, which goes beyond the differences of gender, race, and religion. As a result, the nation state is fundamentally connected to secularism as a mean to transcend religious differences. In describing this political process, Asad explains that nation state secularism does not rely on religious pluralism or absence of religion, but rather on the predominance of certain religions on others. This analysis is central when referring to European identity, which is the result of an interpretation of European history that does not take into account religious minorities. Therefore, European identity builds itself on a Christian concept of the secular that shows anxieties about non-Europeans and considers citizenship bounded to the acceptance of a specific set of secular values. This tendency is

exemplified by xenophobic positions that welcome Christian migrants more than those from other religions, in order to promote an easier cultural and religious integration (Casanova, 2004).

Asad's approach is central to expose the inconsistency of these secularist positions: on the one hand, European countries preach a strict separation of Church and state, with an implicit critique to the role of religion in the public space and a negation of the dialectic between secular and religious. On the other hand, Christianity is not only tolerated, but also employed as a political discourse that, together with secularism, opposes other religions. A possible explanation of this contradiction can be found in the different understanding of public and private: Christianity, considered "private" in character, is not seen as threatening for the rationality that allegedly dominates European public debates. On the contrary, Islam is considered as a totalizing religion that seeks a public position, and therefore tries to dangerously appropriate public spaces. As Talhami (2004) writes, a "view of Islam as a faith that made no separation between religion and politics deepened its image as fundamentalist, dangerous and backward" (p. 154).

The ambiguities of secularism in Europe are found in Italy, as well: a number of Italian public debates employ the concept of "Catholic model of secularism" to solve the tension between secular and Christian principles that govern the country. The "Catholic model of secularism" helps addressing the contradiction of a formally secular country where the Catholic Church benefits from a privileged position in public spaces, as analyzed in Chapter One. The model is "founded on the social

representation of Catholicism as the cultural basis of the nation's identity" (Frisina, 2011, p. 272). An example of this model of secularism can be found in the presence of religion in public spaces. Italy considers public buildings as secular, and therefore problematizes the presence of religious symbols such as the hijab[xxvii]. However, the Catholic crucifix is not only allowed in public spaces, but also encouraged in some circumstances. It is justified by political and juridical discourses that reiterate the importance of the "Christian roots of Italy," as well as the compatibility of Catholicism with secular and liberal identities (Mancini, 2010; Ozzano and Giorgi, 2012; Joppke, 2013).

This interplay of secular and religious spaces in Italy is problematic because it creates a hierarchy between different religions, marginalizing those that are not aligned with mainstream religious institutions. In addition, the perceived "consensual Catholic" public sphere is ambiguous because Catholicism is not always in armony with secular principles, despite what often portrayed by mainstream media and discourses. On the contrary, religious and secular positions tend to have a conflictual relation in trying to establish a predominant presence in public and institutional spaces, as the analysis of this dissertation's case studies reveals. This conflictual relation is symptomatic of a lack of dialogue between religion and secularism and a need for more reflection about the position religion should occupy within the public sphere.

Both the academic re-thinking of secularization and the political use of secularism are relevant to understand discourses of minority religious groups in Italy.

The former can provide a dialectic model where secular and religious coexist in public and media debates, explaining for example the role of Church and state in Italy around questions such as abortion, gay marriage, and divorce. The latter explains why certain groups, prevalently, but not only, Muslims, are marginalized by a controversial and ambiguous model of "Catholic secularism" that privileges a certain type of religiosity over others. Because of the inconsistencies around different understandings of the secular, both in academia and in politics, this dissertation compels a re-thinking of how nation states in late modernity frame their identities. In particular, Asad's analysis is central to understand that it is important neither to dismiss the existence of the category of the secular in the West, nor to ignore the proliferation of religions in the public sphere. Media can provide an important venue for the re-thinking of secularism and for the creation of spaces where secular and religion can meaningfully dialogue.

The secular, in conclusion, is a central category of analysis to understand the role of religion in the Italian public sphere. The concept of public sphere as theorized by Habermas seems to mirror a political concept of secularism that is based on rationality and does not leave space for religion in public debates. However, the re-thinking of the public sphere in more inclusive terms can open up possibilities for religious groups to find spaces of participation and to promote a dialectical relationship between religion and secular. Therefore, the idea of public sphere is central in the understanding of religion and the secular, and promotes reflections on how they are articulated in space.

Public Sphere

The concept of public sphere is important to understand the kind of public opinion that exists in Europe and Italy, in relation to secular and religious positions. For example, it accounts for the Christian influence in public debates and the exclusion of Muslims from the consensus-making process. Furthermore, it is involved with the formation of public and private spaces, as well as spaces for collective debate and opinion formation. The notion of public sphere can be employed to explain the formation of publics in relation to media consumption, both in dominant and marginal spaces. While there are different conceptualizations of public sphere (Dean, 2003), I will focus on the historical analysis of Habermas, and, in particular, the importance of media in this process. Habermas' concept is also important because of the responses other scholars gave to this idea of public sphere: I will proceed by presenting the limitations of this theory and how Dean, Fraser, Warner, and Mouffe propose to re-think the public sphere in order to focus more on identity and to account for the formation of multiple counterpublics and spaces that challenge the idea of consensus.

Jurgen Habermas' Public Sphere

Habermas describes the rise of the bourgeois public sphere in his work "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere"(1962). Focusing on 18th century Europe, Habermas analyzes the historical moment of social life when the separation of the public and private occurs. Through debate and discussion, private individuals come together to create public opinion. Consensus is a central element in the public sphere. Habermas indeed describes it "as a sphere which mediates between society

and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion, accords with the principle of the public sphere" (1974, p. 50). The concept of space and the use of media are central to the notion of public sphere. First developed in literary contexts and then moved into political ones, the public sphere needs spaces of discussion and debate to come into being. Space, understood both as physical locations (theaters, cafes) and ideal locations (the imaginary of civil society) allows for the formation of public opinion.

Media enable the creation of publicness through communication between individuals and places. The public sphere is based on the circulation of media to enhance discussion and form public opinion. Furthermore, media can help individuals constitute into a public that resists authority:

> The bourgeois public sphere could be understood as the sphere of private individuals assembled into a public body, which almost immediately laid claim to the officially regulated "intellectual newspapers" for use against the public authority itself (Habermas, 1974, p. 5).

The "public body" Habermas writes about is not the audience of mainstream media, nor the majority of the population; on the contrary, it has a potential for subversion and creation of oppositional meanings. Habermas explores, for example, the rise of political minorities in Great Britain, analyzing the role of non-mainstream groups in civil society and the potential articulation of spaces of resistance (1962, p. 63). Furthermore, Habermas sees the formation of a public as based on equal

participation. Since the public sphere is the result of a rational-critical discourse, integration is based on "communication rather than domination" (Calhoun, 1992, p. 29). The public sphere constitutes a model of consensus based on individual participation in collective discourses: "The issues discussed became 'general' not merely in their significance, but also in their accessibility: everyone had to *be able* to participate" (Habermas, 1962, p. 37).

However, despite Habermas' attention to minorities and equal participation, the public sphere is not fully inclusive. Habermas considers the public sphere as solely based on rationality, and this overlooks groups whose existence is based on identity. The bourgeois character of the public sphere results in the inevitable exclusion of certain categories of citizens, such as women. Similarly, religion is largely overlooked by Habermas, since it is not considered as an element of the rational-critical debate that characterizes the public sphere. The focus on rationality rather than identity can easily turn into a political stance that chooses to ignore the existence of certain minorities: the absence of religion in the public sphere is an implicit endorsement of the secularization idea that religion is irrelevant in late modernity.

This lack of inclusivity is also due to the fact that Habermas analyzes a specific historical condition. The model was not meant to be universal and applicable to any social and geographical circumstance. Indeed, the Habermasian public sphere is not found in every context: the transition to mass democracy of the welfare state, for

example, resulted in a progressive intertwinement of public and private, with a "re-feudalization" of public authority. According to Habermas, mass consumption of media becomes more relevant than public debate, undermining the process of publicness and the distinction of public and private spaces.

Re-thinking the Public Sphere: Public and Media

Aware of these limitations, Habermas re-thinks the concept of public sphere in more inclusive terms; as mentioned above, he reconsiders for instance the position of religion in Europe, making it part of rational discourses that originally excluded faith. However, the concept of public sphere remains too exclusive to account for non-mainstream groups, and does not take into account the question of identity. The public sphere is based on the idea of consensus; but, in order to reach a homogeneous consensus, it is inevitable to exclude minorities or groups that do not find a place of expression in public debate. Some critiques of Habermas focus on the idea of "publicness" and the possibility, or lack thereof, groups have to constitute themselves into a public.

Dean (2001, 2003) contests Habermas' idea of public. According to her, Habermas gives more prominence to reason rather than inclusivity, resulting in a multiple-public model that is "more confusing than convincing" (2001, p. 641). For Dean, there are two types of public: the public "supposed to know" and the public "supposed to believe." This distinction prevents a genuine debate and undermines the information potential of media. While debate might turn the public "supposed to believe" into the public "suppose to know," there is an informational gap that prevents full inclusivity and participation. Democracy needs to keep a part of the

citizens as "supposed to believe" in order to function in a capitalist society. The idea of public is, therefore, fictional. Participation into democracy is not entirely possible despite the development of communication technologies. Dean opposes the idea that the Internet is a public sphere because it serves the logic of "communicative capitalism": asserted to technology corporate power and the needs of the "society of spectacle," communicative capitalism dominates the net and gives only a false illusion of democratic participation, because it is premised on the idea of circulation only.

While Dean dismisses the idea of public as a fiction, other authors re-think the public sphere in a way that would allow for the formation of multiple publics, or counterpublics. Warner, putting emphasis on a mass media perspective, theorizes the emergence of counterpublics. Similarly to Dean, Warner considers the public as a "fiction." However, while Dean does not see a democratic potential in the creation of publics, for Warner there is a possibility for people' agency in this process. The "fictional" character of the public lies in its adaptability to different contexts and the self-imagination of its members. Media circulation and intertextuality are the basis of the public formation: "A public enables a reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity" (2005, p. 11-12). The public exists because it is the object of media attention. In certain circumstances, publics resist dominant ideologies and are related to subcultures: "some publics are defined by their tension with a larger public" (p. 56). These counterpublics as connected with social spaces where alternative discourses circulate. An example of counterpublic is the queer one, which

is based on the re-negotiation of private and public in a way that implies a specific and non-mainstream understanding of media texts.

Warners' idea of multiple publics can be applied to the study of religion and media as well, accounting for the formation of publics based on religious identities. Hoover (2006) writes about a "relative de-massification of audience" (p. 45), that implies publics are no longer homogeneous and fixed. Therefore, it would be wrong to sharply divide a monolithic "religious" audience from the "secular" one. It is rather necessary to account for fluid processes of audience formation that bring different patterns of content consumption. Hoover dismisses the idea of a single media center within society, theorizing a model where multiple media centers coexist and provide the audience with venues of agency and meaning-making: "We can no longer assume any singular public sphere within which media events may be articulated. Instead, there are multiple public spheres, even within what we once thought of as a particular, bounded cultural and national context" (Hoover 2006, p 295). The abundance of religious biopics that are produced for the Italian national television represent an example of formation of religious and secular publics (Buonanno, 2012). While the biopics are meant to entertain and they target religious and secular publics alike, they are widely consumed by a religious public that constitutes itself in virtue of the content circulated. In this way, different understandings of the content help with the articulation of religious identities. Warner's work help situating these phenomena in between cultural and political contexts of public formation.

Re-thinking the Public Sphere: Minorities

Dean and Warner focus their critiques on the formation of publics in relation to media consumption and public debates. Some other scholars put attention on minorities that are excluded from the public sphere in their processes of indentity-formation. Fraser (1990), for example, analyzes gender and racial minorities. She criticizes the public sphere for the discrepancy between the equal participation theorized by Habermas and the limitations of this model in practice: "The bourgeois conception of the public sphere as described by Habermas is not adequate for the critique of the limits of actually existing democracy in late-capitalist society" (1990, p. 136). Fraser calls for more inclusivity and the creation of non-liberal, non bourgeois, and competing public spheres. In doing so, Fraser does a feminist reading of Habermas focused on the interplay of public and private, putting emphasis on the concept of the body in relation to gender and racial minorities. Furthermore, she states that the public sphere should not reason within the framework of the Westphalian nation-state, but rather be trans-national (2007). In her critique, Fraser advocates for the creation of multiple publics that benefit from real equality, instead of having a civil society where publics can be "weak" or "strong." These definitions imply that, because certain publics can only have influence on public opinions, while others have actual influence on laws and state decisions, there is a substantial inequality in participation.

While Fraser focuses on gender and racial minorities, Mouffe (2005) analyses ideological minorities. Mouffe contests Habermas' notion of consensus, arguing that it is not only "conceptually mistaken," but also "fraught for political danger" in

Western modernity (p. 2). Indeed, "there is no consensus without exclusion" (In Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2006, p. 4) and the creation of collective identities always presupposes the distinction between "we" and "they." These two terms, in opposition with each other and often based on hierarchies of domination and subordination, cannot lead to true equality in participation. On the contrary, social and political power relations inevitably lead to creation of antagonisms between groups.

In a democracy, Mouffe argues, it is necessary to transform these antagonistic power relationships in "agonistic spaces," promoting confrontation and opposition to mainstream consensus; in this way, "enemies" are turned into "adversaries". This position is based on the idea that peaceful consensus is not able to provide the dialogue that is needed to stimulate democratic participation. For this reason, Mouffe dismisses the idea of "post-political", a concept based on the idea that a world "without enemies" and "beyond antagonism" is possible (idem). Lack of plurality within democracies and refusal to acknowledge differences result in new forms of oppressions against minorities, instead of their social inclusion. On the contrary, agonism is able to create greater inclusion by creating venues for struggles and conflicts that would benefit democracy. Indeed, democracies should be defined by the continuous dialogue and confrontation between non-hegemonic groups, in order to create a plurality of subjects.

Mouffe's theory is relevant in the Italian context, where the collective identification is based either on hegemonic Christianity or on secular values. Indeed, the Italian democratic state often does not acknowledge the existence of

differences. Depriving groups that do not agree with this consensus from the possibility of expression and conflict within the public sphere prevents the full realization of democratic aims. For example, Muslims are often excluded from the public sphere because they are not seen as compatible with the hegemonic model of "Catholic secularism." Mainstream consensus does not grant equality, but rather establish power relations where Muslims are silenced. In order to enter the public sphere, Muslims need to constitute themselves into an agonistic group, which questions the mainstream consensus by establishing a dialogue and a presence, as well as forcing a re-thinking of the Italian identity. This agonism can be expressed, for example, through the establishment of alternative venues of expression that restist stereotypes about Islam.

The notion of multiple public spheres and multiple publics can account for the position of minorities within society, in opposition with mainstream discourses. The contemporary Italian debates about migration offer an example of the relationship between marginal groups and the public sphere: excluded from the public space, migrants have difficulties in finding a space of engagement in the creation of public opinion. They represent not only a religious and cultural minority, but they are also constructed as a "common adversary." The construction of a "common adversary," according to Mouffe (1988), is a political strategy aimed at deconstructing conflicts and avoiding that different minorities connect to each other to struggle against a dominant hegemony. Xenophobic and racist anti-migration discourses, often entangled with anti-Muslim ones, can therefore be seen as a construct to prevent minority groups to enter agonistic public spaces. Migrants are constructed as a

problematic subject that is excluded from the public sphere.

The concept of public sphere is useful to account for the formation of publics in relation to media, and the position of minorities, including religious ones, within society. The public sphere, both the one theorized by Habermas and the various notions of public sphere elaborated by other thinkers, is relevant in relation to the process of creation of both hegemonic and non-hegemonic spaces. The idea of public sphere, indeed, is connected with the notion of domination and social power and it is useful to understand the resistive discursive formation of the groups I will analyze in the next chapters. However, power and resistance are not only articulated in society in relation to public and private spaces, nor are they limited to consensus and public opinion. From a cultural perspective, the formation of hegemony and counter-hegemonies is concerned with the interplay of different social elements. Gramsci and, later, the Cultural Studies tradition, explore the concept of hegemony from the viewpoint of culture. Both traditions are relevant to understanding the formation of resistive practices and discourses of religious minorities.

Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony

The concept of hegemony is influential for the study of media practices as well as for the assessment of religious dynamics within society. It is useful to account for the discourses mainstream and non-mainstream groups produce, and to capture the tension between dominant and non-dominant spaces. The cultural perspective on hegemony helps define the, sometimes, ambiguous definition of "minority" and "majority." I will therefore present, first, Gramsci's theorization of hegemony and, second, how this idea was developed by the Birmingham Center for Contemporary

Cultural Studies, and Williams in particular. In doing so, I will put particular attention on the idea of counter-hegemonies and the coexistence of dominant and alternative elements within culture.

Antonio Gramsci and the Concept of Hegemony

Gramsci innovatively theorizes the concept of hegemony as a power that is not only based on domination, but on consensus, as well. Gramsci re-thinks Marx's idea of base and superstructure, writing that society is a complex interaction of different spheres rather than a dichotomy between forces of production and social institutions. This framework allows Gramsci to elaborate on the concept of hegemony as an interaction of different social meanings and institutional structures: hegemony is not only a top-down force that states impose upon its citizens, but rather a process that operates also from the bottom-up. Coercion pairs with consensus in order to create a hegemonic system. This process is sustained by both the creation of a cultural and social system and the half complicity of the people.

Hegemony is based upon a system that privileges elements that maintains the hegemonic status quo and suppresses those who do not. Hegemony is indeed not based "on the brainwashing of 'the masses';" on the contrary, it depends on "the tendency of public discourse to make some forms of experience readily available to consciousness while ignoring or suppressing others" (Lears, 1985, p. 577). This produces a "spontaneous philosophy", a term inspired by Marx's concept of "ideology;" "spontaneous philosophy" includes language, common sense, and the folklore of a society.

To maintain hegemony, it is necessary to reach people's "half-conscious complicity in their own victimization" (Lears, 1985, p. 573). This complicity lies in the tendency of people to act in contradiction with their own beliefs, defined by Gramsci as "contradictory consciousness." This "contradictory consciousness" is the product of the interplay between contemporary social beliefs and values that are inherited from the past; even if they are inconsistent with each other, people consider them as equally acceptable. In this way, hegemony is maintained because of the contradictory support people offer to the system they live in.

The idea of hegemony has proven useful in the study of social structures, including religion and media: "The production of meanings and values by social institutions, including churches, schools and the mass media, play an essential role in establishing the legitimacy of the existing political order" (Carregee, 1993, p. 330). These structures operate in an hegemonic way but they are challenged by oppositional social elements. Indeed, the concept of hegemony can account for the nuanced relationship between mainstream and alternative discourses, in relation to a number of social contexts that include religion and media.

Gramsci's idea of hegemony, therefore, is a useful framework to account for the resistive formation of counter-hegemonies; it has often been employed for the study of social movements. The innovative character of Gramsci's concept of hegemony makes it possible not only to theorize social movements from a rational perspective, but from an emotional and affective perspective, as well (Zembylas,

2013). The term "affectivity" in this contest represents individualized and socialized contents within structures of power. Emotions and affects are connected both with the construction of hegemonic consensus and with the formation of resistive practices. By stressing the importance of affectivity, it is possible to create an "emotional pedagogy" of activism overcoming the dichotomy between feelings and knowledge: "The popular element 'feels' but does not know or understand; the intellectual element 'knows' but does not always understand, and in particular does not always feel" (Gramsci, 1987: 418)" (p. 9). This affective element can be found in a number of social movements in Italy; for example, atheist groups, while stressing the importance of rationality, employ emotional techniques, as well. In order to attract a larger audience, discourses on the necessity of a more secular state are often paired with others on persecutions of atheists, focusing on personal stories of people in non-democratic and highly religious countries. These stories, differently from discourses based on rationality, appeal to the emotional sphere of the audience.

This idea of hegemony and the potential of challenging it, as well as the different rational and emotional elements that characterize culture and resistance, can be applied to a number of different contexts. Gramsci elaborates his theory in his work "The Prison Notebooks" ("Quaderni dal Carcere", 1929-1935), while imprisoned by the Italian Fascist regime. The experience of dictatorship most certainly informed his idea of state power. However, Gramsci is influenced by Marx and theorizes a model that focuses on capitalism in general; indeed, he argues that "capitalist societies were sustained not only by the formal and potential coercive

power of the state, but also by complex cultural and ideological processes that secure popular consent to the established social order" (Carragee, 330). Contemporary, democratic Italy can be analyzed as a space where hegemonic forces come into play. For example, mainstream media can be seen as hegemonic spaces where religious and political interests come into play to maintain a certain status quo.

I believe Gramsci's idea of hegemony is central in the analysis of liberal democracies in late modernity, especially to expose the limits of the hegemonic consensus. Indeed, the concept of hegemony has been employed by other thinkers. For example, Mouffe applies the idea of hegemony and counter-hegemonies to her re-thinking of the public sphere. For Mouffe, counter-hegemonies are not only oppositional forces, but rather a re-articulation of existing structures to create a new situation (Tambakaki, 2014). The concept is important in relation to the Italian context, where certain religious groups are marginalized by their lack of participation. Muslims, for example, are excluded from the hegemonic consensus. They do not suffer from the same oppression of non-democratic states described by Gramsci, but they are subject to a new form of oppression because they are often not recognized as a part of the pluralism of the country. Muslims, therefore, need to create counter-hegemonic practices in order to find spaces of dialogue and participation, and show the non-inclusive character of democratic consensus, creating what Mouffe defines as "agonistic spaces." The concept of hegemony as related to resistance and opposition has been incorporated by a number of other

thinkers, as well. For example, the Cultural Studies tradition draws on the Gramscian idea of hegemony in order to describe cultural aspects of society.

Hegemony within Cultural Studies

The concept of hegemony has been central for Cultural Studies theorists to address their re-thinking of Marxism in cultural terms. As Hall attests, "I have to confess that, though I've read many, more elaborated and sophisticated, accounts, Gramsci's account still seems to me to come closest to expressing what it is I think we were trying to do." (1992, p. 4). The Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies focuses on cultural production and experience. It sees culture as a social phenomenon, an interaction of different practices, a "site of convergent interests" (Hall, 1980, p. 35). "Culture," Williams writes, "Is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning" (1989, p. 4). The incorporation of Gramsci allows the Cultural Study tradition to theorize hegemony focusing on this fluid view of culture as an intellectual resource, overcoming the Marxian perspective that focuses on economy rather than culture.

Williams, in particular, employs Gramsci's concept of hegemony to describe the coexistence of different elements within society. As Gramsci theorizes the "spontaneous philosophy" to describe the culture of a time, Williams coins the concept of "structure of feelings;" this perspective sees society as the living result of cultural organization (1961). For Williams culture is the result of a "selective tradition." He defines it as follows:

There is a process which I call the *selective tradition* (...) the way in which from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded. (1973, p. 9, emphasis in original).

The Cultural Studies' focus on practice help theorizing hegemony from a material perspective. The selective tradition creates a mainstream culture through human practices and behaviors that evolve in time. Hegemony is, therefore, a cultural and social element rather than an abstract concept. Within the selective tradition, dominant and non-dominant meanings and practices coexist. The non-dominant elements of society can be residual, if inherited from the past, or emergent, if in the process of coming into being. Both residual and emergent elements can be incorporated within mainstream values, or they can constitute alternative and oppositional elements. While alternative elements do not necessarily imply social transformation, oppositional ones are aimed at resistance to the dominant system. They represent, therefore, counter-hegemonies, discourses that are articulated in different venues to challenge hegemony in society. In every society there are a number of alternative and oppositional elements. In relation to religion, counter-hegemonies are represented both by groups that do not share the main religiosity of a country, such as Muslim in Italy and Europe, and groups that articulate different practices and beliefs within a mainstream religion, such as Catholic groups in Italy that find alternative sources of authority other than the Vatican.

The idea of mainstream and non-mainstream values within culture is central in Cultural Studies in relation to gender and race. From a Cultural Studies perspective, gender and race are determined by cultural structures of domination, rather than by class. The discussion around these elements offers the possibility to expand the notion of hegemony, problematizing the individual as a political subject. It is also concerned with the dichotomy between public and private and the process of identity construction. Media have a central role in creating ideas around gender and race: for instance, Hall (1981) argues, mass media contribute to the construction of racist images both in an implicit and explicit way, because they are venues where ideas about race are "articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated" (p. 35).

The Cultural Studies tradition did not focus on religion, but the attention to race and gender can provide a useful framework to analyze minority religions and the interplay of public and private in relation to religions. In Italy, for example, Catholicism constitutes the hegemonic religious worldview, deeply embedded in civil society and social activities (Garelli, 2007). This is the result of historical processes of selection of certain cultural elements over others. However, there are also alternative and oppositional religious elements that persist from the past, and manifest themselves in religious practices such as the cult of Saints or healing rituals, as explored in Chapter One (Pace, 2007). Alongside these elements, there are also new emerging values that are contrasting the hegemonic position of Catholicism, such as an increasing number of non-believers. The coexistence of dominant and non-dominant social elements results in the formation of groups that, depending on their social position, can be defined as "majorities" or "minorities." While the first

term refers to the hegemonic role of Catholicism, the second encompasses groups that struggle to gain equal recognition and perceive that their position is in contrast with mainstream ones.

The cultural perspective on hegemony, therefore, is relevant to understanding the agency of religious groups that sought to enter, or contrast, the public sphere from a non-hegemonic position. It is concerned with the creation of space, since these groups negotiate spaces of existence in relation to hegemony. The tension between hegemonic and non-hegemonic religiosity is mirrored in media use, as well: minority religious groups aim at creating discourses that challenge hegemonic values, but they rarely have access to mainstream media. Therefore, they account for their marginal position by using alternative media and by creating alternative practices. While they cannot reach the same audience of mainstream media, alternative media are central in the articulation of media practices and the creation of media spaces, and become fundamental in public debates about religion and the secular.

Alternative Media and Media Practices

Minority groups, such as non-mainstream religions, often employ alternative media to search for discursive spaces. These spaces can be constituted as "agonistic spaces," as theorized by Mouffe, or "counter-hegemonies" in a culturalist perspective. Following Warner's analysis of media consumption, minority groups can constitute themselves in counterpublics, as well. The aim of these space-creation

processes is to enter the public sphere assessing the position of religion in society, debating the use of religion and the secular in relation to private and public spaces. However, even if these discourse-formation activities are usually aimed at gaining mainstream attention, they often employ non-mainstream media. The concept of alternative media is therefore relevant to contextualize the actions of minority religious groups. I will define alternative media, with particular attention to digital media. In doing so, I will outline the definition of "tactical media" and the concept of "connective action," explaining why they are relevant for my study. I will explain Couldry's (2012) idea of "media practice" in relation to digital and alternative spaces. Finally, I will present the concept of "third space" as the theoretical framework that accounts for how religion and media come together to create resistive and alternative spaces.

Tactical Media and Connective Action

Alternative media are so called because they occupy non-mainstream spaces and/or they are used to advance non-mainstream discourses. Lievrouw (2011) writes that they "employ the communication artifact, practices and social arrangements to challenge dominant aspects of the society" (p. 19). The category of alternative media is heterogeneous: Lievrouw identifies among the main characteristics of alternative media the creation of collective identities, the production of meanings and symbols, the participatory and interactive culture, the "unconventional" action repertoires (p. 48).

Alternative media are often, even if not always, connected with activism, in relation, for example, to the practice of consumerism (Benet-Weiser and Mukherjee, 2012) or social movements (Della Porta, 2010). For this reason, there are a number of other terms employed to define alternative media, such as "citizen media," "radical media," "critical media," or "social movement media" (Mattoni et al., 2010). The practice of activism refers to the ability of making changes in history and society, usually through direct protest. Activism and media are intertwined in creating alternative and oppositional discourses:

> Media, in this context, can be understood both as a medium to communicate, propagate and interact, as well as a battlefield – a 'symbolic arena' – for the struggle to signify, where meanings making sense of the world and ideas of what citizenship entails – from a national, but increasingly also from a regional or global perspective – compete (Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2007, p. 220).

Activism usually refers to oppositional practices against a dominant hegemonic power. However, activism within alternative media is not only confined to mass protests or revolutions. For example, social movements can be kindled by non-collective actors, characterized by "fragmented but similar activities" (Bayat, 2009, p. 14). Social actions can produce "strategical openings," allowing practitioners' engagement without subverting the system. These "openings" are relevant to theorize articulations of power and resistance that can create non-mainstream identities and meanings. This type of alternative media is what Raley (2009) defines as "tactical media:" the term indicates a variety of media practices that are aimed at

creating micropolitics of disruption, intervention, and education. Raley describes tactical media as follows:

> Tactical media signifies the intervention and disruption of a dominant semiotic regime, the temporary creation of a situation in which signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible. Tactical media operates in the field of the symbolic, the site of power in postindustrial society (p. 6)

While tactical media might not create an immediate and visible social impact, they are relevant for the creation of a cultural thickening of religious practices. Through this thickening, religion is re-negotiated and re-elaborated in order to create hybrid subjectivities that function in a society without necessarily sharing all its hegemonic values. Echchaibi (2013) individuates in the Muslim blog "Muslimah Media Watch" an example of tactical media, because it does not subvert social order, but questions the position of religion in Western modernity. The blog's narratives go beyond institutionalized discourses of gender and religion in the West, creating oppositional narratives and forms of resistance. The concept of tactical media is relevant in relation to alternative discourses in the Italian context, as exemplified by Ardizzoni's analysis of web-based Telestreet project (2013). The Neapolitan street TV project Insu^TV challenges the Italian power structure that "leaves little room for dissident voices" (p. 879). The television is considered an instance of tactical media because of its effort to create alternative perspectives on the Italian society without engaging in open political activism. By giving direct space of discursive articulation to migrants,

the television creates "new, parallel sources of power" (p. 877) to redefine the concept of citizenship and create spaces of participation.

The concept of tactical media, as these exemples show, is useful to contextualize the activities of non mainstream groups in the context of activism. Religious groups, for example, do not usually engage in activism *strictu sensu*. However, I do consider the groups I analyze as example of activist groups because, through a tactical use of media, they create performative spaces of resistance that are aimed at social change. Minority religious groups in Italy often engage in tactical media practices in order to challenge dominant narratives and articulate voices for recognition. They challenge the conventional storytelling of mainstream media, creating subversive "micropolitics of disruption," as I will analyze in the following chapters. When describing alternative and tactical media, it is important to consider two elements.

First, alternative media neither are limited to new media technologies nor can develop only in the Internet space. Media use is defined "alternative" if it conveys a message that is non-mainstream, independently from the media platform it employs (Hamilton, 2000; Coyer et al. 2011). For example, Couldry's (2000) account of protests demonstrates how people can challenge media power through an alternative use of television. According to Couldry's analysis, protesters seek media attention but also critically engage with media representations, creating non-mainstream discourses within, and thanks to, those that are traditionally considered mainstream media. On the other hand, it is important to avoid the mistake of

thinking that Internet discourses are always alternative or subversive. Mainstream religions, such as the Catholic Church, occupy institutionalized digital spaces that mirror the official hierarchy of the Vatican. The Pope, for example, has a Twitter account[xxviii], but it is used to spread the official message of the Church instead than creating participation and engaging in debates.

The relationship between alternative digital media and what are considered as mainstream media can sometimes be nuanced. As I will illustrate in my analysis, groups that privilege the Internet as space of expression often aim at mainstream culture and media. However, they are sometimes reluctant to engage with mainstream media, not only because they lack the possibility of doing so, but as a form of resistance against what they perceived as a non-inclusive media system. Lack of involvement between alternative and mainstream media is symptomatic of the complex ways non-mainstream messages are created and diffused, but also of the problems of certain media systems, such as the Italian nationa television.

Second, alternative media practices are not disconnected from offline spaces. There is an academic tendency to consider online activism as less effective than offline protests. Rotman et al. (2011) analyze the term "slaktivism" as a low-risk, low-cost activity via social media, "whose purpose is to raise awareness, produce change, or grant satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity." (p. 821). A form of activism that is confined to media practice can surely raise awareness and provide information, but non-media practices are needed to effectively engage people. For this reason, media practices do not have to be considered as independent, but

rather analyzed within the context they operate in. According to Cammaerts (2015), online actions create "weak" ties that exclude face-to-face interactions; however, these ties can become "strong" networks if they kindle offline direct actions. An example of the interaction between online and offline practices can be found in Italy in pro-family Catholic movements: while these groups engage with the Internet to create discourses and spread information, the core of their movement remains protests in public squares. Their activism is articulated in-between online and offline spaces that are equally important for the creation of their message.

Therefore, it is important to consider alternative media practices in relation to different media platforms and in virtue of their relation with the non-media context. While it would be a mistake to limit the study of alternative media to the Internet, it is also important to take into account that the development of media technologies changes people's communicative practices. Technology reconfigured publicity by creating an intertwinement of old practices and patterns in new media (Baym and Boyd, 2012).

Different media platforms, indeed, allow for different articulations of messages, as argued by Segerberg and Bennet (2011). As a result, late modernity is characterized by personalized messages, rather than by classical structures of solidarity. This model is defined as "connective action," based on networks. The creation of networks have characterized social movements in the last decades, where action is organized "from below" and aims at being transnational by incorporating a number of different goals and activities (Della Porta, 2000).

Networks create collective identities and patterns of actions; through the use of social media, the collective effort turns into a "connective" model of protest where there is a high degree of individualization within a collective identity. The connective model allows for people and organizations with different goals to collaborate for a common objective, but maintaining their values and priorities in virtue of the personalized way of communication they employ. This personalization of action characterizes contemporary political life, creating a fluid relationship between different characters:

> We seek to emphasize that exploring contemporary forms of collective and connective action requires moving away from starkly dichotomous assumptions about the individual and the collective. There are different ways of constituting a 'we', and these different methods of political practice matter for the formation, capacity, and possibly the meaning of protest. (Bennet and al. 2014, p. 273)

The connective action model is relevant to understanding how religious groups create messages that are articulated in non-traditional networks, including religious messages. The media, and the Internet in particular, enables believers to engage with the creation of hybrid identities and spaces of practice in a personalized way; as analyzed above, that implies a shift in authorities and institutionalized symbols. In addition, the connective action model help explaining how people approach religious practices by subscribing to a personalized set of beliefs. Connective actions, being more personalized, are characterized by flexible participatory schemes and the

coexistence of multiple narratives and authors. Therefore, it is necessary to address media practices that allow the creation of these narratives.

Media as practice

Narrative practices and the articulation of different voices are central in the use of alternative media. According to Couldry (2010), voice is a process of self-articulation that creates values in society and media. In neoliberal contexts, only certain voices are taken into account, while other are silenced. Couldry's definition of "neoliberalism," as a political and social doctrine, is similar to the Gramscian concept of "hegemony." On the one hand, the articulation of alternative voices bears the potential of giving agency to people that, otherwise, would have no access to public debate; on the other hand, it enables the creation of identities and social awareness within certain groups. When people are able to gain a voice, they can potentially create narratives that contrast hegemonic structures: "spaces for voice are therefore *inherently* spaces of power" (p. 130).

In theorizing articulations of voices, Couldry focuses on the power dynamics between media and society. Media, indeed, have a central role in the legitimization of social power and in the construction of cultural categories within society. However, Couldry dismisses what he defines the "myth of the mediated center" (2012). This myth is based on the notion that media have a privileged role to the center of symbolic production and are located at the "center of culture". While it is true that in certain contexts, such as the Italian one, media construct themselves as "socially central" in virtue to their close relationship with the state, it is important to

take into account struggles over media power, as well. Non-mainstream voices, such as those represented by a number of religious blogs in Italy, challenge the power of mainstream media and engage in a symbolic struggle over the meaning of democracy and modernity. In so doing, they contest the assumption that Italian national media constitute the only "center" of production of hegemonic discourses around religion and secularism.

The contemporary proliferation of media within Western societies needs to be addressed in virtue of media practices. Media power depends on a content that is generated by others; media can then act on this power through representations (Curran and Couldry, 2003). Couldry's social theory, indeed, does not consider media as the only repository of power, but rather focuses on the uses people do with media and the social outcomes they produce (2012). This approach calls for a "non-media centric media studies" perspective, which refuses a single media logic. Employing Bourdieu's field theory, Couldry takes into account multiple media logics, considering media as connected and able to legitimize a number of other social fields, such as politics and religion. In doing so, he goes beyond the dichotomy between media texts and media institutions and considers media in virtue of their relationship with society. He describes this approach as follows:

> Such a media sociology is interested in actions that are *directly oriented* to media, actions that *involve* media without necessary having media as their aim or object; and actions whose possibility is *conditioned* by the prior existence, presence or functioning of the media (p. 35, emphasis in original).

To analyze media, therefore, it is important to take into account multiple facets: media texts, political economy, technical properties, and social uses. Only the combination of all these elements enables a study of society that accounts for changes and the creation of hegemonic and non-hegemonic narratives. This perspective is relevant when analyzing alternative religious discourses in the digital space: they need to be considered not only in virtue of media power, but as the sum of a number of social and cultural elements that express themselves in the use of the Internet.

Discourses on media practices can be paired with the idea of religious practice. Religions are defined and lived through institutionalized and non-institutionalized practices that need a venue for expression. Media practices can become religious in scope when they involve religious beliefs and are aimed at religious communities or individuals. Religious groups that engage in alternative media practices open up the possibility of thinking about media and religious practices as connected, rather than separated. Instead of talking about media practices that enable religious practices, or vice versa, it is possible to think about the fluidity of practices that involve the mutual intertwinement of media and religion.

The creation of voices and media practices is inherently connected with the production of space. Couldry employs the term "presencing" to account for actions aimed at maintaining a constant presence across space: "A whole set of media-

enhanced ways in which individuals, groups and institutions put into circulation information about, and representation of, themselves for the wider purpose of *sustaining a public presence"* (p. 50, emphasis in original). The creation of space, as Knott (2014) argues, is interconnected with the presence in time. Couldry pairs the idea of "presencing" with that of "archiving," which indicates the capacity for creating self-narratives across time. The practices of "archiving" and "presencing" hold symbolic power that is potentially generative of meanings and values. While these spaces are not necessarily disruptive of established social and cultural norms, they can contribute to the creation of resistance and alternative discourses. The creation of space within the digital not only allows the articulation of voices, but also encompasses a set of practices and meanings that apply to religion, as well.

Third Space

Religions in the digital space create values and practices that differ from, but are not disconnected with, those that are not media-related. The digital space therefore becomes a "third space" where it is possible to create hybrid religious identities and new understandings of religious aesthetics and authorities. This framework, theorized by Hoover and Echchaibi (2014), enables a perspective that encompasses religious practices, media practices, and spatial practices.

The concept of third space has been employed in a number of sociological and philosophical perspectives connected with the process of space creation. Oldeburg and Soja, for example, employs the term "third place" and "third space", respectively, to indicate the interplay between physical and social spaces, explaining

how architecture can create social interactions in spaces that are in-between public and private ones (Hoover and Echchaibi, 2014). In Postcolonial theory, Bhabha (1990) employs the concept of third space to account for practices of creation of hybridized cultures and subjectivities. In this case, the "in-betweenness" that characterizes the third space relates to spaces between different cultures, in specific the colonizer and the colonized. Spaces, therefore, can be connoted as imaginary or real in relation to the social environment.

Lefebvre's spatial triad (1992) is theoretically helpful for the concept of third space. According to Lefebvre, space can be "conceived," "perceived," or "lived." Conceived spaces have a pre-planned representation, since they are hegemonically designed for a specific function. Perceived spaces are places where people's actions occur, and are therefore defined by human agency. Finally, lived spaces encompass the imaginary activity of changing the pre-planned functions of spaces. Therefore, lived spaces are potentially disruptive against the hegemonic design of conceived spaces. They are characterized by non-dominant practices of space and they have the potential of becoming third spaces.

Lefebvre's idea of space is employed by Knott (2005) in relation to the spatial study of religion, and it can be applied to media practices, as well. Third spaces within the Internet are defined by the creation of communities around certain practices and the imaginary effort of producing narratives. Digital third spaces are located in-between physical and imaginary spaces, and they can create communities. They are characterized by practices of "as-if-ness:"

People act "as-if" these were bounded contexts of discourse and interaction. They act "as-if" they were communities of shared experience and sentiment. They act "as-if" they were contexts of public discourse and public deliberation. They act "as-if" these were powerful media for the communication of ideas and "as-if" there are relatively broad audiences of listeners out there. They act "as-if" the various expressions they craft in these spaces represent grounded, received truth claims for known communities of shared experience and value. (Hoover and Echchaibi, 2014, p. 13)

Digital third spaces allow for the thickening of religious practices and are generative of meanings. They can be either resistive against traditional religious authorities or simply provide a place for the articulation of non-mainstream viewpoints and practices. They exemplify how digital media can allow for new communicative patterns, holding media practices as central in the creation of alternative media discourses. The study of space within the digital needs to go beyond strict dichotomies of physical and imaginary, public and private, mainstream and alternative spaces. The Internet does not constitute a physical space, but the online world is necessarily connected with offline practices. The concept of public and private are re-negotiated in the formation of communities that are not primarily based on face-to-face interactions but have the potential to gain publicity through the articulation of discourses. Furthermore, practices of resistance are in a dialectic relationship with dominant values, and alternative media continually put themselves in relation with mainstream ones in creating non-hegemonic meanings.

I argue that the three case studies I focus on, the association UAAR, the group *Sentinelle in Piedi*, and the blog *Yalla,* represent examples of third spaces, as I will illustrate in the following chapters. They employ the digital space to create religious discourses that could not be articulated in other spaces. They discuss the position of religion in society and its relation with the secular from a marginal perspective. Forming communities and creating alternative sources of religious authority, they engage with public opinion and seek to enter the public sphere in order to challenge dominant values. They create counter-hegemonic discourses through alternative media practices to change social and cultural patterns. These blogs are examples of media practices that question the position of religion in the Italian society imagining alternative social models in opposition to the perceived hegemonic national identity.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ATHEIST ASSOCIATION UAAR AND ITS BLOG

Introduction

In Italy, the Catholic crucifix is exposed in every institutional building, such as public schools, hospitals, and municipality office. This habit contrasts with the formal secularism of the Italian state, which recognizes equal rights to all religions. The paradox exemplifies some of the nuances of Italian religiosity and kindles debates about the role of religion in public spaces. Some non-Catholic Italian citizens, such as the Muslim Adel Smith and the atheist Soile Lautsi, became vocal in contesting the crucifix as a symbol of the pervasiveness of Catholicism in the public sphere. Court decisions around these cases reflect the ambiguity of the Italian "Catholic secularism." In the Lautsi vs. Italy case (2009), for example, the Italian state described the crucifix as a "secular symbol" that carries a "humanist message", composed of "a set of principles and values forming the foundations of our democracies." The European Court of Human Rights refused to identify the crucifix as a "humanist symbol", but nonetheless did not consider its presence in public spaces as able to "indoctrinate" non-believers (Gatti, 2015). As a result, the crucifix was not removed from public spaces, even if Lautsi's request was considered legitimate in a secular state such as Italy.

This ambiguity is reflected in media discourses, as well. Ozzano and Giorgi (2013) analyze media debates about court cases on the crucifix and found four

predominant frames: first, left-oriented newspapers argued that the crucifix in public spaces is an attack on secularization. Secondly, Catholics from different political coalitions believed that the crucifix is a symbol of Italian culture. Then, media influenced by the center-right coalition reiterated the idea of crucifix as symbol of European civilization. Finally, the crucifix was used by newspapers connected with xenophobic parties as a symbol against an alleged "Muslim invasion."

The UAAR (Union of Atheists and Agnostic Rationalists) intervened in the media debate around the crucifix with a series of blog posts that oppose its presence. According to the UAAR, the display of the crucifix in public spaces is an example of the hegemonic role of the Catholic Church in Italy, which marginalizes non-Catholics in the country. The association expressed this opinion by supporting Italian citizens that made public gestures against the presence of the crucifix. For example, the UAAR offered legal assistance to Davide Zotti, a high school professor who removed the crucifix from the classroom he was teaching in. Zotti explained that he was disturbed by the presence of the crucifix because, as a declared homosexual, he does not feel that the Catholic Church accepts and legitimizes his role as a citizen and an educator. The UAAR's official blog *A Ragion Veduta* describes Zotti's gesture as follow:

> The crucifix is the symbol of a religion. A Country that pretends to be secular cannot institutionally use religious symbols, because public spaces cannot have symbols that refer to a specific ideology. A

Country that pretends to educate its future citizens cannot transmit the message that, in front of the law, someone is more equal than others. Therefore, [Italian] citizens need to support Davide Zotti, who –in a simple but brave way –fights for everybody's rights (Raffaele Carcano, 11/28/2014, my translation)

The assistance the UAAR offered to Zotti, as well as the advocacy in favor of people in a similar situation such as Smith and Lautsi, exemplifies the association's effort to promote secularism and to oppose the presence of Catholicism in public spaces. As explained in the quote, the UAAR believes that a secular state should prevent religious symbols from entering public spaces, and not punish those who try to protect the principle of "laicism.[xxix]" While the presence of the crucifix in public spaces is not a direct attack against atheists, for the UAAR it is one instance that proves how atheists are marginalized by cultural, legal, and social norms in the country. According to the association, the presence of the crucifix exemplifies how the hegemonic role of Catholicism influences institutions in a number of different contexts which have an impact on all Italian citizens, atheists and believers alike: Zotti was not disturbed by the presence of a religious symbol *per se*, but by the fact that the public space he was working in is influenced by a religious institution that openly challenges his sexual orientation and his civil rights.

The debate around the crucifix is an example of resistance against a material religious symbol. While the UAAR is not formally prevented from participating in the Italian public sphere, its members nonetheless feel that they are not granted equality because of the religious presence in public spaces. The material existence of

the crucifix becomes a way of endorsing or rejecting certain ideologies, and the various interpretations around its presence kindle debates that problematize the religious and the secular in the Italian society. The crucifix controversy is, therefore, an example of why the UAAR exists and how it contrasts material and symbolic religious practices .

Digital discourses about the crucifix on the UAAR's blog add complexity to the existing media debates about the issue, creating an alternative source of information and opinions. The blog *A Ragion Veduta*, addressing issues such as the crucifix, exemplifies how the Internet can become a space of promotion of secularization and discussion about the role of religion in society. In this chapter, I will show how *A Ragion Veduta* is a resistive digital space that helps atheists to feel a sense of community and to oppose the contradictions they see in the Italian "Catholic secularism". In specific, I argue, the blog has two main functions. First, it establishes an alternative voice to contrast the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of certain religious-related topics on the Italian mainstream media. Secondly, it exposes the limits of participation within the Italian democracy, whose lack of pluralism prevents atheists and other minority groups to engage in civil and social change. The presence of the UAAR and its blog, therefore, calls for a greater religious privatization and advocates for the secular character of public spaces.

The UAAR and its blog "A Ragion Veduta"

The blog *A Ragion Veduta: Il Mondo Osservato dall'UAAR*, online since 2005, is the official voice of the Italian Union of Atheists and Agnostic Rationalists. The

blog's title *A Ragion Veduta* means "With Hindsight," but it can be literally translated as "Reason is Seen." The blog, employing the term "reason" in its title, stresses how rationality is a central value for the UAAR. Indeed, the word "rationalists," which has the same etymology as "reason," is present in the association's name. The UAAR constructs its worldview around the idea that the state should be secular, and that rationalism should substitute for religious values. This focus on rationalism indirectly endorses the Habermasian idea that the public sphere is based on rationality and does not include religion, destined to disappear in late modernity. Reason is, therefore, one of the main symbolic resources the UAAR employs to justify its ideologies, articulated on the homepage of the website as follows:

> Among the values that inspire UAAR, we find rationality, laicism, respect of human rights, freedom of conscience, the principle of equal opportunity for all citizens, without distinction based on gender identity, sexual orientation, philosophical, or religious ideas (the UAAR website, my translation)

These values all figure prominently in the blog. The blog subtitle, Il *Mondo Osservato dall'UAAR* means "The World Observed by the UAAR". It implies that one of the main functions of the blog is to report news happening in Italy and worldwide. Indeed, the blog offers press releases about the secularization of society and the rise of religious fundamentalism. Furthermore, it elaborates opinions and comments about news from a rational viewpoint. Through its posts, as the one quoted above, the UAAR

articulates a set of reflections about religion and the position it should occupy within late modernity.

Among its aims, the UAAR has the promotion of a secular state and the improvement of social and media visibility of atheist citizens. In doing so, it creates a secular structure that at the same time imitates and rejects religious organizations, constructing itself as an interlocutor in religious discourses. At a theoretical level, the UAAR criticizes all religious worldviews, considering all of them as irrational. Practically, the association focuses especially on the Catholic influence in Italian society and politics. The UAAR considers Catholicism as a hegemonic force that, as for Gramsci's definition, is not coercive but rather based on consensus. Because of its historical and social role in the country, Catholicism is not imposed upon Italians, but often accepted as part of the tradition and not questioned. On the contrary, the UAAR criticized the fact that the alleged "Christian roots" of the Italian and European civilization confer to the Catholic Church a powerful role that impacts non-believers, as well.

The UAAR is, according to its website[xxx], the only national atheist association in Italy, and its blog emerged as an authority to embody the voice of people that are not religious or that do not agree with mainstream religious values. The association includes atheists, agnostics, and, in general, people who consider themselves rational instead of religious. These definitions have different nuances, but members of the UAAR usually self-identify generically as "atheists," hereinafter the term employed to define the association's members and blog readers. The UAAR counts

about 4000 members, who pay a mandatory membership fee every year. The association criticizes left-wing and right-wing politicians alike for being connected with the Vatican. Even if the UAAR does not identify with any political party, many of the blog's discourses appeal to a liberal audience. The UAAR has its headquarter in Rome and it is articulated on the national territories in local chapters, which are run by volunteers who are in charge of the organization of local events. Mirroring the religious composition of the country, the most active chapters are in regions that are traditionally less religious, such as the Center regions, while they are less active in the more religious Southern regions.

The blog occupies a central position in the UAAR's communication strategy. According to the president Raffaele Carcano, *A Ragion Veduta* is in the top 100 list of the most influential Italian blogs[xxxi], which makes it more influential for the Italian audience than religious blogs (personal communication, 06/10/2015). The Internet presence of the association is reinforced by the national Facebook and Twitter accounts, handled by two employees in the Rome headquarter, with 120,375 and 8,509 followers respectively[xxxii]. The association has a YouTube channel, which is, however, not frequently updated. Social media presence mirrors the offline structure of the organization because, other than national channels, each local chapter is autonomous in managing its own social media. In addition, the association is active in printing, through the bimonthly magazine *l'Ateo* (the Atheist), which started to be published in 1996, and the publishing company *Nessun Dogma* (No dogma).

The UAAR's media presence reveals an ability to interact with an heterogeneous public. In particular, the blog *A Ragion Veduta* attracts a readership that includes people who are not members of the association, and sometimes kindles discussions with more than one-hundred replies. In the comment section of the blog it is possible to find religious readers that are critical of the UAAR's positions. However, the majority of comments engage in dialogues between non-believers, who express different positions while similarly self-identifying as atheists. The comments are an example of how the blog can provide a space of community-building, where readers constantly engage in the definition of their identity as non-believers.

Despite the richness of comments, the blog has only two main authors: the president of the UAAR Raffaele Carcano and the treasurer Massimo Maiurana. In addition, there are two employees that work in the UAAR headquarters in Rome that, occasionally, write blog posts or help editing them as editorial staff. They are also in charge of social media, web- mastering, and graphic design. The blog posts are peer reviewed by the two authors, the two employees, and a fifth member of the editorial staff who functions as a reader. They are put online after discussion and revision of sources, and the blog is generally updated twice or three times a week. Some of the blog posts are written by one specific blogger, while others are generically signed as "Editorial Staff." Occasionally, there are other members of the association that contribute to the blog. Some articles, such as book reviews or opinions about atheism, are archived in a special section.

During summer 2014, I interviewed Raffaele Carcano on the phone asking for his viewpoint about the relationship between religion and media in Italy. Following Carcano's suggestion, I met with Silvano Vergoli, in charge of the UAAR local chapter of Genoa and employed by the Italian national television network RAI. We met at the RAI headquarters in Genoa. Vergoli is not directly involved in the blog, but he is engaged in the UAAR's events and communication strategies. In summer 2015, after deciding to include the UAAR among my case studies, I spent a day in the UAAR headquarter in Rome, meeting the two employees and interviewing Carcano again. Furthermore, I did a telephone interview with Massimo Maiurana. The interviews focused on the structure and the aims of the blog, among which figures predominantly the public engagement for a more secular society.

Contemporary Atheism: Seeking Community and Seeking Change

Secularization, as analyzed in Chapter Two, is intertwined with the phenomenon of religious re-publicization. The greater publicization of religion, especially after the 9/11 attacks, marked an increasing presence in the public sphere of non-religious beliefs, as well. Atheist activism became more prominent and started to attract scholarly attention, especially in the U.S. A number of studies have focused on the perceived marginalization of atheists within American society and their difficulties in "coming out" as non-believers (Cimino and Smith, 2011; Guenther, 2014). Atheists mainly suffer social stigma because religious people consider them as lacking moral and ethical resources, and because they cannot benefit from venues of socialization provided by religious institutions.

A strategy to overcome the alleged lack of moral resources is to find legitimation in science (Thomas, 2010; Pigliucci, 2013). The scientific turn in atheism gave rise to what has been defined "New Atheism," a name associated with a group of atheists that "began publishing works arguing that atheists should take a more aggressive stance against religion and begin fighting its influence on public life" (Schulzke, 2013, p.1). Employing science as a symbolic resource, a number of atheists were able to emerge in the public sphere as interlocutors with religious organizations.

Cimino and Smith (2011) consider New Atheism as central in providing a sense of communities among atheists. Non-believers lack the sense of community that is offered by most religious organizations, and atheist associations often provide a space where socialization can occur (LeDrew, 2013). Furthermore, atheists groups, promoting circulation of atheist texts connected with New Atheism, help articulate values and meanings that are at the basis of community formation. According to Smith (2013), atheists are engaged in a collective identity work that is aimed at "seeking community" and "seeking change." These two elements are related, since communities of atheists tend to

form because of a need of activism for social change.

Atheism in contemporary Italy has not received great scholarly attention, but literature from the U.S. can prove useful in addressing the Italian framework, as well. Certainly, it is important to carefully consider the different religious and social contexts of the two countries before comparing them. For example, the

phenomenon of New Atheism is not prominent in Italy, but the UAAR employs science as a resource to enter the public discourse. From my analysis of the blog emerged a willingness to gain more publicity for atheism and contrast the religious re-publicization of the last decades. Some of the main themes of the blog are closely connected with the idea of "seeking community" and "seeking change."

Indeed, the UAAR aims at grouping atheists and giving them a set of values to provide a common identity. Through local and national events, and non-spiritual assistance and ceremonies, the UAAR aims at providing a substitute for the socialization that, in Italy, is traditionally provided by the Catholic Church (Garelli, 2007). The community formation promoted by the UAAR passes through activism and engagement for social change. Atheists are heterogeneous and often hold different viewpoints. What the UAAR's members have in common, together with non-believing in god, is the willingness to change society and publicly participate in debates about religion.

The Internet is central in providing atheists with a sense of community and engages them for social change (Cimino and Smith, 2011). I argue that this is particularly true for the UAAR, which chose the Internet as a main vehicle to articulate its sense of marginalization. In the chapter, I will explain why I consider the blog as an example of third space that allows the association to establish a voice and criticize the lack of pluralism in Italian society. I will analyze how the UAAR's blog constructs atheists' identity as marginalized, but also considers atheists as an important minority that has more resources than other groups. The sense of

marginalization is articulated in two ways. First, the blog operates as a critique of Italian mainstream media, which are perceived as hegemonically Catholic. In analyzing this critique, I will explain how the UAAR contrasts this sense of exclusion and enters the public sphere by employing a communication strategy that, relying heavily on the Internet, has the purpose of providing an alternative voice in opposition with perceived dominant values. Second, atheists feel that a democratic state should grant equality to all the citizens, letting atheists participate into public debates. Equality is reached through civil and human rights, principles the UAAR advocates for in a number of campaigns: the practice of "*Sbattezzo*" (debaptism) aimed at contrasting the hegemony of the Catholic Church, the support of LGBTQ rights and the advancement of a non-Catholic model of family, the attention to atheists persecuted in Muslim countries that see religion at odds with democracy. In conclusion, I will analyze the position in society that the UAAR imagines for secularism in relation to other religious groups and traditional social structures.

Atheists in Italy: a Marginalized Minority?

> At the origin of this diffidence [against atheists], therefore, there is a lack of direct knowledge of non-believers, and stereotypes that consider the development of atheisms as a threatening trend for the moral laws of society. For this reason, atheists are less accepted than other religious minorities (Laura Salvadori, Website Archive, my translation)

A Ragion Veduta exists to address a perceived sense of marginalization and to resist stereotypes against atheists, as explained by the quote above. The UAAR often frames atheists as stigmatized in every country, but stresses the peculiarity of the Italian context because of the influence of Catholicism in media and society:

> The [Freethough] Report[xxxiii] has a section dedicated to Italy, where one can find a long list of discriminations against non-believers and citizens that believe in *laïcité*, discriminations that the UAAR always denounces: a political agenda that responds to precepts of the Catholic Church, the teaching of Catholic religion in public school and public funding for Catholic schools, the fiscal benefits of the Catholic Church that cost the state six thousand million of euros a year[xxxiv] (Editorial Staff, 10/12/2014, my translation)

According to this blog post, and many similar others, a Catholic-influenced hegemony that involves power centers of the Italian society, such as media, politics, and institutions, discriminates atheists in terms of representation and participation. As the crucifix controversy exemplifies, the UAAR feels atheists are excluded by material and symbolic practices that charge public spaces with Catholic meanings. A survey about secularism and religion that the UAAR commissioned to the Research Institute Doxa[xxxv] indicates, indeed, that the majority of Italians self-identify as Catholics and are influenced by the precepts of the Church, confirming the cultural hegemony of Catholicism. However, from the survey emerges also that Italians are generally favorable towards non-believers and the majority of the population agrees on the fact that atheists should be able to criticize religions and religious beliefs. A

blog post comments on the results of the survey saying that they represent "another instance that the population legitimizes the presence of atheists and agnostics, as well as their beliefs. But certainly politicians and media do not do so" (Editorial Staff, 06/23/2014)

The perceived marginalization of atheists, therefore, is caused by a lack of participation rather than actual hostility of the Italian population. The blog denounces the difficulties the UAAR encounters in constructing itself as an interlocutor for secular and religious matters in the public sphere. Atheism is tolerated and even sympathized with as long as it remains in the private sphere, but atheists that participate in public debates and activism are implicitly discouraged to do so. Carcano, in an interview (06/02/2014), articulated this point explaining that atheists are less stigmatized in Italy than in the U.S., on the condition that they remain hidden, even through self-censorship. He made the example of the former president of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, who is an atheist. However, he never publicly mentioned his non-belief, nor actively promoted laws to enhance secular debates in the public sphere.

In articulating this peculiar type of marginalization, the UAAR self-identifies among religious minorities. It coined the neologism "ateophobia" (ateofobia), inspired by the word "islamophobia," to explain that atheists are discriminated by Italian media and society (Editorial Staff, 12/19/2014). However, the association distinguishes itself from minority religious groups. Atheists are discriminated because their positions can be potentially disruptive for the Catholic hegemony that

is predominant in Italy, and not on cultural or ethnic basis. According to the UAAR, atheism is feared in the public sphere because it can undermine religious-inspired values that constitute the basis of society. Other religions can pose cultural problems, but they do not challenge the idea of faith itself by advancing secular discourses.

By articulating the idea of discriminations against atheists, the blog implicitly constructs an atheist identity that is "marginalized, but better" than the religious identity. A number of blog posts, indeed, stress how atheism is related to privileged social conditions: "In general, non-belief seems to be a phenomenon that develops more easily where people have better capabilities, opportunities, rights, autonomy – even in economic terms –and freedom." (Editorial Staff, 04/26/2014, my translation). Similarly, a YouTube video[xxxvi] posted on the official channel of the association shows examples of Italian atheists, both in the past and in the present, stressing how they gave contributions to the country in terms of politics, scientific research, arts, and literature. By associating itself with characters such as Nobel Prize winner Rita Levi Montalcini and famous poet Giacomo Leopardi, the association explains that atheists are open-minded and tolerant towards minorities, including religious ones. This reinforces the idea that atheists are not a weak minority, but a powerful minority that distinguishes itself from the rest of society for displaying better resources and the intellectual ability to engage in discussions.

Furthermore, from my interviews emerged the idea that atheists do not lack moral resources; on the contrary, they are more engaged and generally more attentive to the creation of a better society:

> From my point of view, atheists are morally more engaged than believers because they do what they do not to achieve something after death, but because they have a civil conscience. I don't use violence against you, I have a respectful behavior because I think this is the correct thing to do, not because I fear some punishment if I commit sins. Having said that, of course not all atheists are necessarily honest persons. (Silvano Vergoli, personal communication, 05/21/2014, my translation)

The UAAR considers its sense of marginalization as a challenge rather than as a weakness. As for the blog analysis, non-believers self-perceive as able to overcome this marginalization by creating communities and seeking social change. The blog becomes, therefore, a space for the definition of a collective atheist identity. Atheism is not based on a set of norms and values, and non-believers often hold different positions on social and cultural issues. However, by describing atheists as a "resourceful minority," *A Ragion Veduta* provides its readers with a common identity that is useful in the creation of a community. The articulation of hybridized subjectivities and resistive identities is a characteristic of digital third spaces. The media are important venues for the articulation of social, cultural, and national identities, as analyzed in Chapter One. In case of groups that do not identify with the mainstream cultural identity of their society, the Internet can be central in providing

spaces for identity construction. In the case of UAAR, the description of atheists as a collectivity is helpful to provide a more homogeneous interlocutor for religious issues in the country, as well as consolidate the positions of the members. This identity-construction process is possible in a digital third space because atheists seldom see themselves represented by mainstream media and often challenge the representations of atheism they witness within national media.

Italian Media System and Secular Information

> The diffusion of non-belief has always suffered from lack of mass media attention. On the one hand, the so-called "secular" media show clear indifference [for the topic], and on the other hand religious media openly demonize [atheism]. Because of this situation, the Internet represents a true novelty, able to reduce the asymmetrical information that exists on these topics. It is not surprising, indeed, that atheists and agnostics have a great presence on the web (Editorial Staff, 04/14/2010, my translation)

A Ragion Veduta often denounces the malfunction of Italian mainstream media, stressing the need for alternative sources of information. The opening quote summarizes some of the central arguments around media that emerged from the analysis of the blog. The UAAR laments that the Italian mainstream media has two fundamental weaknesses that prevent them from providing accurate religious information. On the one hand, they are centered only on Catholicism, overlooking non-Catholic religions and secular positions; on the other hand, Catholicism

influences news production, which results in a superficial and apologetic media representation of the Pope and the Vatican.

Italian Mainstream Media: Catholic and Superficial

In 2014, the UAAR did a petition to gain the attention of AGCOM[xxxvii], the organ that regulates Italian public communication service. The UAAR president Raffaele Carcano explains the reasons behind this petition: "RAI does not consider our country's pluralism at all, and in doing so it does wrong to all those who do not identify with Catholicism" (09/12/2014, my translation)

This view is reinforced in an editorial that Carcano wrote for the left-wing magazine *Critica Liberale*[xxxviii] ("Liberal Critique," 2014), which dedicated an issue to religion in Italian television. Employing data collected from the Research Institute Geca Italia[xxxix], the magazine showed how the near totality of religious news and religious entertainment programs are centered on Catholicism. In his comment, Carcano denounces the absence of secular topics in Italian mainstream media. The UAAR's petition, published in the same issue of *Critica Liberale*, has been rejected by AGCOM, with the motivation that secular themes are absorbed by a number of non-religious television programming. This rejection confirms the view, often articulated on *A Ragion Veduta*, that Catholicism holds a hegemonic position in Italian media. This results in a Catholic monopoly of the Italian public broadcasting service that, overlooking secular viewpoints, contributes to framing Italianness as Catholic.

The UAAR's blog laments not only the quantity of Catholic information, but also the way the Vatican and the Pope are portrayed. Since the election of Pope Francis in 2013, the UAAR's bloggers denounce the media's effort to portray him as humble, innovative, and progressive:

> When the Pope says things that very few people like, our mass media do not dare show it. They do not want to go against the image that readers and viewers have of the Pope – and they [readers and viewers] got this image because of the mass media's questionable way of presenting news (Raffaele Carcano, 02/12/2015, my translation)

In several posts, the UAAR criticizes the fact that, even if Pope Francis differs from his predecessors for his communication style, which makes him appreciated by the majority of believers, he is not operating any substantial change to the Church's doctrine. The blog coined the ironic neologism "popolatry"[xl] to describe the media attitude towards the Pope. According to the association, "popolatry" is the media tendency of uncritically celebrating the words and actions of Pope Francis while operating an "oversimplification" of the religious message.

The underrepresentation of non-Catholic positions and the apologetic media portrayal of the Pope depend, according to the UAAR's bloggers, on the hegemonic control the Catholic Church exercises on mainstream media. This control was explained by the RAI employee Silvano Vergoli in an interview:

> The Catholic Church is one of the political and economic powers that have a very great influence on information (...) political power, economic power, Catholic Church, you cannot separate these elements (…) this results in an information that is compliant to political, economic, and clerical power. It is dramatic, and even non-Catholics are influenced by it (Silvano Vergoli, personal communication, 05/21/2014, my translation)

Journalists, religious and secular alike, are conditioned by Catholic power to report Catholic news in a positive way, Vergoli says. This results in a superficial portrayal of religion that is based on soft news rather than an in-depth analysis of Catholicism, overlooking or misreporting controversies within the Vatican:

> A classical example of how media treat everything that is about the Vatican: the news of a nuncio[xli] that has been, for a long time, without doubt, known as a pedophile, and "finally" arrested, was not reported as a normal act of the ecclesial authority, but as an example of how this Pope is "revolutionary" (Editorial Staff, 09/22/2014, my translation)

The high number of posts that *A Ragion Veduta* dedicates to Italian mainstream media is symptomatic of a perceived malaise of the UAAR. The UAAR considers the media portrayal of the Pope and the Vatican as damaging because it prevents people from rejecting religion. The achievement of a secular society, which would grant civil rights on the basis of rationality instead of religious influence, is more difficult if

mainstream religiosity is perceived as a positive and intrinsically part of the national identity. Furthermore, through a lack of representation of secular positions, media hinder the expression of atheists and portray atheism as a "non-existent" phenomenon.

This malaise is one of the main reasons *A Ragion Veduta* exists. Wanting to engage in social change, the UAAR needs to create a space where it is possible to achieve participation in the public sphere, bypassing mainstream media. *A Ragion Veduta* becomes, therefore, a third space where the sense of marginalization is articulated and contrasted with oppositional discourses. Digital third spaces, indeed, are often venues of identity construction that lead to the articulation of resistive and oppositional practices. The UAAR's blog is an example of tactical media because it aims at creating dissent that questions some aspects of mainstream society, and that resists the authority of mainstream media by advocating for a new system of information. *A Ragion Veduta,* in addition, is a third space because it constitutes a venue where the marginalized atheist identity is negotiated in a way that can enhance the public voice of non-believers. The blog is part of a media strategy that is aimed at establishing the UAAR as a national interlocutor for religious issues, bypassing the lack of participation in mainstream media spaces.

The UAAR's Media Strategy: The Importance of the Internet

The UAAR responds to the perceived problems of Italian mainstream media representations of atheism by articulating an alternative information campaign. In particular, the Internet enables the UAAR to create communities and advocate for

social change. This is explained in Carcano's interview, where he talked about how he became involved with the UAAR through the Internet. When he was a teenager in the 1980s in a small town in Northern Italy, Carcano did not have the possibility of meeting with other atheists, nor to discuss ideas about secularism. For him, and for many other atheists in the same condition, digital forums and newsgroups constituted a central tool to form a group and articulate discourses:

> The difference between the world pre- and post-Internet was that before [the advent of the Internet] we were convinced to be a few, scant group of people with no possibilities to communicate. Where could we physically meet? Where do I meet someone to call? (…)So there was no possibility of meeting and seeing the faces, the lives, and the ideas of these [atheist] people. The Internet put these people in communication, and we discovered we were not only a few. The impact in this sense has been absolutely great. We were 200, and now we are 4000. (Raffaele Carcano, personal communication, 06/10/2015, my translation)

The UAAR sees the Internet as a way to change its marginalized identity: atheists can create communities and become more powerful if they are able to overcome the lack of attention from mainstream media and find other spaces of articulation. However, the association existed before the diffusion of the Internet and was equally engaged in providing alternative information. In the 1990s, the UAAR started to publish the magazine *L'Ateo* ("The Atheist") and promote books about atheism through the publishing company *Nessun Dogma* ("No Dogma"). Today, non-digital

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alternative media, such as magazines and books, remain an important part of the UAAR's communication strategy. Digital and non-digital media are employed together to reach a wider target audience. Through the use of social networks, especially Twitter and Facebook, the UAAR shares information about atheism and promotes its publications and events, as well as its blog posts. Therefore, the Internet did not substantially change the UAAR's communication strategy, but it enhanced it by creating greater visibility of the association and providing a space of debate and community formation.

While the Internet is central in the UAAR's communication strategy, the bloggers are aware of the fact that it should be used critically. From the interviews emerged the fear that the Internet can attract fundamentalists or does not allow for accurate information. However, this fear is contrasted by the fact that the target audience of the blog is constituted by educated people that are able of critical thinking:

> Today, almost everyone can "create a truth." It is sufficient to have access to the Internet and, with some luck, one can see a pseudo-truth diffusing wild fire, like a computer virus. It depends on whether it seems credible and plausible or not, but it also depends on the channels one uses to transmit it. Certain channels are employed by people that are more sensitive to certain topics, and so they are more easily "infected." For example, the false truth of the chemtrail[xlii] will never be believed by a group of physicists, while a Madonna [statue]

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that cries would be easily believed in a context of religious people.

(Massimo Maiurana, 06/23/2015, my translation)

The quote describes potential weaknesses of Internet information, creating a dichotomy between "scientists" and "religious believers." It implies that the former are skeptics that do not believe in false truth found on the Internet and are able to question supernatural ideas through the use of rationality. Furthermore, it implicitly compares Internet lies with popular religious beliefs: they both apply to people's gullibility and need some critical skills to be discerned. Therefore, the Internet can be misleading for a certain part of the audience, but not for the majority of the UAAR's members. According to Carcano (06/10/2015), the target audience of the blog is constituted by "educated geeks," including a high number of people that work in the IT field and people that have a college degree in science or philosophy. They are able to critically think about information and consciously navigate the digital space.

In distinguishing between a "secular" and a "religious" public, the UAAR is able to reiterate its sense of being a "resourceful minority." Atheists do not interact with mainstream media, not only because they lack the possibility of doing so, but also because their message is allegedly too sophisticated for a general national media audience. Carcano articulates this idea explaining that, in certain circumstances, the UAAR has been invited to send a spokesperson to debates on mainstream television but, most of the times, it was not successful because of the aggressive attitude of anti-atheist people involved in the debate[xliii]. However, Carcano said, the UAAR "fights battles that do not need that kind of audience"

(06/10/2015, my translation), implying that the average viewer of Italian mainstream television is not able to understand the UAAR's ideas, nor is the UAAR interested in entering certain types of debates.

The blog, therefore, intends to attract a specific audience, rather than being inclusive with the general public. The blog posts, normally long and seldom centered on personal stories or narratives, employ a style that is usually too elaborate to find a space in mainstream media for different reasons. First, the blog employs a rich number of data and quotes articles in various languages, which might result in being uninteresting or excessively complicated for a general audience. This richness in data and sources is certainly a way to address an educated audience, rather than being accessible to the majority of the population; it also prevents the UAAR's blog from being accused of circulating "Internet lies," or using the Internet to provide superficial and inaccurate information.

Second, the blog employs a subtle irony, often not entirely politically correct, about religious people and beliefs, as well as Italian society. This is exemplified by the creation of neologisms, such as "popolatry," as analyzed above. The humor is especially present in the comments, often aimed at making satire against religious behaviors:

> I have a picture with a dedication and autograph from Angelo Roncalli[xliv], dated around 1932, when he was Archbishop of Areopoli. Can I believe it will operate miracles? For example, will it make me win the lottery, or will it prevent me from being smashed by a

wooden crucifix? Or should I try to sell it to an atheist? (Faidate, 04/29/2014, my translation)

This use of humor is aimed at criticizing non-rational positions and the attitude of certain Italians that believe in supernatural events. This stylistic choice reiterates the elitist character of *A Ragion Veduta* and the implicit superiority of atheists in comparison to other religious groups. The UAAR's satire, often disrespectful, stresses how the Internet is a more free space to articulate opinions. It is not a kind of humor that would be popular in mainstream media, but it resonates among the specific public of the blog.

The media strategy of the UAAR, and in particular its blog, helps position the association in relation to the Italian society and media system. It operates a critique of mainstream media and expresses willingness for changing them– through, for example, the petition to AGCOM described before. However, it contradictorily articulates the idea that atheists do not need mainstream media to get their information. In doing so, the UAAR creates a dichotomy between the Catholic-influenced Italian mainstream media and the Internet. Therefore, according to the UAAR, there are two types of public: on the one hand, the general religious public that would benefit from a better national media system, since it is not able to discern true information from false information, believing for example everything is said about the Pope. On the other hand, the more resourceful atheist public, that does not need mainstream media to articulate its debates of the secular. According to the blog's discourses, the UAAR can establish itself as an interlocutor and source

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of information for the atheist community without employing mainstream media. This dichotomy between "religious" and "atheist" public does not seem to leave space for a religious public that is able to use the Internet and critically think about media. The UAAR does not aim at "educating" the religious public, and it is elitist in choosing not to specifically target religious people. The blog is the way to engage in the public sphere in an alternative way and generate discourses about mainstream media, but not directed at them.

The separation between the "atheist" and the "secular" public exemplifies how *A Ragion Veduta* forms a counterpublic. As theorized by Warner (2005), publics are created in virtue of the circulation of texts within a specific audience. The blog's effort to circulate information and opinions among its readers allows for the creation of an atheist public. It is possible to define this public as "counterpublic" because it is formed in opposition to the general Italian public, allegedly influenced by Catholic values. While the UAAR subscribes to a Habermasian notion of public sphere as based on rationality, the association manifests through the Internet a need for creating an atheist identity. The atheists' need for recognition implicity advocates for a public consensus based not only on rational debate, but also on the negotiation of group's identity. The creation of a resistive identity through circulation of information is, therefore, a strategy to establish a voice in contrast with the Italian media system and positions

 atheism in the Italian public sphere. In addition, the association challenges the religious-influenced norms that govern Italian society and politics by advocating for human and civil rights.

Equality, Civil and Human Rights for Social Change

> Secular democracy provides a backdrop essential for the prevention of human rights violations and provides the conditions for many of those requirements set out in 24/16. Human Rights will only flourish in a political framework where people are seen as human rights agents and not defined primarily by their beliefs or arbitrary characteristics [such as gender or race]. Accordingly, we call on the High Commissioner and Council to explore the role of secularism in the protection of human rights. (Elizabeth O'Casey, International Humanist and Ethical Union, statement to the United Nations, quoted by *A Ragion Veduta*, 09/24/2015)

The UAAR articulates a media strategy to contrast its perceived marginalization in mainstream media. However, lack of media recognition and participation is not the only reason *A Ragion Veduta* exists. The UAAR often laments a backwardness of Italy and a marginalization of atheists in social and cultural practices, as well as institutions. The presence of religion in public spaces is problematic for symbolic and material reasons, as exemplified by the crucifix controversy analyzed at the beginning of the chapter, and for the social exclusion of certain categories. The blog addresses this sense of marginalization through a number of campaigns, which exemplify how the UAAR is engaged for social change. The campaigns I analyze below are important in understanding certain aspects of the association. The

campaign for *Sbattezzo* ("debaptism") for example, provides atheists with a practice that helps form a common identity while promoting equality. The advocacy for LGBTQ rights and the support for human rights in Muslim countries show the importance of civil and human rights as an ethical resource that substitutes religious values in an atheist worldview. The campaigns, through comparisons with other countries, show what should be the position of atheism in Italy, according to the UAAR.

The campaigns exemplify how the blog creates a third space. Through the articulation of discourses, the blog is able not only to provide practices and resources to form a common atheist identity, but also to engage in social change and to be generative of resistive meanings. The discourses it creates around these topics show how digital media can create a space in between the online and the offline world, since the digital advocacy is aimed at social change in Italy. The three cases analyzed below underscore how the UAAR's blog is an example of alternative media that advances non-mainstream discourses in relation to a number of different social and cultural spheres, resisting hegemonic social values.

The Practice of Sbattezzo

The campaign for *Sbattezzo* is one of the most successful of the UAAR, according to Carcano (personal communication, 06/10/2015). Started in the 1990s, *Sbattezzo* is a formal notification of atheism to the parish where one has been baptized. The UAAR provides information about this practice, as well as letter templates to write to the parish. The main reason this campaign was first promoted

is to constract the Catholic practice of baptizing children when they are too young to take spiritual decisions. It is considered a way to indoctrinate children and make them part of the Church for the rest of their lives. This idea is articulated on the blog as follows:

> Those who baptize their children, and do that to make their families happy or to celebrate the birth of the new baby, should carefully think about this step, often considered symbolic and with no consequences. To baptize children means to raise them in the Catholic faith, and therefore atheists need to think through [this decision] (Editorial Staff, 01/14/2014, my translation)

The practical reason behind the practice of *Sbattezzo* is to raise awareness about the actual number of atheists in Italy. The official statistics of the Vatican consider every person who received baptism as Catholic. Many Italians, even if they are not religious or if they do not have many contacts with the Church, decide to baptize children for a sense of tradition and culture, as illustrated by the Doxa survey[xlv] on religion and atheism. *Sbattezzo* is, therefore, a way to prove that the number of Catholics is lower than officially recorded. Through this practice, the UAAR aims at demonstrating that people are willing to oppose the hegemonic role of the Catholic Church.

However, my interviews indicate that the UAAR is not sure whether the Catholic Church actually notifies the former believers that want to debaptize. It is likely that this practice has no real impact on official statistics. *Sbattezzo* is a private

and a personal decision, which does not need to be taken in order to become a member of UAAR or to self-identify as atheist.

Nonetheless, *Sbattezzo* has an important symbolic value, because it can provide a sense of community and common identity. It is a symbolic gesture that sanctions the belonging to the atheist groups, and that can raise public awareness. *A Ragion Veduta*, indeed, encourages people that de-baptized to register on the website www.sbattezzati.it, in order to show the prominence of the phenomenon. Furthermore, the UAAR organizes public events for *Sbattezzo* where people can compile their letters for the parishes. Every year, the UAAR organizes a "*Sbattezzo* Day" where volunteers from each city spend the day in a public place giving information about the association. These events, largely advertised through the blog and social networks, are aimed at creating awareness on a number of secular topics in general, and also giving members a sense of community.

The interviews indicate that *Sbattezzo* is able to capture the interest of media and the population. By stressing the need of formally withdrawing from the Catholic Church, it supports the formation of a counter-hegemonic space that builds its identity in opposition with mainstream values. It results, therefore, in subversive practices on a symbolic level that criticize religious rituals. It implicitly encourages atheists to become vocal about their non-beliefs and take a position toward social change. Largely advocated for both online and offline, *Sbattezzo* exemplifies the atheist trend of "seeking community" and "seeking change." It is one of the UAAR's initiatives that qualifies the blog as an example of third space. By substituting the

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authority of a religious ritual by a non-religious one, the practice creates a sense of as-if-ness that provides atheists with a feeling of belonging that mimics that of religious communities.

The practice of *Sbattezzo* alarms the Catholic Church, which cannot ignore it. According to a blog post, the Vatican usually tries to ridicule or demonize this practice:

> When Catholic hierarchies are not able to prevent people from talking about a phenomenon [*Sbattezzo*], they usually like to do two things: make fun of it or demonize it. Pope Benedict XVI is not famous for his humor, so he probably prefers the second option. One week ago he said that "Without God there can be no peace" (…) According to the Pope, "When someone negates God, he negates human dignity" (Editorial Staff, 12/23/2012, my translation)

The counter-ritual of *Sbattezzo* becomes a way to attract attention and protest against the idea that atheists in Italy are tolerated as long as they do not make public claims. A blog post, for example, focuses on the fact that the British BBC described the practice of *Sbattezzo* in Italy in an objective and informant way, while it is often dismissed or criticized by Italian mainstream media (Massimo Maiurana, 11/27/2014). The post underlines the differences in atheists' treatment in Italy and in other countries, where secular positions have a more prominent role in the public sphere. The post is useful to understand how the UAAR imagines a different Italian society following the examples of other countries:

Religious affiliation in multicultural Britain is not determined by asking

data from religious communities (...) On the contrary, they do it

through census and official surveys, offering real data, and not

artificial ones. And these data say that one third of the citizens are not

religious, less than 60% is Christian and most of them are Anglicans.

(Massimo Maiurana, 11/27/2014, my translation)

While *Sbattezzo*'s value is mostly symbolic, the UAAR hopes that its impact will

result in increased atheist rights, as it happens in more secular countries such as the

UK. *Sbattezzo* can help the association capture public attention and increase equality

in participation in the public sphere, becoming more vocal in the advocacy for civil

rights. Supporting civil rights is central in the UAAR's worldview, as exemplified by its

blog. The association, indeed, is not only concerned with rights that are specific to

atheists, but defends a number of other minorities, such as homosexuals.

Advocacy for LGBTQ Rights to Achieve a More Secular Society

Atheism often employs non-religious ethical and moral resources. For the

thinkers that belong to the New Atheism trend, science gives meaning to the human

experience. Science is important for the UAAR, as well, and its blog and social

network pages are often attentive to scientific progress. However, science is not the

only resource for legitimation of atheism that the UAAR employs. Civil and human

rights, as exemplified by the opening quote of the chapter, are central for the

association. Without religious texts or religious authorities as guidance, the UAAR

often stresses the importance of following democratic laws and principles of human equality and dignity, as well as self-determination.

The centrality of civil rights is exemplified by the UAAR's advocacy for LGBTQ unions. In Italy there are no specific rights for homosexuals, since the government does not recognize neither civil unions nor homosexual marriage. For the UAAR, support for the LGBTQ community and its rights is part of a struggle for a more secular society, as well as a way of re-thinking the Catholic-inspired idea of family.

The UAAR sympathizes with the LGBTQ cause because it considers it as an example of religious discrimination. According to the association, all religions tend to be homophobic:

> It is clear that religions have a tendency to demonize homosexuality. This can result in violent homophobia, like it is currently happening in Russia, or it can instigate homophobia, as it is happening in France. It is not surprising, therefore, that, according to a *Pew Research Forum* survey, gay in the U.S. tend to be non-religious (…) homosexuals perceive as hostile, in particular, Islam, the Mormon Church, and the Catholic Church. (Editorial Staff 06/15/2013, my translation)

Homosexuals suffer in particular in Italy because of the influence of the Catholic Church in politics, according to the UAAR. Therefore, the association often supports Italian LGBTQ groups in their events, such as the Gay Pride. Campaigns for the

LGBTQ community are framed as an important step to gain more equality in Italy, which is at the basis of a more secular society.

According to *A Ragion Veduta*, atheists and homosexuals both suffer from a lack of recognition and media attention because of the Catholic Church's hostility. In articulating its own sense of marginalization and difficulties to participate into the public sphere, the UAAR is supportive of other minorities that are in similar conditions. A post explains the similarities in the Catholic treatment of atheists and homosexuals:

> In the past years, when [Bergoglio] was archibishop and head of the Argentinian Episcopal Conference, he was politically against gay marriage, which he defined "product of the Devil" (…) After becoming Pope, he has been ambivalent toward atheists, first quoting Leon Bloy[xlvi] ("Who does not pray the Lord, he prays the Devil"), and then saying that he wants a "dialogue" with non-believers (Editorial Staff, 07/03/2013, my translation)

The quote exemplifies how both homosexuals and atheists are marginalized by the Catholic Church. The advocacy for LGBTQ rights is also a way to challenge the Catholic hegemony in defining social and cultural values. Civil unions and gay marriage, indeed, pose a threat to the traditional concept of Catholic family. The UAAR seeks social change not only in advocating for civil rights, but also in trying to modify a Catholic-influenced mentality:

Family is a social, cultural and anthropological construction (…) Since traditions do not last forever, this type of family [the Catholic one] is not unchangeable, and it represents only an increasingly small percentage of families. Obviously traditionalists, especially Catholic ones, do not agree. They feel betrayed every time anybody dares to propose any form of support for other families, which will certainly not result in less support for their own families. Traditional family valus became another tool to impose a certain worldview, a culture, a religious faith. (Massimo Maiurana, 12/02/2014, my translation)

The re-thinking of the traditional Catholic family is articulated by the blog through comparisons with other countries where LGBTQ rights are granted:

In the U.S., and in many other countries, the concept of family evolves and fits the needs of a modern society. The idea of family, indeed, includes also homosexual couples. On the contrary, in Italy we still have a traditional and Catholic vision of family, with the husband ruling, the wife taking care of the home, and popping out as many kids as possible (Massimo Maiurana, 09/10/2015, my translation)

The post stresses the idea that Italy perpetuates inequalities among its citizens, while other Western countries already consider the concept of family in a more inclusive and secular way. The comparison with other countries, according to Raffaele Carcano, reveals the "backwardness" of Italy, the only Western country that

does not grant any right for homosexual couples (Raffaele Carcano, 05/29/2015, my translation)

The sense of marginalization of the UAAR is reinforced in the quotes above: not only are atheists, in general, discriminated because of their beliefs, but they are particularly marginalized in Italy where there is a general backwardness in terms of civil rights. The UAAR employs the Internet to create a space of discussion aimed at supporting the civil rights on another minority, the LGBTQ community. This is an example of how the blog engages in social activism. *A Ragion Veduta* not only establishes an atheist media presence, but it also increases participation of groups that suffer from some kind of marginalization. Atheists do not need specific civil rights, but the UAAR's blog becomes a space of advocacy for a more equal recognition of all citizens, especially those stigmatized by the dominant and Catholic-influenced view of family and culture such as homosexuals.

In its advocacy for LGBTQ rights, the UAAR stresses the backwardness of Italy in relation to other, "more modern," Western countries. In its battle for human and civil rights, the association is aware of the fact that many non-democratic countries do not recognize secular principles at all, and therefore contribute to further discrimination against atheists. Therefore, the blog is often attentive not only to the lack of civil rights in Italy, but also to violations of human rights worldwide. By advocating for human rights, the UAAR articulates its relationship with Islam, as well.

Human Rights to Help Muslims Emancipate from Religion

The UAAR focuses its critiques on the Catholic Church, because it is perceived as the hegemonic religious power that prevents Italy from becoming a secular society. However, both religious change in Italy and Europe and global trends such as migration and terrorism urged the association to articulate discourses on Islam, as well.

The position of the UAAR about Islam is controversial. Formally, the association is for human equality, freedom, and inclusivity. Therefore, the bloggers are careful in not articulating comments that could be interpreted as racist. They express the idea that people from developing countries need to be helped and Italy should receive migrants. However, different posts stress the importance of recognizing the violent nature of certain types of Islam:

> In Syria and in Iraq, there is a war, one of the many wars that are fought on our little planet. They didn't start this war to decide whether Arab cuisine is better than McDonald's. They started it in the name of a religion. They gave the movement a Muslim name (Islamic State) and a Muslim symbol. The religious leader is called "Caliph," therefore he is a successor of Mohammed, another religious leader that personally fought one or two wars in the name of Allah. When they conquer territories, they apply the *sharia*[xlvii]. It would be wrong to connect ISIS' ideology exclusively to Islam. But it is even worse,

given the data about it, to negate that behind ISIS there is Islam.

(Raffaele Carcano, 10/03/2014, my translation)

Blog posts about Islam, even if critical, tend not to be explicitly anti-Muslim, but they equally criticize all religions as irrational and potentially violent. The above quote is part of a post about the similarities between contemporary Islam and the violence of Christianity in the past. The post kindled debates among the readers, which exchanged comments about the intrinsic violence of all religions. However, some discussions reveal a greater hostility of atheists against Islam than against other religions. An example is the following exchange:

Do you think that Islam is pacifist? How can a "religion of love" commit all these terroristic attacks and murders that we read on the papers? The Quran explicitly says that one should kill the unfaithful (that is, the non-Muslims), stone the adulterers, and cut the hands of thieves. If you don't believe it, look on the Internet (Massimo, 10/02/2015, my translation)

Massimo, you see, I know many Muslims and they are fathers with three kids, they are not violent but they just work to provide food for their families. They are backwards toward women, and I agree with Tiziana [another blog reader] that women have the potential to change Islam. Islam is a terrible religion, worse than Christianity,

difficult to domesticate, but only fundamentalists do terroristic attacks, not normal people. (Mafalda, 10/02/2015, my translation)

The two comments reveal common positions the blog readers have about Islam: they consider it as a violent and backward religion, incompatible with Western values. Even the second comment from Mafalda, who tries to say positive things about Muslims, frames them as socially and culturally backwards. Atheists that comment on the blog criticize Catholicism because of its influence in Italian politics, but they generally consider it as a more democratic religion than Islam. This happens, probably, because they implicitly embody the secularist principle, analyzed in Chapter Two, that sees Islam as more problematic than Christianity in the West.

The UAAR, therefore, finds itself in the contradiction of wanting to avoid racist and discriminatory statements, but having an apparent majority of the members that are hostile toward Islam. This contradiction is solved through the advocacy for human rights, which become a resource to frame Muslims as in need of help. People from Muslim countries, indeed, are often described as oppressed by the lack of religious freedom and freedom of speech, among other rights.

An example of this tendency is found in the campaigns in favor of atheist bloggers and writers in Muslim countries. The UAAR has, indeed, been vocal in condemning Bangladesh for the murders of a number of atheist bloggers in the past few years. Furthermore, it supports human rights campaigns to help the Saudi

Arabian blogger Raif Badawi, condemned for apostasy. The blog describes Badawi's situation as follows:

> What is Badawi guilty of? He criticized Islam and its worldly representatives, and he was accused of apostasy. From a certain perspective, he was lucky: in Saudi Arabia there is death penalty for apostasy. Our posts, your comments, are more critical [than those Badawi wrote about religion]. But we receive no lashes on our flesh. First lash, second lash, third lash…it is difficult to even imagine what it feels like. (Raffaele Carcano, 01/30/2015, my translation)

The advocacy for Badawi and other bloggers, while reiterating the importance of the Internet as a space to resist and circulate information, expresses a call for solidarity toward like-minded Arabs. Readers are invited to emotionally identify with the personal story of Badawi, while being concerned by the backwardness of undemocratic Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia.

The tendency of separating the single stories of people in Muslim countries from Islam in general is applied to migration, as well. The UAAR re-frames migration not in terms of Muslims coming to Italy, but rather of people that are escaping non-democratic Islamic states. A post that describes the travel of a migrant to Italy exemplifies this tendency:

> Often we hear about Christians persecuted [in Muslim countries] and international voices that advocate for them. This is certainly right to

do. However, this diffuses the narrative, based on fear, that all migrants are Muslim fundamentalists that invade Christian Europe. These stories [such as the one described in the post] exemplify the contrary: migrants escape religious fundamentalism, too. And they risk becoming victims of this fundamentalism, if the West does not help them. The defense of human rights in the world and the help for refugees cannot exclude atheists, agnostics, and secular people that every day are discriminated in different parts of the world because they criticize religion. These people are a hope of progress and emancipation for their countries (Editorial Staff, 09/15/2015, my translation)

By advocating for human rights, the UAAR distinguishes between "fundamentalist Muslims" and people from Muslim countries that would benefit from religious freedom and freedom of speech. In articulating the atheist identity as marginalized, the UAAR urges its members to support atheists that are in even worse conditions, because they live in non-democratic countries. This lets the blog address Islam without being explicitly anti-Muslim; on the contrary, people that follow backward and oppressive Muslim rules are seen as in need of help to emancipate from religion. Again, this is an example of how the blog creates a space of solidarity and belonging for atheists. The UAAR describes the stories of bloggers such as Badawi or atheist migrants to give the hope that certain countries will become more secular thanks to people that resist irrational religious impositions. The blog often compares Italy to other countries that are considered as more progressive in terms of civil rights, such

as the UK; however, it also describes countries that are considered more backwards, showing how religion can damage democracy and human rights.

Civil and human rights are important resources that the UAAR employs to create an atheist worldview and identity. Through media discourses about rights, the association reinforces its own position within the Italian society. It identifies atheists as a resourceful minority that can become more vocal and gain more equality of participation in the public sphere, as exemplified by the attention to *Sbattezzo*. Furthermore, it positions itself in relation to other countries. The imagined Italian society that is described in the digital third space is a secular one such as the UK, that grants its citizens civil rights like homosexual marriage. On the contrary, the UAAR strongly criticizes non-democratic countries such as Saudi Arabia, considered as the result of an excess of religion in the public sphere. Not only do the bloggers articulate these ideas on the blog, but they also directly advocate for social change, both in Italy and elsewhere, through events and petitions. The interplay between online and offline spaces constitutes the "in-betweennes" typical of third spaces, which are generative of meanings situated between the digital and the physical space. While *A Ragion Veduta* advocates for social change online, it is tightly connected with the offline activities of the association and aims at producing real social change.

The UAAR, through its blog, exposes the limits of the Italian democracy by describing the symbolic and practical marginalization of certain groups, such as atheists and homosexuals, which are identified as "others" in relation to hegemonic

values. This happens, according to the association, because of the predominance of Catholic values in the Italian public sphere that prevents the full participation of citizens that are in disagreement with hegemonic values. On the one hand, *A Ragion Veduta*'s discourses are agonistic in the sense theorized by Mouffe (2005), since they lament lack of participation in the democratic consensus. On the other hand, the association aims at modifying the perceived Italian Catholic hegemony by substituiting it with a new model of secularist hegemony. The UAAR does so by presenting itself as an interlocutor for secular and religious matters as well as an "adversary" in relation to the Catholic Church. By stressing the alleged superiority of the atheist identity and its effort for social change, the association engages in a tactical media use to change the existing Italian consensus.

Conclusion: the Utopia of a "Secular Italy"

> In Italy, not only 'Clerical Things' happen. Even if it is difficult to perceive it, something is changing. Every month we want to give you good news, that show how, if we make a concrete effort, it is possible to improve this country (Disclaimer to the blog post series "Good Laic News", my translation)

The UAAR employs its blog as a resistive space where atheist identity is framed as a marginalized one, but also where this marginalization is addressed and made sense of. Though this mediated space of discussion, the UAAR imagines a different Italian society based on secular principles rather than religious values, creating a sort of heterotopia, in the Foucauldian sense (1984). This society is a critique of the existing

model of "Catholic secularism," which the association sees as problematic. The type of utopian society the UAAR imagines in its digital third space is continuously discussed through comparisons with other countries and through critiques of Italian society, institutions, and media system.

The utopian effort to imagine a "secular Italy" is found in a number of blog posts, which underline both negative and positive aspects of the Italian society. *A Ragion Veduta* publishes a weekly post called "The Clerical Thing of the Week" (*La Clericalata[xlviii] della Settimana*), where it denounces the hegemonic power of the Catholic Church, as well as the intertwinement between religion and politics. It does so by listing a number of events, among which one is weekly chosen as the "Most Clerical Event." For example, one week the "Most Clerical Event" was the fact that the Italian government "announced it will allocate 500 millions of euros for the Catholic Jubilee [xlix] [in addition to what already allocated]" (Editorial Staff, 10/19/2015). Other events listed in the same post are, among others, the fact that the RAI television show "Real Stories" ("Storie Vere") invited a fortune-teller who can see angels, and the fact that a public high school encouraged students to attend a mass during class time in order to celebrate a Catholic Saint. The events are usually collected through the collaboration of the members of the association, which engage in the blog production by signaling "Clerical Things" to the bloggers.

However, the UAAR does not only criticize the Italian society, but underscores also the positive things that happen in the country. Once a month, the blog publishes a post called "Good Laic News" (*Buone Novelle Laiche*). The "Good

Laic News" include political and social decisions, such as the approval of a fastest procedure to divorce (Editorial Staff, 02/06/2014). Sometimes, they are international news that have influence on Italy, such as the fact that the European candidate[i] for the Democratic Party, Martin Shultz, is against the crucifix in public places (idem).

The "Good Laic News" are introduced monthly by the disclaimer quoted above. It exemplifies how the UAAR clearly sees its role as important to change Italian society and the perception of atheism within the public sphere. Through advocacy for a better media system, more equality and increased human and civil rights, the association believes that the utopia of a "secular Italy" created through the blog can be enacted in Italy.

The way the UAAR employs its blog to create an alternative and secular society presents a number of characteristics that qualify this digital venue as a third space. In its effort of "seeking community" and "seeking change," the UAAR provides its members with a space of discussion, practices, and values to believe in. Without being a religious institution, it creates a structure that mirrors religious organizations in articulating an atheist identity. This identity is resistive because it challenges certain social and cultural values; therefore, it needs to find a specific space of expression. The Internet becomes the preferred space of discussion of this identity because there is a greater freedom in representations and more possibilities of creating oppositional meanings than in mainstream media. The construction of this identity is in-between the online and the offline space, since the association is

engaged in promoting campaigns on its blogs. *A Ragion Veduta* is, therefore, a hybrid space that can be generative of reflections and activism, as well as meanings.

The digital third space the UAAR articulates is a response to the perceived hegemony of Catholicism. As for Gramsci's definition, hegemony is a complex interaction of social meanings and state institutions that is interiorized by citizens. In case of Catholicism in Italy, its presence in the public sphere makes it a hegemonic force whose influence is pervasive both in institutional decisions and cultural norms. The hegemony of Catholicism is materially exemplified by the crucifix, whose presence in public spaces is normalized because perceived as part of the culture, and seldom questioned. The UAAR advocates for non-Catholic voices to interact with and challenge this Catholic hegemony, finding a space of participation that can change the structure of the Italian consensus. In order to achieve its aims, the UAAR does not advocate for the disappearance of religion from society, but rather for a more balanced participation in the public sphere and a predominance of secularism over religion. Without being explicitly anti-religious, the blog advocates for an Enlightenment-inspired view of society where rationality should be given prominence. The critique to the perceived Catholic hegemony is, therefore, aimed at substituting it with a "better" atheists hegemony governed by secularist principles.

The crucifix controversy analyzed at the beginning of this chapter exemplifies how the UAAR conceptualizes space in relation to an ideal secular society. By criticizing the presence of religious objects in secular institutions, the UAAR operates a critical re-thinking of the public sphere where people can be religious in virtue of

the principle of religious freedom and self-determination, but they should not influence secular social spheres. Carcano explained this concept: "I consider [society] as divided in three parts. There is a private sphere, a public sphere, and an institutional sphere. We believe that religion needs to occupy the public sphere, but not the institutional sphere." (personal communication, 06/10/2015, my translation).

In articulating the UAAR's worldview, Carcano advocates for what Casanova (1994) defines as "religious privatization." While a number of societies in late modernity are undergoing a progressive deprivatization of religion, the UAAR seeks to establish a society where religions exist in public spaces, but where these spaces are not institutionally religious. Therefore, according to the association, a public building needs to be connoted as secular. The presence of the crucifix is problematic because it establishes a religious space, which excludes atheists from full participation. Implicit in the statement lies the idea that a secular space allows the existence of private forms of religion, while a religious space is incompatible with secular principles.

While the UAAR denounces instances of marginalization of atheists, discourses articulated within *A Ragion Veduta* suggest that the association believes that in the future the Italian state will become more secular. Through post such as the "Good Laic News," the UAAR shows how its heterotopia of a secular Italy is already being enacted:

The "Francis phenomenon" might have conquered the media, and it
might have gained the approval of a ruling class that is more
interested in maintaining the status quo than in civil progress.
However, it resoundingly failed in reconquering that mass of believers
that was already distancing itself from the Church as institution
(Massimo Maiurana, 10/27/2015, my translation)

As exemplified by the quote, the UAAR is optimistic about the possibility of creating
a secular Italy. Probably because the association sees religious privatization as an
inevitable process in late modernity, and subscribes to an Elightement-inspired idea
of religion as irrational, the blog often fails to engage in constructive dialogue with
religious interlocutors. Dialogue with other positions is difficult because the
association considers secular values and secular spaces as more inclusive and better
suited for Western democracies than religious ones. Even if the UAAR challenges the
lack of participation of atheists, it has an elitist style that does not include the
majority of Italian citizens, often considered as "irrational." Despite this alleged
irrationality, and despite the fact that the blog does not aim at turning religious
people into atheists, the UAAR believes that Italians will eventually stop following
religious leaders, as expressed in the quote. To the present, the blog is an important
medium because it is the only space where alternative discourses on the religious
and the secular can be articulated. In the future, the UAAR sees Italian society
becoming fully secular and achieving a media and institutional system that is not
intertwined with religion, making the digital third space created through the blog
irrelevant. In the utopian "Secular Italy," atheists will be the privileged voice in

media and society, evolving from being a "resourceful minority" to constitute the

hegemonic majority.

CHAPTER FOUR

IN PIEDI, CONSERVATIVE CATHOLICS IN ITALY

Introduction

> Today, the European Parliament will vote a bill to force all member
> states of the European Union to recognize homosexual marriage (…)
> This is a dangerous sign of a secular and anti-Catholic mentality–
> which is also anti-human– a mentality that will be imposed without
> any possible dialectical confrontation (Luigi Negri, Archibishop of
> Ferrara-Comacchio, Il Blog di Costanza Miriano, 02/04/2014, my
> translation)

The majority of Italians self-identify as Catholic, but a number of Catholic movements lament the progressive disappearance of traditional religious and cultural values in contemporary Italy. They employ the digital space to oppose the alleged diffusion of a secular mentality, increasingly pervasive in the West. Currently, Catholic groups consider same-sax marriage, still not permitted in Italy, as one of the main threats to the religious values they believe in, as explained in the opening quote. These groups do not represent the totality of Italian Catholics, but a specific religious orientation. Catholicism is heterogeneous in its interpretation of social values and authority, and groups that are more conservative often self-perceive as a minority, articulating a specific religious identity. They do not consider themselves as part of the hegemonic Catholic tradition of the country, which they criticize as influenced by secular principles. The group *Sentinelle in Piedi* is an instance of how a

religious-inspired group engages in defense of Catholic family values. *Sentinelle in Piedi* present a new model of political and social activism that employs public spaces and digital media, making a claim for religious reappropriation of secular spaces. By advocating against same-sex marriage, they constitute themselves in a resistive group in opposition with mainstream opinions articulated in the public sphere. Their use of media is an example of in-betweeness of online and offline actions that allows for the creation of a third space where religious values are negotiated in relation with modernity. In particular, the group combines the visual presence of protesters in public spaces with the tactic of remaining silent for an hour. The absence of words conveys a strong message that goes beyond the critique of same-sex unions, but addresses the lack of Catholic participation in what is perceived as an overwhelmingly secular society. The digital space becomes the preferred venue to articulate counter-hegemonic discourses. *Sentinelle in Piedi* represent a response to anxieties of secular modernity in liberal democracies and employ Catholicism as a resource to contrast what the group sees as a progressive loss of traditional values.

Sentinelle in Piedi *against Same-Sex Marriage*

The group *Sentinelle in Piedi* was founded in 2013 in the northern Italy city of Brescia, near Milan. Founders wanted to oppose a bill against homophobia, in order to prevent the institution of same-sex marriage in Italy. The name of the group, which literally means "Standing Sentinels," is a translation of the French group's name *Veilleurs Debout*[li]. The French *Veilleurs Debout* became popular when they opposed the decision of the French government to approve same-sex unions by standing in silence in public places, distanced from one another. The Italian

Sentinelle in Piedi take inspiration from the group in its way of protest: they spend an hour in a public square reading a book, silently protesting against same-sex unions. Some Catholic media outlets, both in Italy and abroad, claim that the group was inspired by the words of John Paul II during the Mass at Washington Hall: "We will stand up every time that human life is threatened.[liii]" The militaristic-inspired name "Sentinels" imply the idea that they need to "guard" and "protect" certain values, implicitly referring to the idea of "Christian militancy". Indeed, their protests are called *veglie*, "watch", and there are many militaristic-inspired metaphors in their blog and social network pages, as analyzed later in the chapter. The employment of this terminology reveals that *Sentinelle in Piedi* do not only protest against a specific law, but they also engage in the protection of a set of values they consider under attack in late modernity. According to their website[liii], they want to denounce "every occasion where there are attempts to destroy humans and civil society."

Sentinelle in Piedi do not identify as a group or a movement[liv], but rather as a "method," and they do not grant formal group membership. Similarly, they refuse to be identified with any political party or religious group. While formally a-religious, and inclusive with members of all religions, *Sentinelle in Piedi* center their protests around the idea that Catholic-inspired traditional family values are the basis for the society. While they are not an institutionalized religious group, they adhere to a homogeneous set of Catholic values and they create spaces for the articulation of a specific Catholic identity. Therefore, I consider *Sentinelle in Piedi* as a poignant example of contemporary Italian religiosity that gives emphasis to social and political matters rather than focusing on theological aspects. This informal and non-

institutionalized aspect of the group helps understanding the characteristics of contemporary Catholic militancy, that finds new and alternativew modes of expression, often connected with media. While *Sentinelle in Piedi* refuse to constitute themselves into a formal group, they often collaborate with more established Catholic groups thourgh, for example, the participation in pro-family protests organized by Catholic associations. In addition, a number of Catholic public figures self-identify as members of *Sentinelle in Piedi*, becoming sources of informal authority for the group.

Costanza Miriano, who writes *Il Blog di Costanza Miriano*, an influential blog on family, society, and religion, is a central figure within the organization of *Sentinelle in Piedi*. Miriano is a journalist that works for the national Catholic channel Rai Vaticano, the national broadcast service dedicated to the activities and the discourses of the Vatican. In addition, she writes for a number of Catholic publications and she published books about family life. Her most influencial book, *Sposati e Sii Sottomessa* ("Wed and be Submitted") advocates for a strict gender division of social roles and emphasizes the importance of traditional and patriarchal family values. The national magazine *L'Espresso*[lv] defined Miriano as the "female prototype of *Sentinelle in Piedi*." According to the article, *Sentinelle in Piedi* are an "ultra-Catholic" movement and Miriano embodies the idea of woman who is able to reconcile her role as a mother and wife with attention to her look and femininity. *L'Espress*o defines her as "dedicated to church, nail polish, and high heels."

Miriano, in her blog, often describes the activities of *Sentinelle in Piedi* and she is often quoted by the group on its website and on social networks. As I will analyze in this chapter, *Sentinelle in Piedi* do not have a recognized leadership structure, and Miriano is reluctant in considering herself as a leader for the movement. However, I included Miriano's blog in my analysis because it is crucial to understand the sources of authority for the group and for the articulation of Catholic dicourses, which are often not clearly defined in *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s official website and left unspoken during public protests. Miriano's anti-LGBTQ activism, which she articulates in her blog, is a way to advocate for a general set of Catholic-inspired values, protect the model of the heterosexual family, and contrast the rise of secularism in the West.

A New Way of Being Catholic in Italy

Sentinelle in Piedi self-identify as a minority because they defend positions that are more conservative than those of mainstream Catholicism in Italy. This happens because Catholicism, both in Italy and worldwide, is characterized by a number of different negotiations of social values, which may or may not align with the official positions of the Vatican. On the one hand, some Catholics follow the precepts of the Catholic Church condemning homosexual unions and engaging in pro-family activism (Reidel, 2009; Antonelli et al. 2014; Hooghe et al., 2015). On the other hand, some Catholics do not share the same values promoted by the Vatican about social issues. These people re-negotiate their religiosity in a way that allows for different interpretation of family values, including same-sex unions. (Kirby and Michaelson, 2008; Clague, 2014; Clements 2014).

Italian Catholicism presents a number of different orientations (Hichy et al., 2015). The term "orientation" indicates the degree to which people employ religious values to make sense of social norms. Less conservative religious orientations result in a negotiation of Catholicism that accepts, for example, homosexuality (Bertone and Franchi, 2014), while more conservative orientations, such as the one of *Sentinelle in Piedi,* refuse to negotiate religious principles. Different negotiations of Catholicism result in an inner heterogeneity of religious beliefs and authorities, especially concerning social issues. As observed by Paternotte (2015), for example, the election of Pope Francis in 2013 was welcomed by more progressive Catholics, but the Vatican's opposition to the so-called "gender ideology" coincided with a rise in Catholic-inspired anti-LGBTQ movements across Europe.

Sentinelle in Piedi not only construct their identity in opposition to the secular-inspired mentality of Italian society and politics, but they also self-identify as a minority in relation to what they consider as more moderate Catholic orientations in Italy, implicitly criticizing Italians that do not strictly follow religious precepts. Analyzing different religious orientations in Italy allows for a more complex understanding of the "belonging without believing" character of Italian religiosity, acknowledging the existence of groups that advocate for a more prominent role of Catholicism in the public sphere. *Sentinelle in Piedi*, indeed, aim at creating, or re-creating, a "Consensual Catholicism" where certain positions assume a predominant public role and contrast the idea of secular state.

Sentinelle in Piedi, through the defense of a certain Catholic orientation, constitute an example of non-conventional political influence of the Catholic Church. They create, indeed, an oppositional movement that is able to capture the attention of public debates and defend the positions of the Vatican. The presence of the Vatican in the country tends to influence Italian politics in a conservative way (Pasquino, 2005). Catholic political engagement in Italy formally ended in 1994 with the dissolution of the Christian Democratic party (Giorgi, 2013), but the Catholic Church continues to engage in non-political conservative positions for issues regarding topics such as abortion, divorce, and same-sex unions. *Sentinelle in Piedi* are not tied to political parties, but they engage in social activism that results in political influence.

To understand how the group articulates its religious identity and social engagement, I analyzed the official blog of *Sentinelle in Piedi*, created in 2014[lvi]. There are no official data on the number of *Sentinelle in Piedi'*members, since they do not require formal membership. The group's national Facebook page counts 22,759 followers, and the Twitter account 4,353[lvii]. In addition, a number of Italian cities have their own Facebook and Twitter accounts, which are used to organized protests. *Sentinelle in Piedi' veglie* attract between one hundred and six hundred participants in each square and are regularly organized in all major Italian cities. The group is more active on social networks than on the official blog, which is not frequently updated.

I integrated my analysis with the blog of the journalist and writer Costanza Miriano[lviii]. Online from 2011, the blog analyzes also the French context that inspired the *Sentinelle in Piedi* movement and some aspects of the Italian society that led to the creation of pro-family groups. Posts are authored by a number of writers and the blog is updated daily with personal stories, prayers, opinions, and quotes from Papal discourses or from religious authors.

I have contacted Miriano for an interview, but, after a first positive response, she did not answer my further emails. Similarly, my efforts to interview members of *Sentinelle in Piedi* have been unsuccessful. I managed to interview Massimo Introvigne and Marco Invernizzi, prominent exponents of the Catholic group *Azione Cattolica*[lix] (Catholic Action) and part of the Italian pro-family movement. They, occasionally, write posts for Miriano's blog. Both of them took part in protests organized by *Sentinelle in Piedi*, but they did not want to speak for all the members of the group. I observed a protest of *Sentinelle in Piedi* in Milan, which is the second biggest city in Italy, in May 2015. During this *veglia* I was able to talk with some members, including Raffaella Frullone, one of the spokespersons of *Sentinelle in Piedi* and a blogger for Miriano's blog; however, she did not agree to meet again for a formal interview, saying that she prefers to communicate the group's message during public protests.

The lack of formal interviews and the scarcity of information on *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s official blog prevented the collection of data on certain aspects of the group's activities. However, this also constitutes an interesting data about how this

movement sees itself in relation to media and society. Miriano and other *Sentinelle*

in Piedi members' refusal to be interviewed allowed me to better theorize the media

resistance of the group, as well as the use of silence as a way of protest. While the

data analysis is, in certain cases, based on lack of data rather than first-hand

information, it nonetheless gives insights on the group's peculiar relationship with

media, which is connected to the perception of Catholicism in late modernity.

    Sentinelle in Piedi's strong critique of media representations is analyzed in

the first part of the chapter, together with the group's ambiguous approach to

media use. I will proceed by describing the nuanced concept of religious authority

within the group. I will then explore the idea of family, gender, and homosexuality

that this Catholic orientation conceals, explaining how the group articulates its

identity in response to a perceived social threat. I will conclude by explaining how

Sentinelle in Piedi's use of offline and online spaces allows for the creation of a third

space where they discuss the position of religion in Italian late modernity.

Sentinelle in Piedi and Media

> *Sentinelle in Piedi* are here in Milan and in other 99 squares [across
>
> the country]. We're here to say no to a bill that would equate gay
>
> unions with marriage, that would let two same-sex persons raise a
>
> child, depriving this child of his mother and father. This bill on civil
>
> unions is not civil at all. It destroys civilization by annihilating its most
>
> important element, which is family. It would lead to the abominable
>
> practice of surrogacy for pregnancy. All this happens in a context of

general indifference, and with the complicity of mainstream media, which are aligned with the "single thought"[lx] (Raffaella Frullone, public speech, *Sentinelle in Piedi* protest, Milan 05/23/2015, my translation)

Sentinelle in Piedi emerged in the Italian public sphere through an unconventional model of public protest. On the one hand, their presence in public squares is characterized by the absence of verbal messages, with the only exceptions being the speeches from a selected spokesperson, as the opening quote exemplifies. On the other hand, they extensively use the digital space to communicate their ideas, adding nuances to the message that they carry out in the square. The group creates, therefore, a counterpublic that is in-between the offline space of the square and the online space of the Internet.

Silent Protests to Attract Attention

All *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s protests follow the same pattern. From the first *veglia* in Brescia in 2013, the group started to use the model of silent protest in different cities across the country. The protests last one hour. People stand at approximately three feet from one another, and read a book of their choice, remaining still and silent while a spokesperson does a speech at the beginning and at the end of the protest. The spokesperson, a different member of the group for each protest, is in charge of flyers, banners, and other printed material. When I observed the *veglia* in Milan, the chosen spokesperson was Raffaella Frullone, one of the bloggers that collaborates with Costanza Miriano. Frullone directed people in the square with a

megaphone, while a group of men wearing the same orange vest displayed banners at the corners of the square and distributed flyers about the protest.

From my observation of the *veglia,* I noticed how *Sentinelle in Piedi* appropriate a public space and charge it with new meanings. The visual, bodily presence of the protesters – about five hundred, in the case of the *veglia* I observed – occupies an entire square in silence, a way that is reminiscent of militaristic formations. The protesters' space was defined by other members of the group: men with the orange vests, who distributed flyers to passersby, and two men with a professional camera that were making a video for the *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s website. In addition, policemen patrolled the square to avoid possible scuffles. Frullone and some other women stood in front of the protesters, and were the only members of the group interacting with passersby.

The protesters did not move or talk, even when it started raining: Frullone proudly told me that they also would stand still "in the case of an hurricane," underscoring the martyr-like willingness of *Sentinelle in Piedi* to accomplish their goal of protesting for one hour. Both the presence of the banners and the men with the orange vests defined the space of silent protest, creating a sort of invisible barrier between the people inside and the people outside. During the *veglia* in Milan, as it often happens, counter-protesters in favor of LGBTQ rights screamed and played music to disturb *Sentinelle in Piedi*. This resulted in a clear opposition between the silent space occupied by *Sentinelle in Piedi* and the noisy presence of the counter-protest. Frullone, indeed, incited *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s members to

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maintain the principle of non-violence and to remain silent when talked to or provoked. The group's presence during *veglie* connotes the square with Catholic meanings, is a way similar to how the Catholic crucifix charges public spaces with religious values.

The creation of this space is completed by the activity of reading of *Sentinelle in Piedi.* Protesters isolate themselves from the outside world through the act of reading in a quasi-meditative fashion. Reading is a symbolic performance, that, according to *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s website, allows for the cultivation of culture and freedom of thought, as well as in-depth knowledge. *Sentinelle in Piedi*, indeed, "read a book to show the permanent education we all need" (*Sentinelle in Piedi*, Official Website, my translation). The symbolic performance is enriched by the visual homogeneity of all the protesters holding a book, instead of employing tablets or smartphones, in what might be an implicit critique of technology. During the *veglia* I observed, I could see people reading different types of books: Papal encyclicals, Costanza Miriano's books, but also the Quran and novels from controversial authors, such as the homosexual Pier Paolo Pasolini. While some non-Catholics, in specific Muslims and Jews, do occasionally join *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s protests, they represent a minority within the group. Therefore, reading texts such as the Quran is probably a strategy employed by *Sentinelle in Piedi* to create their group identity as open-minded and tolerant of other cultures. Similarly, the choice of books such as Pasolini's might be motivated by the willingness to confront themselves with other viewpoints. *Sentinelle in Piedi* employ as intellectual resources a number of authors, including some that are explicitly atheists, such as Antonio Gramsci. Costanza

Miriano, for example, quoted on her blog the famous Gramscian statement "I hate the indifferent" (06/19/2015). This might be an attempt to establish *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s claim as universal and able to appeal to people of any ideology and culture. In addition, it established the primacy of reading as a symbolic gesture regardless of the content of the book, because the intellectual act of reading is generative of resistance and knowledge *per se.*

Figure 1. Preparation of a *Sentinelle in Piedi* protest

Source: my picture

Figure 2. Preparation of a *Sentinelle in Piedi* protest

Source: my picture

Figure 3. *Sentinelle in Piedi's* Veglia

Source: http://www.sentinelleinpiedi.it/

Figure 3. *Sentinelle in Piedi's Veglia*

Source: http://www.sentinelleinpiedi.it/

Figure 5. *Veglia* in Brescia*,*

Sentinelle in Piedi's *Facebook Page, 01/25/2016*

The method of protest elaborated by *Sentinelle in Piedi* is a powerful way to communicate a message that goes beyond traditional communication channels. With their bodily and visual presence in the square, as well as the materiality of the books they hold, they create a space of protest that is not directly articulated through words. The use of silence conveys a number of meanings, and it is powerful in transmitting a resistive message. The French group *Veilleurs Debout* employed the strategy of silent protests to avoid being accused of homophobic speech, which is a crime in France. In Italy, where there is no law against hate speech based on homophobia, the tactic of silence is used as a powerful symbolic practice against a perceived secular hegemony. It indirectly shows resistance against national media and an information system that is considered as serving only secular positions.

Silence, indeed, is not only the opposite of speech, but it completes speech by enriching discourses with new connotations. According to Meyer (2015), silence is a "polysemic notion" (p.2), which can be produced and connoted both by spatiality and materiality. By considering it in relation to Lefebvre's (1992) notion of space as charged by meaning and lived through practices, silence becomes a possibility to produce a certain type of space. Through their silence, indeed, *Sentinelle in Piedi* create a performative space of protest and resistance. The group enacts Meyer's concept that "silence is an absence made present" (p. 13), because with their bodies and their activity of reading a book they make their absence of words a tangible protest.

An article from the online Catholic magazine "Tempi," which praises the technique of the group, explains the value of silence for *Sentinelle in Piedi:*

> The *Sentinelle* took Mcluhan's "the medium is the message" concept in a literal way: standing in squares, and surrounded by crazy contesters, they prefer to use a powerful and archaic symbolic language rather than slogans. Silence, order, and harmony, are responses to chaos. They represent the Apollonian spirit against the Dionysian one[lxi], they chose equilibrium and purity as [preferred] categories of the spirit. In [Catholic] liturgy things are covered not to be hidden, but rather to be shown in their true nature. Similarly, the silence of *Sentinelle* is able to speak and cry. It does it against crazy secularism, against totalitarianism that does not tolerate other ideas, against the exploitation of human life (Valerio Pace, "Tempi", 10/04/2014, my translation)

The article summarizes the main points of *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s tactics and explains the reasons why the medium of silence becomes the message of the group.

First, silence is able to attract attention more than slogans. *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s protests have been able to attract the media's curiosity and the reactions of counter-demonstrations because of the non-conventional way of expressing their message. As a "powerful and archaic symbol," silence can be more effective than actual words.

Secondly, silence is for the group a way to "contrast the noises of today's society" (*Sentinelle in Piedi* blog, 06/18/2015, my translation). It becomes a way to criticize Western modernity where technology and capitalism rule the pace of life and compel people to an increased speed. The act of standing an hour in silence and reading a book instead of engaging with technology is a mindful way to reappropriate a space and time that is loss in secular modernity. In doing so, they show a nostalgia for a past that can be recreated through "harmony and purity."

Thirdly, silence is connected with religious practices of meditation, prayers, and reflection. *Sentinelle in Piedi* contrast secularism by transforming the public space into a quasi-religious space through the sacrality of the absence of words, implicitly stating that listening can be more powerful than talking. In doing so, the group shows that no words are needed to explain the truth of the Catholic doctrine.

Silence is, therefore, a powerful medium that conveys *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s message and makes the group "hyper-mediatic," as it was defined by an article published on the national newspaper *La Repubblica,* and quoted by Miriano's blog (03/31/2014). However, the absence of words complicates the group's relationship with traditional and new media, and its "hyper-mediatic" character involves a number of different levels of expression depending on the venues they are articulated in.

Sentinelle in Piedi*'s Critique of Media*

Sentinelle in Piedi refuse to employ traditional media to convey their messages. This attitude is exemplified by the way they responded to my attempts to

interview them. When not ignored, my emails received negative answers because *Sentinelle in Piedi* refuse to talk to journalists or researchers. When I approached Frullone, she made clear that the space and time of the square protest was the only one in which she was willing to speak with me for my research. This attitude represents an example of tactical media use that expresses a direct critique to mainstream media without engaging with them. The refusal of interaction with national media becomes itself a powerful message against the media system.

Sentinelle in Piedi's website explains this reticence to engage with media outlets. On the homepage of the website, which has also been published as a blog post by Costanza Miriano (05/21/2015), it is written that "many journalists ask us to be interviewed, take part in television shows or radio debates. We are gathering here all the information that helps to understand why we say no to your invitations." They express their refusal to speak with journalists as follows:

> We do not seek visibility, we are not interested in television talk shows. We only want to express one action, the action of [gathering in] the square. This action educates us in our everyday lives and shakes our consciousness, because it is a public gesture. The space we want to re-appropriate during our *veglie* is public, as well. (My translation)

The quote exemplifies some of the core principles of *Sentinelle in Piedi*. They want to engage the public space as a collective entity that conveys a single message. By transforming the public square into a religious and resistive space, they do not want

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to articulate multiple opinions, but rather constitute themselves into a homogeneous group. They are aware that each member of *Sentinelle in Piedi* holds different political and cultural ideas, but individuality is not relevant within the group, which presents a homogeneous set of ideas that all members share. When I tried to interview members of *Sentinelle in Piedi* I met during the protest, they would refuse to speak for the group. The common answer I received was "I can tell you my ideas, but I cannot represent the whole group," and they referred me to the spokesperson. The resistive practice of silence in the square results in an absence: the group chooses to avoid confrontation, debate, and articulation of personal opinions.

Sentinelle in Piedi's choice of avoiding journalists conceals a strong critique of both mainstream and digital media, which implicitly states that the symbolic use of the square is more powerful in conveying Catholic messages than media. The website of *Sentinelle in Piedi* and Costanza Miriano's blog often lament that Italian mainstream media misinterpret their instances. Miriano, for example, explains in a post (05/01/2015) that she has been defined as "homophobic" and "a Catholic iron-lady," as well as being accused of "wanting to heal homosexuals," by three national newspapers. Miriano criticizes these definitions, saying that they do not correspond to her idea of Catholicism and family and that they are the result of a superficial media coverage.

For *Sentinelle in Piedi* and Miriano not only media tend to generalize, but they are also unable to understand the real essence of the Catholic doctrine. In a

post (10/28/2015), Miriano quotes Pope Benedict's resignation speech that criticizes the way media misleadingly reported the outcomes of the Second Vatican Council[lxii].

Similarly, Miriano explains that the media did not report the 2015 Synod[lxiii] on the family in an informative and objective way:

> I read the final relation on the Synod, and I thought that nothing changed on the doctrine about marriage and family, and my heart was full of joy for certain wonderful words (…) Then, I started reading news press and newspapers' titles that overturned my interpretation of the relation (Costanza Miriano, 10/30/2015, my translation)

This media attitude is explained by the influence of secular ideology on mainstream media, which tends to suppress voices that articulate certain religious viewpoints. Both Miriano in her blog and the *Sentinelle in Piedi* activist Marco Invernizzi during his interview expressed resentment for the lack of media attention of big pro-family protests, such as the rally that happened in Rome the 20th of June 2015. This media critique recognizes the pervasiveness of Catholic topics in Italian mainstream media, as analyzed in Chapter One. However, it opposes the fact that Catholicism is often represented as a monolithic entity able to coexist with, and be influenced by, secularism. Not only secular newspapers, but also certain Catholic media did not report the protest in a complete way. This happens, according to Invernizzi, because of a powerful "gay lobby" that influences governments and media worldwide, and that imposes censorships and self-censorship around certain topics. As a result, media often overlook Catholic militancy, focusing only on moderate positions within the Catholic Church that are more aligned with secular values (Personal

Communication, 07/09/2015). This self-censorship produces the "single thought" *Sentinelle in Piedi* talk about in their speeches, which leads to the impossibility of articulating opinions that are not dominant in the public sphere, and influence both non-believers and moderate Catholics.

According to Miriano, the inaccuracy and superficiality of media representations, as well as the pervasiveness of digital media, risk undermining relationships and the harmony of family life. A number of her posts focus on the necessity of promoting dialogue within the family in order to help people maintain their discernment between online and offline reality:

> Human beings in ten years will be more depressed and more dependent on certain behaviors, such as games, sex, technology, work. People that seek refuge in the Net to compensate for what they lack in life will encounter dangerous risks. We will have new social problems: the "technophobic" and the "technodependent". (Lucandrea Massaro, Il Blog di Costanza Miriano, 02/13/2014, my translation)

Sentinelle in Piedi and Costanza Miriano, therefore, give a general portrayal of media as misleading and dangerous, both because they are biased and because they risk alienating people from genuine relationships. In doing so, they create an image of "good Catholic parenting" that is at odds with consumption of media. The resistance against media is an implicit critique to modernity. Media and technology create a distraction accelerating the pace of life, which *Sentinelle in Piedi* contrast with their

hour of book-reading in public squares. A number of Miriano's blog posts, while not directly criticizing Capitalism, argue that modernity alienates people from meaningful values. Possession of objects and distraction through technology, according to Miriano, are unable to fulfill what people "lack in life." Implicitly taking inspiration from the model of Catholic lifestyle as based on material poverty but spiritual richness, *Sentinelle in Piedi* advocate for a reappropriation of values through mindful action, instead of seeking help in media and technology. However, there are contradictions in this critique: *Sentinelle in Piedi* attract media attention with their *veglie*, and they need media to express their ideas.

Sentinelle in Piedi*'s Ambiguous Media Use*

Sentinelle in Piedi's choice of protesting in silence conveys a powerful message and attracts attention, but the group needs venues to verbally articulate its ideas. Therefore, the Internet is employed as a space to provide information and explain to group members and potential members the reasons behind their protests. There is a deep contradiction between the critique of media and technology and the extensive use *Sentinelle in Piedi* do of media. The group, indeed, attracts and benefits from media attention, even if it does not officially seek for visibility. In addition, *Sentinelle in Piedi* have a strong digital presence that shows different levels of engagement with the group's members.

The Internet was central in the organization of the first *veglie*: according to Raffaella Frullone, after the first protest in Brescia, *Sentinelle in Piedi* formed groups in every Italian city thanks to the diffusion of information through Facebook.

Sentinelle in Piedi's website and blog, indeed, provide information about the group and its activities, and give detailed descriptions of the protests. The website features pictures from past *veglie,* as well as a number of promotional videos to attract participation. The graphic of the website is consistent with that of the flyers and banners employed during the protests in the square, and this is the same in every city. Furthermore, the texts of the website, which center around protection of children, freedom of expression, non-violence and acceptance, mirror the speeches of the public square, always maintaining a politically correct style.

Social media, both at national and local level, advertise new *veglie* and provide information sharing national and international news about issues regarding family. Social media pages are updated multiple times a day and they show a greater engagement with members: the homogeneity of the message that is central in the square becomes more nuanced through the Internet. While the official website insists on politically correctness and acceptance, avoiding explicit religious and political messages, the comments of the members are much more polemic. For example, a member of the official *Sentinelle in Piedi* Facebook page comments on a video of a flamboyant counter-protest of homosexuals as follows:

> These silly people [homosexuals that contest *Sentinelle in Piedi*] want the same rights of respectable persons? (…) had they been people with a brain and not perverts, they would understand that their counter-protest, instead of disturbing respectable people, provides good PR for all pro-family movements that have dignity and decency. We cannot expect anything else from people with no brain, or a brain

full of demons. I respect decent homosexuals, but those [people in the video] are not civil people. (Facebook comment, 11/08/2015, my translation)

The Facebook page, which is public, sometimes provokes arguments between pro-LGBTQ people and *Sentinelle in Piedi.* This happens in Miriano's blog, as well; however, the comments to Miriano's blog are, overall, more politically correct than those found on Facebook, probably because of webmaster moderation. Therefore, the three digital venues under analysis show three different levels of users' engagement: the website does not attract comments or reaction, Miriano's blog encourages debates but not polemics, and the Facebook page is where users become more aggressive in expressing themselves. These different engagements show that, despite the group's critique of media, the Internet is a central space for their presence.

Sentinelle in Piedi's media approach is ambiguous because, at the same time, it criticizes technology but employs the Internet as the main platform to articulate discourses. This might be a consequence of the media pervasiveness in modernity, where the total avoidance of media becomes challenging when the aim of a group is to reach a certain audience. This ambiguous media use can be explained with the different way *Sentinelle in Piedi* connote various media venues. Miriano, for example, is herself a journalist for the Italian mainstream religious channel RAI Vaticano, and she is a trusted source of information for the group. Miriano's profile explains that she used to work with secular media and she collaborates with a

number of national religious publications, which she often quotes on her blog. Furthermore, she participates in interviews and debates on mainstream radio and television. Miriano often criticizes media on her blog, but she separates her ideas as a person and as a journalist to what is generally produced by the media. She implicitly urges Catholics to be suspicious of media but to trust her, because she is a journalist that follows religious values. Miriano advocates for a use of media that distinguishes between discourses centered around "good Catholic values" and discourses that, on the contrary, are influenced by "secular ideas". By operating this separation, *Sentinelle in Piedi* distrust the majority of Italian media, but justify their employment of certain media spaces. The group's technique of resistance is, therefore, selective in allowing certain media venue to become preferred spaces of expression.

Sentinelle in Piedi's ambiguous media approach can also be explained through the dichotomy between the private and the public. The square and the official website represent the public character of the movement. They employ a homogeneous message to operate a religious reappropriation of secular spaces, which is the aspect captured by mainstream media. However, the digital space is used as a space to diffuse "private conversations." Facebook elicits discussions that are more nuanced and less politically correct than the message expressed in the square. These different media use, which involves the employment of different styles, exemplifies how *Sentinelle in Piedi* do not only operate a media critique, but rather negotiate their media use articulating different messages in each online and offline venue.

The ambiguity of *Sentinelle in Piedi'*s media use is symptomatic of the anxieties they feel in what they see as the progressive disappearance of a Catholic public sphere. Through its selective media use, the group trusts only religious voices that oppose secularism, considering secular media as unable to diffuse the values they believe in. In virtue of the circulation of these messages, and by bringing their private and material practice of reading a book in silence in a public venue, *Sentinelle in Piedi* constitute themselves in a resistive counterpublic. This counterpublic's message, while sometimes nuanced and not verbally expressed, is in opposition with what they perceive to be the mainstream secular mentality of society and media. The counterpublic builds itself around a specific set of religious values and constitutes a particular and resistive Catholic identity. The target audience of *Sentinelle in Piedi* seems to be constituted by like-minded Catholics, and the counterpublic builds itself in opposition to what it perceives as a secular hegemony. Other religions are often not referred to: *Sentinelle in Piedi* affirm the primacy of Catholic values, but members of other religions are more tolerated than secular people. *Sentinelle in Piedi's* counterpublic, indeed, opposes mainly atheists and Catholic that are inspired by secular values. The articulation of their message in-between online and offline spaces enables *Sentinelle in Piedi* and Miriano to elaborate their concept of religious authority.

Negotiation of Catholic Authority

> Christ said the Pope is His successor and Christ chooses the Pope. Isn't this right? If you don't believe in this, why do you believe in the

Resurrection? And if you do believe in this, you shouldn't say that you "like" or "don't like" [the Pope]. You only have to love him and serve him. (Paolo Pugni, il Blog di Costanza Miriano, 10/04/2013, my translation)

The presence of religion in media, and vice versa, puts the concept of authority into play. Traditional religious authorities have to compete with the diffusion of new symbols and meanings, as analyzed in Chapter Two. *Sentinelle in Piedi* are an example of how religious authority can be re-thought through media discourses. The group articulates authority on different levels. Inside the group there is no formal authority. Costanza Miriano is an informal lay authority for the group because her blog is a source of legitimization of *Sentinelle in Piedi'* s actions. The authority of the Pope is never questioned, as the opening quote exemplifies, but Miriano employs her blog to give opinions about and to interpret the official message of the Church. Furthermore, *Sentinelle in Piedi* and Miriano refer to Catholic authorities other than the Pope, such as Cardinals that are active in the pro-family movement. The concept of authority within *Sentinelle in Piedi* is more nuanced on social networks than it is on the official website, mirroring the different articulation of media discourses analyzed above. The digital space is central in articulating these different types of authorities and interpretations of the religious message, exemplifying how the Internet can become a third space that finds new sources of religious legitimization.

Sentinelle in Piedi's and Formal Authority

The pro-family activist and intellectual Massimo Introvigne compared *Sentinelle in Piedi* to the Occupy movement[lxiv] in the U.S. and the *Indignados*[lxv] in Spain. According to Introvigne, these movements are similar because they do not have a leadership structure (personal communication, 06/05/2015). *Sentinelle in Piedi,* indeed, do not have a recognized authority and a formal membership. The founders of the group do not make their name public and each protest has a different spokesperson in charge of speeches and organization. Websites, blog, and social networks do not have a recognized author. This absence of leadership reinforces the homogeneity of the group's message, which cannot be attributed to one person in particular but rather expresses the voice of the movement.

However, the authority structure of *Sentinelle in Piedi,* similar to their media use, conceals some ambiguities. Frullone explained to me that the protests are spontaneously organized by people that come to know the movement through the website and the social networks. She claimed that there is no central authority and that each city has a group that schedules its own protests. At the end of each rally, the spokesperson fundraises to print new flyers and banners. Nonetheless, the militarist-inspired rigor, the well-structure media strategy, and the network of groups across the country suggest that there is an organizational structure more solid than what is claimed on the website and described by Frullone.

The group is formally a-religious and does not dependent from any religious organization, but the connection between *Sentinelle in Piedi* and the Catholic Church

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is reinforced by the fact that Catholic leaders often endorse the activities of *Sentinelle in Piedi,* as exemplified by priests and bishops that are quoted by Miriano or that write on her blog in support of the group's activities. The connection between the group and the Vatican is also found in the inspiration it took from Pope John Paul II's words[lxvi]. In addition, the Facebook page often employs Catholic quotes. A Facebook post on the official page (03/21/2015), for example, shows an androgynous man with a quote from Pope Francis: "The abolition of differences between men and women is a problem, not a solution."

Therefore, while not openly connected with the Vatican, *Sentinelle in Piedi* recognize and are recognized as part of a Catholic mentality. The Vatican never formally endorsed the group, but Catholic intellectuals and the Pope himself spoke in support of traditional family values, exemplifying how *Sentinelle in Piedi* are part of a broader Catholic social movement, rather than an isolated phenomenon[lxvii].

The Informal Authority

Alongside with members of the Catholic Church, first among all the Pope, *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s Facebook page quotes a number of lay thinkers. Costanza Miriano is an example of informal authority for the group. The national Facebook page of *Sentinelle in Piedi,* indeed, identifies Costanza Miriano as one of the "four musketeers" that protect family. The group recognizes as "four musketeers," together with Costanza Miriano, the politician and author Mario Adinolfi, the psychologist Marco Scicchitano, the priest Maurizio Botta (Francesco Bellotti, Il Blog di Costanza Miriano, 07/31/2014). Miriano, among these four intellectuals that are

vocal in protect Catholic values, is currently the most active on the digital space. The authority of Miriano is recognized outside the movement, as well: in a television debate on the national channel LA7, a journalist presented Miriano as "one of the voices that the Catholic movement of *Sentinelle in Piedi* follows the most."[lxviii]

Miriano shows certain reluctance in being considered an authority for *Sentinelle in Piedi.* During the interview for LA7, she modestly said that she "just consider herself a *sentinel.*" She feels inadequate as a leader of *Sentinelle in Piedi* and refuses to claim religious knowledge because she is a lay believer. However, Miriano does acknowledge the influence she has on the group. While not a formal authority, Miriano shows her willingness to take an inspirational role for the group because she feels the need to protect the traditional family:

> After the book was published [Miriano's book *Sposati e sii sottomessa*] I became a sort of symbol of the battle to defend family (…) [I am] not a sister for my friends in trouble, but someone who knows all the answers; not someone who is struggling with her everyday life, but someone who went beyond struggle; (…) Can you believe it? But when you're walking and you realize that people are following you, what do you do? (…) So I became a defender with a flaming sword, even if I am not physically strong enough for that (Costanza Miriano, 11/12/2014, my translation)

In the quote, Miriano auto-ironically and humbly describes herself as not fit for a leadership role, but she employs the militaristic metaphor of the "battle to protect

family" to describe her involvement with *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s protests in squares and as an ideological supporter of the group.

Miriano is an example of how informal authorities can be framed on the Internet. She does not self-identify as a leader of *Sentinelle in Piedi* and the group does not refer to specific authorities, but Miriano's blog and intellectual activities are important as a source of legitimization of pro-family protests. Miriano, in her blog, provides a Catholic interpretation of society that helps articulate the Catholic identity of *Sentinelle in Piedi* in relation to the Vatican and its hierarchies.

The Authority of the Pope

Sentinelle in Piedi and Miriano, belonging to a conservative Catholic orientation, consider the authority of the Pope as non-negotiable. As the opening quote of this section exemplifies, they believe that Catholics should always "love and serve" the Pope. Therefore, Miriano often employs her blog to quote both Pope Francis and his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI. In particular, she defends Pope Benedict XVI, who is generally less appreciated than Francis by moderate Catholics:

> For years I have been a veteran in a barricade, full of medals for vehemently defending Benedict XVI in business meetings with colleagues, in dinners with friends, in gatherings with relatives, and in assemblies with neighbors, sometimes even with passersby. I read his outstanding books at night (…) I stood in St Peter's Square and prayed to show my love for this Pope who was martyrized by media. Then, at a certain point, tired and full of scars, but still ready to use my sword,

I was suddently surrounded with friends. (Costanza Miriano, 10/23/2013, my translation)

In the quote above, Miriano describes her effort to defend Benedict XVI from his detractors, employing once again a militaristic metaphor and criticizing mainstream media. She expresses her disappointment in seeing many Catholics criticizing Benedict XVI and, suddenly, re-approaching the Church saluting the election of Pope Francis as a progressive turn of the Vatican. According to Miriano, the authority of the Pope should always be respected, and for this reason she equally follows Benedict XVI and Francis. However, she does not uncritically support the papal authority. On the contrary, Miriano employs her blog to interpret the messages of the Pope and the Vatican. The following quote exemplifies how Miriano reflects upon the meanings of the words of the Pope in order to justify her behavior as Catholic:

[Pope] Francis said: "I wonder, for example, if the so-called gender ideology is not an expression of frustration and resignation, which wants to delete gender differences because it cannot relate with them." These are intense words, never heard before, words that inevitably go against a cultural system, and define gender ideology not only as questionable but also as the "expression of frustration." (Costanza Miriano, 04/20/2015, my translation)

In this post, Miriano interprets the message of the Church and implicitly criticizes those Catholics that support same-sex unions. Pope Francis pronounced the words

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"Who am I to judge?" about homosexuals a few month after his election[lxix]. Miriano, in several instances, presented her interpretation of this ambiguous position of the Pope: differently from what other Catholics might think, Miriano believes Pope Francis respects homosexuals as he respects every human being, but firmly condemns same-sex unions. Furthermore, by presenting quotes from both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, Miriano implicitly underscores the similarities between the two, refusing the interpretation of many Italian Catholics that see Francis as more progressive:

> I like this Pope [Francis] more and more everyday. I certainly don't believe that this is because he is changing his attitude. I believe it is because I slowly came to understand his language. I learned how to fully be his daughter. I abandoned my concerns –which derived almost only from [what I read in] newspapers (…) Marriage is sacred, inviolable, he [Pope Francis] said yesterday, and family is under attack, because of the gender ideology. (Costanza Miriano, 03/26/2015, my translation)

While Pope Francis might seem different from Benedict XVI, Miriano reiterates that he protects traditional family likewise. For her, the distortion of the message is, once again, the fault of media. Therefore, Miriano not only defends the authority of the Pope because she needs to do so as Catholic, but she actively reflects on the meaning of his words, and she employs them to support *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s cause. Similarly, the group often employs quotes from Pope Francis and his predecessors to support its Catholic worldview and the effort to protect traditional family values. The

Pope is the main source of religious authority that Miriano quotes on her blog, but she often describes the words and actions of other thinkers within the pro-family movement.

Lay and Religious Authorities

Miriano's blog often quotes lay and religious non-traditional sources of Catholic authority. One example is the Guinean Cardinal Robert Sarah, who published the book "God or Nothing." Sarah operates within the hierarchies of the Church, and his zeal to protect the traditional family made him an authority for the group *Sentinelle in Piedi*. Miriano describes Sarah in enthusiastic terms:

> I love Cardinal Robert Sarah (…) I decided my love was never-ending
> when I asked him what was his favorite prayer, and he told me that
> the rosary[lxx] is like one of these swaddling cloths mums use to carry
> their children in contact with their bodies. The rosary makes us in
> contact with Mary, really close. (Costanza Miriano, 11/18/2015, my
> translation)

Furthermore, Miriano often refers to lay movements within the Catholic Church. An example is the Neocathecumenal Movement, which was founded in Spain in the 1960s by the painter Kiko Arguello. The movement encourages believers to go through a spiritual path centered on the values of community and family. There is no formal connection between the Neocathecumenal movement and *Sentinelle in Piedi*, but it might be that *Sentinelle in Piedi* recruits members among Neocathecumenals,

given the similarities of the two groups' values. Miriano describes Arguello as follows:

> For Kiko, the resurrection of Jesus is an event that changed the history of the world, as well as his personal story. He bases his own life on this certainty, and he feels the need to announce this message to the world. "I cannot stay without talking about the Gospels," he always repeats. He is possessed by the love of Christ, and you don't need to be a priest for that (…) I'm not a Neocathecumenal, but I believe Kiko is a Saint. (Costanza Miriano, 06/24/2015, my translation)

Miriano recognizes that Sarah and Arguello are inspirational characters, and describes them as exceptional men that "she loves" and are "like Saints." They are regarded as authorities, not only because of their faith, but also because their engagement in the protection of family values.

Therefore, *Sentinelle in Piedi's* use of media is nuanced in the messages it conveys and creates a complex authority structure. While the group rejects any form of religious or lay authority, it probably has some sort of organizational structure. The Facebook and Twitter pages of the group refer to certain characters as intellectual resources for the pro-family efforts. Catholic authority, and that of the Pope in particular, is interpreted rather than questioned. Miriano is an authority because of her intellectual work as a Catholic journalist, which brings her in contact with the Pope and several Cardinals and gives her the possibility to interpret media frames and religious messages. She is an example of "reluctant authority" because of

the refusal to be formally recognized as a leader for the movement. This nuanced structure is put into play thanks to the use of the digital space as a third space where religious discourses are created in opposition to secular ones, and religious values are selected as resources to justify social action.

Digital media function, therefore, as venues to negotiate institutional religious authority. They are used to implicitly critique certain forms of moderate Catholicism. The relationship between *Sentinelle in Piedi* and the Vatican is ambiguous. On the one hand, there is a selection of certain authoritarian figures upon others: the group never critiques members of the clergy, but only praises characters that are actively engaged in the pro-family movement, ignoring more moderate ones. On the other hand, the Vatican never formally recognized the group, maintaining a more neutral position on issues such as same-sex unions. By creating a counter-hegemonic movement, *Sentinelle in Piedi* claim to contrast only same-sex unions, but their articulation of authority structures suggests that there are other values they consider threatening to the society. They employ the media to build a Christian identity and frame it as "minority," in opposition with other worldviews.

The Articulation of Catholic Identity

When a man and a woman are reciprocally submitted in their path to God, they are free from mainstream thinking, from the totem of laicism, and they cannot be manipulated by the "single thought." For this reason, we Christians are censored. For this reason, nobody talks about the fact that in France every day dozens of young men go to

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prison for wearing a t-shirt with the image of the family. Or for

praying outside a hospital where children are killed in the safest place

of the world, under the hearth of their mothers. For this reason,

persecutions and the killing of Christians in the world are

systematically ignored (Costanza Miriano, 19/12/2013, my

translation)

The digital space is a venue where *Sentinelle in Piedi* articulate a specific Catholic

identity. The peculiarity of this identity lies in the idea that religious values are under

threat because of the rise of secularism, as the quote above exemplifies. Criticizing

the French anti-homophobia law, and probably exaggerating the numbers of

Catholics that are imprisoned in France, the post aims at underscoring that Catholics'

freedom of expression is restricted in secular countries. There are two main

strategies of identity-construction in the digital space: first, the reiteration of the

idea that Catholic values are at the basis of Western society, and therefore better

than secular ones; secondly, the concept that Catholic families and children are

under threat from a hegemonic worldview of secularist inspiration, that expresses

itself in the advocacy for same-sex unions. These two strategies find spaces of

articulation on the Internet, which is a space to operate the subversion of certain

narratives to create a complex Catholic identity.

The Importance of Catholic Family

Sentinelle in Piedi* and Costanza Miriano consider it natural that Catholic

values are held central in Italian culture. In advancing such an idea, they reiterate the

concept of "Christian roots" of Europe analyzed in Chapter Two. In doing so, the group defends the idea that European and Italian identity is necessarily Catholic. Furthermore, they present Catholicism as the only value system that supports human inclinations and help people accept their limits. Similarly, they consider the traditional family the only "natural" kind of family. Miriano, indeed, advocates against what she sees as "non natural" trends in late modernity. An example is her battle, which resonates with *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s protests, to contrast the so-called "gender ideology.[lxxi]" For Miriano, gender equality is unnatural because men and women have different inclinations that need to be recognized and supported. She articulates her idea of masculinity by describing her family experiences:

> I am proud to say that a lot of mums I met at the beach, at the park, and at the swimming pools, are horrified in seeing my children always carrying a [plastic] gun (…) and yes, my boys always played with violent videogames, and I posed limits because they were videogames, not because they were violent. After videogames, I always suggested that they fought between brothers, because that is what boys should do (…) Today people do not support [children's] fighting anymore, because they want us to believe that there is no gender difference. (Costanza Miriano, 03/18/2015, my translation)

Miriano encourages the violent attitude of boys as an expression of their gender characteristics and identifies the problem of modern education with the exposure to technology such as videogames, rather than violence. In doing so, she reiterates the critique to media and technology analyzed above. Miriano' description of masculinity

as characterized by virility, aggressiveness, and domination is counter-posed by her idea of femininity. Women need to be "voluntary submissive," a terminology taken from St Paul. That means, women reach happiness in consecrating themselves to the care of others, especially their husbands and children:

> I became a mother at 28, and I discovered that it was the thing I truly wanted to do. I don't want to become a plumber or an engineer. I don't care about fixing things; I want to fix people. (…) I only care about people. (There are thousands of studies that explain that women's brain is made for this). I believe that the majority of women are like this; they want more time for themselves and for the people they love. They don't want more work and more success (Costanza Miriano, 03/31/2015, my translation)

Miriano employs a colloquial and ironic style to describe her personal experience as an example of how society should account for gender differences. While she is a successful journalist and writer, Miriano presents herself mostly as a mother, and often confesses her weaknesses. In different posts, for instance, she underscores that she can afford to get emotional and irrational, and her "triviality" is "socially acceptable" because she is a woman (Costanza Miriano, blog homepage). In doing so, she embodies the type of mother and wife she describes in her blog and books, emotionally fragile but caring about others. The description of her everyday life is an implicit way to advocate for Catholic values and to frame Catholic identity. Miriano's family is, indeed, presented as the model of the Catholic union: she needs her husband and children to reach happiness, and she is a good mother and wife not

because she is perfect, but because she always puts family before her work and career. For this reason, she embodies the feminine paradigm of *Sentinelle in Piedi*, and she is often praised by her female readers in her blog's comments.

Miriano constantly argues that the traditional Catholic family is the only natural unit of society. In doing so, she implicitly constructs an idea of Catholicism as providing the better possible lifestyle. However, while "natural," Catholic values cannot be reached by everybody without efforts. The Catholic identity she articulates does not apply to all Catholics, but only includes people that follow the precepts of the Vatican without negotiating them and whose religiosity pervades all aspects of life. She describes herself as a paradigm of Catholic believers because, even if she is weak and often not perfect, she always makes efforts to follow religious authorities and sacred texts. In doing so, she creates a dichotomy between secular and Christian values, strongly privileging the latter. Therefore, she does not conceptualize marriage in terms of human and civil rights, but in terms of a constant effort to reach a higher level of Christian love:

> Outside every church should be written "No time wasters". Christian love means believing in the promise of Jesus, which opens up the possibility of entering the love of the Trinity. If I get married within the sacraments of the Church, I can receive the grace of loving from Jesus: with my collaboration, I can reach a quality of love that is different from mundane love (…) It is important to know that the Church is a *vox clamans in deserto*[lxxii], not a mass model. (Costanza Miriano, 09/09/2015, my translation)

The idea of Catholic marriage that Miriano elaborates is, therefore, limited to a small number of people that are willing to commit to the Church. It is an elitist view of religion and marriage that excludes not only secular people, but also moderate Catholics that adhere to the "belong without believing" model analyzed in Chapter One. The digital space is, for Miriano and *Sentinelle in Piedi,* a venue to reiterate the supremacy of Catholic values and to describe the difficult path of fully adhering to them. Miriano's blog strongly advocates against same-sex unions because they are unnatural, and they cannot lead to the higher version of Christian love. In doing so, she opposes what she perceives as the Italian hegemonic thought, and hegemony that includes not only secular citizens, but also Catholics that are inspired by secularism.

Catholic Values under Threat

The term "minority Catholic" (*Cattolico di minoranza*), employed by Miriano, underscores the sense of threat perceived by Catholics that strictly follow the precepts of the Church. For Miriano, the majority of Catholics are influenced by an increasingly dominant secular ideology that damages Italian values, leaving a minority of more conservative Catholics to struggle against the secularization of society. Homosexuality represents one of the main expressions of the "secular threat" that Miriano and *Sentinelle in Piedi* contrast. Instead of being framed as a minority, LGBTQs are described as a powerful lobby that challenges Catholic values.

Same-sex unions are considered wrong because, being unable to provide children with a masculine and feminine figure, they would inevitably challenge the model of Catholic family advocated for by Miriano and *Sentinelle in Piedi*. Therefore, Miriano engages in anti-LGBTQ activities, not because she condemns homosexuality *per se*, but because she wants to protect a certain model of family:

> Sometimes my children ask me, "If a friend doesn't respect rules, what should I do? Should I beat him?" I answer, "Maybe you shouldn't beat him (and if you have to, do not beat too hard). The best thing to do, if you see a friend doing something wrong, is to tell him directly." Therefore, we tell homosexuals that it is wrong to adopt children: if a child has two fathers, he is orphaned from a mother. If he has two mothers, he is orphaned from a father. And being an orphan is bad. (Costanza Miriano, 14/01/2013, my translation)

With this quote, Miriano argues that being homosexual is an unnatural way to form a family that will inevitably damage children. She suggests that same-sex unions need to be actively criticized because they are intrinsically wrong.

According to Miriano, not only is homosexuality "unnatural," but the presence of LGBTQ groups within the public sphere causes the marginalization of traditional Catholic families. In an open-letter to a homosexual friend, Miriano writes:

> Why do you think we need a law against homophobia? Italy is already one of the most tolerant countries in the world (…) I don't understand

in what you [homosexual friend] are being discriminated against. As many thinkers within and outside the Church, I refuse gender ideology. This makes me, or better, my children, discriminated [because of what we believe about traditional family] (Costanza Miriano, 07/23/2013, my translation)

With these words, Miriano underscores the fact that, despite common beliefs in Italy, Catholics are the discriminated minorities. This identity articulation is reinforced by posts that often frame homosexuality as a "threat" for family and children, and describe homosexuals as a powerful majority. These discourses support the idea, diffused by *Sentinelle in Piedi,* of a powerful "gay lobby" that is trying to undermine traditional Catholic values. Marco Invernizzi, a member of *Sentinelle in Piedi,* analyzed the "gay lobby" as the product of a certain model of capitalist consumption that is supported by a number of international corporations and is centered on individuals rather than on families. According to Invernizzi, this results in the control of media and society that prevents the diffusions of any idea not conformed to the secularist "single thought" (Personal communication, 7/9/2015).

Sentinelle in Piedi use an alarmist and hyperbolic language to frame homosexuality as threatening. Miriano's blog defines gender ideology as an "enemy" of families (Costanza Miriano, 03/02/2015), and she expresses concern for "children and families" (04/26/2013) and for the fact that "family risks to disappearing in the

West" (01/06/2015, my translation). Therefore, she describes LGBTQ activism as irrelevant at best, and dangerous in the worst-case scenario.

The construction of a Catholic identity as a threatened minority extends the claims of *Sentinelle in Piedi* beyond the simple opposition to same-sex unions. The group, indeed, aims at protecting a set of values among which figures freedom of expression for Catholics. *Sentinelle in Piedi* and Miriano perceive homosexuals as the main threat to Catholic values, but they are concerned in general about the development of a secular worldview. Laicism is seen as dangerous for Western society because it destroys moral and ethical principles that are deeply intertwined with religion. For example, a blog post connects laicism with the rise of terrorism, underlining the lack of morality of both:

> Isn't it that Islamic fundamentalism sees European laicism as its first enemy? Isn't it that the so-called "secular values"– which, apart from freedom of choice, only promote the total absence of moral rules– are like matches that can kindle Islamic fanatics, the fire of terrorism and inhumanities? (Giuliano Guzzo, Il Blog di Costanza Miriano, 11/20/2015, my translation)

In the post, secularism is connoted as the main threat to Catholic values, because it creates a moral void. This lack of morality risks promoting the rise of non-Catholic fundamentalisms. The author implicitly mentions the supremacy of Christianity, and Catholicism in specific, on other religions such as Islam. However, as demonstrated by occasional alliances between *Sentinelle in Piedi* with Muslim and Jew groups

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during protests, other monotheisms do not seem to constitute a social threat for Catholic values. While formally inclusive with atheists, *Sentinelle in Piedi* seem to see an incompatibility between secular values and Catholic values, and advocate for a greater presence of religion in the public sphere.

Therefore, the Internet is a space for articulation of a Catholic identity that, in this case, does not perceive itself as hegemonic, but rather suffers from discrimination. These discourses, centered around the tension between the religious and the secular, re-think the concept of hegemony and subvert the categories of "majority" and "minority." While the majority of Italians self-identify as Catholic, groups such as *Sentinelle in Piedi* aim at re-establishing and reiterating the primacy of Catholic values on secularism. In doing so, *Sentinelle in Piedi* implicitly criticize the idea, analyzed in Chapter Two, that Catholicism is compatible with secularism: according to the group, Catholicism should have a primacy in the public sphere and cannot institutionally coexist with secular values.

For this reason, Miriano and *Sentinelle in Piedi* feel the need to contrast the rise of secular-inspired values, such as those that support the LGBTQ movement. This attitude aims not only at creating an agonistic space to grant participation in a perceived secular public sphere, but also to transform the group's marginal role in a more substantial Caholic influence for the country. This attitude derives from the anxieties of Catholicism losing institutional power in modernity, and therefore not being anymore a source of inspiration for morality. *Sentinelle in Piedi* protest because they perceive that secularism and Catholicism are mutually exclusive, and a

fully secular country would inevitably marginalize Catholics. Therefore, the group wants to establish a predominance of Catholic values on secular values, creating a Catholic hegemony. Through its oppositional practices, the group advocates for a future where traditional Catholic values remain relevant in the public sphere.

Conclusion: the Nostalgia of a Utopic Past

> [People] tell us we come from the Middle Ages, we are homophobic, not-transparent, ultra-Catholic (that would be actually great), and so on. But we are right. (…) people attack us in an hysterical way, because we risk destroying the glorious war machine of LGBT, which wants to ruin many human lives by usurping the banner of so-called human rights. But we are right. (Costanza Miriano, 02/11/2015, my translation)

Sentinelle in Piedi's discourses exemplify how the Internet can negotiate between public and private spaces, and articulate nuanced messages and complex structures of authority. Through the digital space and the opinions of informal authorities such as Costanza Miriano, the group subverts the concept of hegemony, as usually recognized, creating a "minority" Catholic identity. In order to reappropriate the hegemonic role of Catholicism that they claim existed decades ago in Italy, *Sentinelle in Piedi* appeal to a nostalgic and utopic past where secularization did not influence the public sphere.

As exemplified by the opening quote, *Sentinelle in Piedi* do not want to be considered "from the Middle Ages," but they do have a problem with Western secular modernity. They see modernity as intertwined not only with the advancement of secularism, but also with a mentality that threatens traditional family values. As a result, a conservative Catholic orientation such as *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s struggles to find a space in media and society. Therefore, the Internet is employed as a third space to create a "heterotopia" of a nostalgic past where Italy was more influenced by Catholic values. As explored by Foucault (1984), heterotopias are venues for the enactment of utopias. The space *Sentinelle in Piedi* occupy in public squares can be considered as an example of a heterotopia because, through the performance of silence, the group creates a different time and space. *Sentinelle in Piedi* slow the pace of life opposing "noisy secular modernity," and they implicitly critique technological capitalism through the mindful and non-technological act of reading. In doing so, the group makes a connection between the refusal of modernity and the need to preserve traditional values from the past.

This concept of past is "utopic" because it does not correspond to an existing past, but rather represents a set of values that are usually connected with tradition and a refusal of existing secular social models. *Sentinelle in Piedi* often use digital media to criticize the lack of morality and ethical principles of other Western countries. Costanza Miriano, for example, pities Dutch Catholics, calling them "scant brothers of faith," who fight against "empty churches." For her, the Netherlands is characterized by a general lack of moral principles, exemplified by the fact that people do not go to church anymore (02/17/2015). Because *Sentinelle in Piedi* see

the majority of Western democracies as influenced by secularism, they advocate against Western modernity for the creation of a traditional society where Catholicism is still predominant, mass media and digital media are less pervasive, the pace of life is slower, and the model of family is heterosexual.

In creating a heterotopia, *Sentinelle in Piedi* form a third space. The group's third space exists in-between offline squares, where it creates spaces around the practice of silence and the materiality of the books, and online venues, where discourses are articulated for different target audiences. The third space is characterized by the putting in play of traditional authorities. By appealing to traditional Catholic authorities and informal lay authorities, such as Costanza Miriano, *Sentinelle in Piedi* employ the digital space to re-think hierarchies within Catholicism in relation to specific values. Authorities are selected and discussed in order to respond to the anxieties of modern life, instead of being followed in virtue of their institutional role. The third space is resistive in creating oppositional discourses to a perceived hegemony, and finding physical and digital strategies to advocate for the predominance of certain Catholic values. The main characteristic of *Sentinelle in* Piedi's third space is, indeed, the primacy of Catholic values as resource of morality.

The group builds this idea of "utopic past" in opposition to the principle of religious freedom because it wants Catholic values to permeate Italian society and culture. The implicit aim is to re-establish a Catholic hegemony where society's "Consensual Catholicism" does not leave space for non-religious positions. In doing

so, *Sentinelle in Piedi* subvert traditional narratives: same-sex marriage is not seen as a mark of progress and a development of human and civil rights, but rather an element that will threaten the moral basis of the society and marginalize Christians. The "utopic past" is not backwards because of the universal validity and the ahistorical character of Catholicism. This narrative style leads to advocating for the protection of Catholicism, and underscores the idea of "Christian happiness":

> I believe that Christianity is the only possible path to happiness for men. We should build walls against abortion, against violence, against trading children's organs (…) There is nothing wrong about walls: I am in favor of walls and borders, if they have doors (Costanza Miriano, 09/18/2015, my translation)

For Miriano, Christianity is the only way for happiness, but it is not an easy path to follow. As the quote exemplifies, there is a need to "build walls," a metaphor for civil and social engagement that involves online and offline spaces. With their public engagement, *Sentinelle in Piedi* reiterate the idea that the Catholic path is challenging and requires efforts. It is easier for many people, such as homosexuals, to abandon this path and lead a life of moral corruption and unhappiness. Catholicism is the only way to happiness because it is the only "truth": "Silence is the only antidote against this new form of dictatorship, [*Sentinelle in Piedi*] choose it because they need to voice their desire to reach the truth, which is the main condition to become fully free and satisfied men." (*Sentinelle in Piedi*, Official Website, my translation)

This centrality of Catholic values and their connection with "happiness" and "truth" does not allow for flexibility and inclusivity. The third space *Sentinelle in Piedi* form in-between online and offline spaces, while formally inclusive, excludes dialogic possibilities not only with secular positions, but also with moderates Catholic orientations that are more flexible on certain issues. In doing so, it shows anxieties over secular modernity where the hegemony is constituted by a set of secular-inspired values, perceived as threatening the preservation of true Catholic meanings.

The close connection between Italianness and Catholic values and the protection of the "Christian roots" of Italy are ways to enact the heterotopia of a "utopic Catholic past." *Sentinelle in Piedi* believe that they can turn the "utopic past" they build through online discourses into an actual present through social activism. They do not wish to go back to the "Middle Ages," but rather to create a future where traditional Catholic values interplay with modernity, redefining Italian identity as Catholic. This future is possible because of the alleged superiority of Catholic values and the Catholic identity:

> Christianity is public testimony and inner life, and these two things not only are not in contrast with each other, but they are also intertwined. A Christian cannot protest in a square without caring for his neighbor (making sure others have water, baking cakes for other people on the bus, caring about other people's children) (…) A Christian can say beautiful words, but what will convince others is the fact that he brings other people's burdens. (Costanza Miriano, 06/20/2015, my translation)

Miriano continues the post by describing how this caring Catholic attitude will succeed in the public protests *Sentinelle in Piedi* organize: "I don't know what will happen, and if I will find anything vaguely smart to say. But I know that we already won." The anxieties for secular modernity are addressed through the reiteration of the idea that the Catholic identity of Italy will not disappear. On the contrary, Miriano implies, through the effort of groups such as *Sentinelle in Piedi* Catholicism will take a leading role in the public sphere and will define an alternative modernity for the country.

CHAPTER FIVE

BUILDING AND ITALIAN MUSLIM IDENTITY: THE BLOG *YALLA*

Introduction

> When I started to tell my experience, I understood the importance of
> speaking in public (…) That's what we are trying to do with our blog
> [*Yalla*]. We work to send a message of normality and plurality about
> the reality that surrounds us. The first conferences [I was speaker at] I
> was asked questions about topics that, for us, are widely known,
> intimately lived, and part of the everyday experience. The questions
> were: "Why do you wear an hijab? Did you choose to wear it?;" "Do
> you think you're integrated in Italy?;" "Do you feel Italian or Syrian?;"
> "Do you have identity crisis?;" "Do you feel discriminated?" (…) I
> understand that meeting a new Italian lifrom *Yalla* makes an impact
> on people (Lubna Ammoune, 01/09/2014, my translation)

Muslims in Italy are a growing minority that contributes to the country's fast-
changing religious make-up. The growth of Islam is connected with migration and
kindles a number of social and political debates. However, Muslims often do not
have spaces of expression within the national media system. The blog *Yalla Italia*[lxxiii]
(hereinafter *Yalla*) is a space of narration of cultural and religious experiences of
second-generation Italians. Born in Italy from foreign parents, *Yalla*'s bloggers find
themselves in-between different cultures and religions. Through its narratives, *Yalla*

becomes a third-space of identity articulation where the practice of Islam is described in relation to the Italian culture. As exemplified by the opening quote, the bloggers are aware of being a minority in Italy, where migration is still recent. Therefore, they advocate for religious pluralism by telling their stories to an audience that often ignores the existence of second-generation and Muslim Italians. The practice of writing a blog is generative of the articulation of non-Catholic Italian identities and can elicit social and religious change.

The Blog Yalla Italia

"Yalla" is an Arabic word that means "Let's go." The journalist Martino Pillitteri, founder of the blog, said that he chose the word "Yalla" as a temporary name for a tentative journalistic project (personal communication, 05/29/2015). However, once *Yalla* started to be published, the name remained and proved apt to describe the bloggers' aims: they want to express the potential of second-generations for Italy by challenging social and cultural stereotypes. Through *Yalla,* the bloggers aim at capturing the dynamic changes of Italian society and at creating a more inclusive model of religious pluralism, where they can find a place of personal and collective development. *Yalla* expresses the necessities of going towards a more multicultural society, but also the urgency of creating a new Italian identity, that needs to be more inclusive. In addition, the blog compels Italian Muslims to move away from a monolithic idea of Islam and to think critically about religion. From this perspective, the name *Yalla* – "Let's go" – encourages young Muslims to take a lead in the cultural and religious change of the country. The blogger Lubna Ammoune, indeed, told me that she got involved in the project at its very beginning, and one of

the things that interested her was the name of the blog, because "*Yalla* is a stimulating expression, that exhorts people to go on" (personal communication, 06/04/2015, my translation)

The subtitle of *Yalla* is "The Blog of Second-Generations." The term "second-generation" indicates people that are born in Italy, or arrived in Italy at a very young age, with non-Italian parents. In the Italian context, the word refers maily to youth from the South or the East of the world, rather than to children of families from other Western countries. Therefore, it defines a generation in-between two cultures, languages and, often, religions. This term indicates that the bloggers, while raised in Italy, still have strict connections with their countries of origin, because in the majority of cases their parents do not identify with the Italian culture. With the definition of "second-generation blog," *Yalla* establishes itself as a space that is not limited to Arab-Italians. In addition, the term underscores how the bloggers do not want to be defined solely on the basis of their belonging to Islam. Rather, *Yalla* is inclusive in scope with people from different cultural and religious backgrounds, in regards to both the bloggers and the target audience.

However, my interviews and blog analysis indicate that certain bloggers propose a re-thinking of the term because it is too generic and misleading. For example, the blogger Lubna Ammoune during her interview said that she does not completely agree with the definition of "second-generation." While it is useful to describe the category, the term can make the audience think that *Yalla*'s bloggers are "second class Italians." On the contrary, she said, they are "second to none."

(personal communication, 06/04/2015, my translation). The bloggers, indeed, identify as Italians and sometimes describe themselves as "new Italians" instead of "second-generations." They often underscore that "second-generation" can be used to differentiate them from the generation of their parents, but it will make no sense if applied to their children. This idea expresses the bloggers' hope that there will be no need to define the next generation as "third-generation," because at that point it will be considered as fully Italian. *Yalla*'s bloggers are, indeed, a transitional generation that bridges the culture of their parents with the Italian culture. "Second-generation" seems to be the word that, despite its limitations, better describes the commonalities of *Yalla*'s bloggers, otherwise heterogeneous in terms of cultural and religious backgrounds. *Yalla*'s posts consistently use the term "second-generation," which is employed also by other Italian associations that promote multiculturalism. Aware of its limitations, I will employ the term "second-generation" in this chapter to distinguish Italians with a foreign background from the rest of the country's population.

Yalla was created to give a voice to second-generation Italians that are often overlooked by mainstream media. In 2006 Pillitteri founded *Yalla* in collaboration with the University professor of Islamic Studies Paolo Branca. While they are not second-generations and Muslims themselves, Pillitteri and Branca were personally and professionally interested in social and religious change in Italy. Pillitteri, before getting involved with *Yalla*, wrote the novel *Quando le Musulmane Preferiscono gli Infedeli*, ("When Muslim Women Prefer Infidels") where he ironically describes the cultural clashes between himself and his Muslim partner. Branca, because of the

Classical Arab and Islamic Studies classes he teaches at the Catholic University in Milan, is in contact with the Muslim community in Milan and its activity. Both Pillitteri and Branca wanted to employ their knowledge of the Muslim community in Italy to find a space of expression for young Muslim Italians, which they felt had no opportunities to have their voices heard. Initially, Pillitteri and Branca recruited six writers of Egyptian, Syrian, and Moroccan background among Arab-Italian cultural associations and Classic Arab language classes in Milan. *Yalla* was first published as a printed magazine within the third-sector publication *Vita*[lxxiv], and became a blog in 2011, a choice that enhanced the engagement with readers and enabled bloggers to write more articles. After *Yalla* became an online platform, new bloggers were recruited among second-generation groups, such as the association *Rete G2*[lxxv], and through announcements on the blog. The majority of the bloggers are college students or young workers.

Pillitteri invites bloggers to write for *Yalla* when he feels they can tell interesting stories of their experiences as second-generation Italians. *Yalla*'s bloggers do not have a journalist background and do not perceive themselves as journalists, even if they receive a compensation for each article they write. Pillitteri described to me the process behind the creation of *Yalla*'s posts. He explained that he has a relationship of trust with the bloggers and he calls them very frequently. From their informal conversations, Pillitteri and the bloggers come up with new ideas for posts, which usually center on everyday experiences. Yalla's counts around forty bloggers, some of whom only write occasionally, while others are part of the editorial staff; sometimes the blog hosts external contributors, as well. The editorial staff holds

editorial meetings in *Vita*'s newsroom, but there are also contributors from other cities that work prevalently via telephone and email. In addition, they have a private Facebook group where they discuss ideas for possible articles, based also on a press release with news about multiculturalism and religion that Pillitteri prepares every week and circulates among the bloggers. The posts are either signed by the bloggers, sometimes with real names and sometimes with a nickname, or are the product of the collective work of the editorial staff. Facebook and Twitter are used to promote the blog, as well, and they count 5,645 and 2,525 followers[lxxvi] respectively. The posts do not have a specific target, but in general they aim at attracting Italians that are interested in multiculturalism and religious pluralism, as well as other second-generations.

Yalla used to be updated several times a week, with both long posts about bloggers' everyday life and short opinion posts on news events. According to Pillitteri, each post attracts an average readership of 2000 visits per day. At the present time, *Yalla* still exists, but it is seldom updated: from the interviews emerged that the blog is currently re-thinking its identity and role. The bloggers I talked with explained that many of them, having now full-time jobs and families, have difficulties in finding time for *Yalla*. In the future, *Yalla* might find new bloggers and become more international, since Pillitteri moved to Brussels. There is also the possibility that the blog will end or change its scope. Pillitteri, for example, in 2014 started the blog Migrador Museum[lxxvii], which is similar to Yalla in talking about religious and cultural change, but focuses on migration. In the future, there might be a need for

Yalla to wide its scopes and discuss other topics, in order to better address issues, such as migration, that are often at the center of debates in Italy and Europe.

Yalla is formally an editorial project that aims at describing the heterogeneity of second-generation Italians. It is not an official group or association, and it does not identify as a Muslim blog. However, the narrative practices that *Yalla*'s bloggers engage with make this digital space an informal group, able to help define a common identity and to advocate for social and religious change. The bloggers find commonalities in the social and cultural marginalization they suffer from, aggravated by xenophobic and anti-Muslim political discourses in Italy. Second-generations are often associated with Islam because it is the religion of the majority of recent migrants, as well as the religion that is generally seen as more problematic in terms of integration. As a result, the blog often publishes posts about the articulation of Muslim identities in Italy.

Being Muslim in Italy

Muslims in Italy represent around 2% of the population, but they still lack a formal recognition from the Italian state (Toronto, 2008; Mezran, 2013). This means that Islam is not part of the "concordat" between state and religious institutions explained in Chapter One, and does not benefit from any percentage of citizens' taxes. The lack of recognition of Muslim communities is not only a bureaucratic issue, but it is symptomatic of an unpreparedness of the country to deal with different ethnicities and religions. As analyzed in Chapter One, the Italian population is majoritarian white and Catholic, and these characteristics are often employed in

social and media discourses to define Italian identity. Ardizzoni (2007), for example, analyzes the media case of the 1996 Miss Italia beauty pageant. For the first time, a black woman of Central American origin was elected as Miss Italia, and immediately a number of polemics arose, claiming that she could not represent "standards of Italian beauty" because of the color of her skin.

This episode, while not directly connected to religion, exemplify what is the general perception of the "white and Catholic" public sphere that is predominant in Italy. The country, relatively homogeneous in terms of religiosity and ethnicity, tends to suffer from a diffused "fear of otherness" that does not accept Italian that do not conform to certain cultural norms. The case of the black Miss Italia unveils an incapacity to accept citizens from different backgrounds: the problem was not that the elected Miss Italia did not meet the required beauty standards, but rather that she was considered "different" in virtue of the color of her skin and, implicity, as bearing a set of values that could not make her an "Italian woman." Similarly, non-Catholic religions, even when tolerated, are seldom accepted as part of the Italian culture. Diversity is better accepted when it does not involve ethnicity or religion, making for example the integration of white-skinned Catholic from Eastern Europe easier than that of dark-skinned Muslims. Similarly, Waldensias tend to bear less social stigma than Muslims because they are a Christian denomination, as well as ethnically and culturally Italian.

The "fear of otherness" that generates this "white and Catholic" public sphere became more visible in the 1990s, when the population began to change in

terms of ethnicity and religiosity. Italy does not have the same migration from former colonies that characterized other European countries, and only in the last two decades Italian society started to deal with new cultures and religions. A natural bridge between Africa and Europe, Italy recently became one of the major migration destinations in the continent, which migrants reach with dinghy boats. The rise in migration resulted in an intensification of xenophobic media and political discourses. These discourses center around the potential rise in crime and decrease in job opportunities that migrants would allegedly cause in Italy. In addition, the religious aspect is often employed as an element of incompatibility between migrants and the Italian and European culture. Migrants, indeed, are not only connoted as "different" because of their culture and ethnicity, but they are problematically and misleadingly associated with episodes of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. Islam is, therefore, often portrayed as a religion that cannot adapt to Western democracies, as analyzed in Chapter Two.

The xenophobic political party Northern League is one of the most powerful voices against Islam in Italy. The leader Matteo Salvini often reiterates that migrants will damage Italian culture and the roots of its tradition. Even if some of the migrants are Christian, Salvini creates his anti-immigrant political campaigns against the "fear of the Muslim other." For example, he made a national case out of a decision of an Italian school principal to avoid Christmas celebrations in a public school[lxxviii] in sign of respect to non-Catholic students. While no Muslim family made any formal complain about the Christmas celebrations, and while Italian atheists are often more vocal than Muslims about the necessity of having a secular public school system,

Salvini employed this case to show how Islam is threatening against Italian culture and traditions.

As a result of this social context that often does not accept religious pluralism, Islam receives great media attention. Media representations of Islam in Italy tend to be negative in portraying this religion as a threat for Western societies. For example, mosque-building is often used by media to reiterate that the visibility Islam is gaining in Italy is a potential threat to Catholic values (Saint-Blancat and Friedberg, 2005). In addition, Italian media contribute to frame Islam as a violent and backward religion, focusing only on problematic issues, such as isolated cases of women murdered by family members because of a refusal of conforming to Muslim norms. These problematic issues, instead of being connoted as exceptions, tend to be used to describe Islam in general (Salih, 2004).

However, Islam is more heterogeneous than represented by Italian mainstream media and political discourses. Studies on second-generation students (Frisina, 2011) and mixed families with a Muslim parent (Cerchiari et al., 2015) reveal that Italian Muslims elaborate strategies of religious and cultural adaptations to the Italian society. In so doing, they articulate a hybrid identity that often employs personal narratives to overcome superficial mainstream media representations. Zinn (2011) analyzes how second-generation Italians use the Internet to define their identity and overcome the risk of being considered an "invisible category." *Yalla* is a space that addresses such identity-formation processes and reflects on Muslim practices and beliefs in relation to Italian society. *Yalla* is not religious in scope nor it

was founded as a Muslim blog, but this peculiar representation of Islam in Italy compels the bloggers to give particular emphasis on Muslim topics, rather than other religions.

I analyzed *Yalla* starting from 2011, the year the blog was put online, focusing on posts about Islam. I interviewed Pillitteri in the office of *Vita*, situated in the city of Milan, where he works and holds editorial meetings with the bloggers that are part of the editorial staff. Furthermore, I interviewed Branca and four of *Yalla*'s bloggers that he put me in contact with. We met in Milan in cafés or public parks, with the exceptions of one blogger whom I interviewed in the city of Modena where he lives and another who lives in the city of Genoa and I interviewed by phone. Not all the bloggers were Muslims, but they gave insight into how the blog is a space for articulation of cultural diversity and explained the challenges of belonging to a non-dominant religiosity.

From the analysis and the interviews emerged that Yalla is important to define its bloggers' identity, and it is one of the rare media spaces in Italy where non-Catholics have their voices heard. The blog often articulates analyses and critiques of Italian mainstream media representations of Islam, which I will analyze in the first part of this chapter. Then, I will proceed describing strategies of normalization *Yalla*'s bloggers employ to express their feelings of belonging to the Italian culture. First, they critique certain models of conservative Islam and describe the negotiation of Muslim practices and beliefs within Italian society. Second, they advocate for a different law to gain Italian citizenship in order to obtain the same rights of their

peers; in doing so, they implicitly state that Islam is compatible with Western citizenship. In conclusion, I will explain how *Yalla*' bloggers employ the Internet to define their position and role within Italian society.

Yalla's Relationship with Media

> An important news [for the media to cover] would be that there are almost a million of young people born in Italy to parents from other countries. Everyday, these people prove that their background is not in contrast with Italian praxis and values, but it is complementary to them. They [these people] are faces, stories, experiences, and opportunities for the Italian system, a direct link with many other nations, a nourishment for the country. But media ignore and disregard them (…) [second-generations] make media narrations go haywire. (Editorial Staff, 12/10/2012, my translation)

Yalla's aim is to give a voice to people that are usually ignored by mainstream media. *Yalla*'s bloggers, as exemplified by the quote above, feel the frustration of being an "invisible category" (Zinn, 2011): while second-generations grow in number and find places within Italian society, they rarely have space for expression within the media system. In their critique, the bloggers challenge the sensationalism of Italian mainstream media, which are mainly interested in controversial religious aspects. Therefore, the use of the Internet is a way to force unheard voices in the public

sphere through a narration style that subverts traditional media representations and increases engagement with readers.

Italian Mainstream Media and Islam

Yalla exhorts second-generation Italians to become bloggers if they are "tired of partial or biased media portray of these topics" (Editorial Staff, 03/14/2013, my translation). Among "these topics" the post mentions immigration, globalization, multiculturalism, and mixed race couples. From the analysis of the blog and the interviews emerged that media often overlook these topics not because they are problematic, but because, on the contrary, they are not controversial enough. *Yalla* exists to try to partially counteract this superficial media representation and enanche participation of an often overlooked class of Italians.

During his interview, Branca explained that "Media are sensationalistic and they want to give alarming news, but these [Yalla's stories] would be reassuring news, so they enter this ambiguous game where if you are not radical, fundamentalist and extreme then you cannot be a Muslim" (personal communication, 05/31/2015, my translation). According to Branca, mainstream media tend to portray Muslims as backwards, violent, and fundamentalists. When Islam is not explicitly criticized, migrants and second-generations are often considered as powerless "victims" with a marginal role within Italian society. In perpetuating these representations, media implicitly connect all migrants and second-generations with a conservative and monolithic model of Islam. This media

sensationalism, explained by Branca and other interviewees, endorses the idea that Islam is non-compatible with Italian and European values.

The media sensationalism that describes Islam as threatening can be found in a number of media reports after the terroristic attack in Paris in November 2015. The national newspaper *Libero*, for example, provocatively titled its front page "*Bastardi Islamici*,[lxxix]" which can be translated as "Islamic Bastards." The title caused polemics and the director of *Libero* Maurizio Belpietro had to face charges for hate speech. This episode exemplifies how Italian media still have difficulties in talking about Islam and how the public sphere is divided when covering topics about Muslims.

The blog *Yalla* emerges in this media context as a voice that is not representative of what is generally described as "threatening Islam." As a result, *Yalla* has controversial interactions with Italian mainstream media. On the one hand, an editorial project of second-generations such as *Yalla* attracts media attention, because it is unique in its genre. The bloggers are sometimes invited to give media testimonies of positive integration. On the other hand, the bloggers are seldom given enough space of expression within mainstream media when invited to do so. This paradox is addressed in a post where the bloggers describe a negative interaction with mainstream media (Editorial Staff, 05/06/2013). The journalist and television host Gad Lerner invited representatives of *Yalla* to speak in his national talk-show "Zeta" about politics, society, and multiculturalism. Five of *Yalla'*s bloggers invested time and money to prepare a speech about citizenship and second-

generations, addressing a question to the Minister Cécile Kyenge[lxxx]. However, they explain in the post that they were not given any chance to speak, and they were kept among the public "still as statues," even if Lerner had promised them more involvement.

This event summarizes some of the main points of *Yalla*'s media critique: the bloggers would like to interact with Italian mainstream media and they are able to attract media attention, but they do not fit the sensationalistic stereotypes that Italian media and Italian audience expect when talking about second-generations and Islam. They are not the "threatening Muslims" that the newspaper *Libero* tried to describe with its title.

Yalla's bloggers not only criticize mainstream media for the way their opinions are overlooked, but also lament a general lack of positive media representation when it comes to second-generations and Muslims. *Yalla,* even if it is not a political blog, often supports the first African Minister Cécile Kyenge and the Italian-Moroccan politician Khalid Chaouki, both members of the Democratic Party. This support has the aim of showing that there are politicians that represent the country even if they do not fit in the "white and Catholic" idea of Italian identity. For the same reason, *Yalla* often talks about positive examples of Muslims and second-generations that are contributing to the development of the Italian society and often interact with media. For example, *Yalla* published interviews with the Italian-Algerian sociologist Khaled Fouad Allam (Marco De Vidi, 09/13/2013)

Implicit in this attention to characters such as Fouad Allam is the necessity for

Yalla to find examples of Muslims that are not problematic, but rather able to speak

against stereotypes and interact with mainstream media in a constructive way.

Because of the difficulties to find spaces of expression within mainstream media and

to establish non-conventional representations, *Yalla'*s bloggers employ alternative

media venues, especially the Internet, as principal platform to express their ideas.

This practice results in an enanched participation in the Italian media sphere. While

participation alone does not result in direct contrast to mainstream media

representations, it can nonetheless grant some agency to the bloggers in defining

the terms of their own experiences. By telling their personal story through *Yalla,* the

bloggers create tactical counternarratives that can contribute to a more general

change in the perception of Islam.

The Digital Space as a Narrative Space

The digital space is a preferred space of expression for *Yalla'*s bloggers

because, even if it cannot reach the same audience of mainstream media, it allows

for a more complex style of expression. The digital platform enables the bloggers to

elaborate upon long narratives and freely express their opinions. *Yalla* challenges

mainstream media representations through a straightforward and colloquial style

that would be difficult to find in national media.

Through the Internet space, *Yalla'*s bloggers extensively explore their

everyday lives. The preferred style of expression is that of "storytelling," as

articulated during my interviews with the bloggers: "I consider myself a storyteller

more than a journalist…I tell what I see, and sometimes I give my opinion, too" (Sumila Jayasekara, personal communication, 06/06/2015, my translation). The technique of storytelling aims at presenting everyday stories that contrast mainstream media representations, expressing the content of the posts in original ways. As a result, many posts are narrated in first person and portray the blogger's personal experiences, as exemplified by the following quote:

> A mixed couple[lxxxi] (or better, a couple of mixed origins) needs a mixed house! I can compromise on kitchen and restroom, but bedrooms, living room and study room are mine to furnish! I want to have a house with suffused lighting, warm colors, wooden furniture, some wind chimes that keep us company with their jingle, smell of mint or vanilla in every room. (Ishmahan Hassen, 07/22/2013, my translation)

In the post, the blogger describes the challenges she faces when deciding how to furnish the house with her Italian boyfriend. She ironically explains that the main problem is the clash between her wish of a Middle-East interior design and her partner's propensity to traditional Italian furniture. The post is an example of storytelling because it is a personal experience told from the perspective of the blogger, which employs a colloquial and ironic narrative style. She does not give direct opinions on mixed couples, but she implicitly states that people from different religions can form a couple and overcome major differences.

The bloggers employ storytelling to develop a provocative style that challenges the values of Italian society. They refrain from complaining in order to be proactive in proposing alternative models for social change. In his interview, Pillitteri explained that he encourages the bloggers to adopt this narrative style and to freely express their opinions, even if this means to take a position in criticizing or supporting certain ideologies.

This narrative approach is found in a number of *Yalla*'s posts. Comments published after the attack against *Charlie Hebdo* [lxxxii] in Paris exemplify the provocative attitude described by Pillitteri. In the post, a number of bloggers gave their opinion of the event explaining its meaning for European Muslims. In doing so, they refused to assume a guilty attitude and justify their religiosity, but rather they call for a firm attitude to prevent Islamophobia and avoid generalizations that identify all Muslims as terrorists:

> I believe I don't need to say that I condemn it [the attack against *Charlie Hebdo*] because I obviously do that. But everybody brutally condemns Islam and nobody condemns the fact that Islam is used as a scapegoat. (…) One cannot criticize *laïcité*, freedom, a non-believer, or a gay person, but Muslims are all [considered as] terrorists and everybody despises them! (Sabrina Mandouh, 01/09/2015, my translation)

The quote exemplifies how Italian Muslims are tired of being target of stereotypes and it provocatively compares Islam with other minorities, such as atheists and

homosexuals, which do not bear the same social stigma. In doing so, the blogger employs a colloquial and direct style to criticize both the Italian society and the incapacity of certain Muslims of standing for their religious beliefs. The post is probably a response to some articles about gatherings of solidarities for *Charlie Hebdo* in Rome and Milan[lxxxiii]. Different mainstream media praised the presence of Italian Muslims in these events, implicitly stating that Muslims need to disassociate themselves from terrorism. While not anti-Islamic, these media narratives still imply that Islam is not necessarily compatible with Western institutions, and Muslims need to "prove" their critique to terrorism with public gestures. Mandouh's post is provocative because, by reiterating the marginalization of Islam in Europe rather than expressing guilt, subverts mainstream narratives around Islam after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. According to the blogger, Muslims do not need to distance themselves from terrorism but rather defend themselves from public media stigmatization.

The bloggers often reject what they consider a common second-generations' attitude of complaining about contemporary Italian society. According to a number of bloggers, second-generations feel marginalized because they do not belong to the mainstream religion and culture of the country, but they are not proactive in trying to change their social position. For example, a post criticizes second-generations that agree to interact with mainstream media only to tell "tear-jerking" stories of discrimination and present themselves as powerless "victims" of the Italian society: "Unfortunately some young immigrants play this [mediatic] game, contributing to create and reinforce a false stereotype and a grotesque representation of non-Italians" (John Shehata, 01/27/2014, my translation).

Because of recent migration, indeed, media often associate Muslims with migrants that escape wars or poverty. When not presented as potentially threatening, migrants are often talked about as "victims" that need to be helped. *Yalla* bloggers often reiterates that they spent most of their lives in Italy and, in most cases, they are not "victims" of any violent state or situation of poverty. Therefore, the blogger Shehata, as many others among *Yalla*'s contributors, exhorts second-generations to refrain from complaining or picturing themselves as victims, but rather take a proactive role in advocating for a more inclusive society.

Through *Yalla,* second-generations are able to provoke and challenge the stereotypes that characterize many media representations of Islam. In doing so, they articulate non-mainstream voices that challenge dominant narrations, as analyzed by Couldry (2010). According to Couldry, neoliberalism is characterized by a "crisis of voices," where everybody has the illusion of having a possibility to be heard, but where in practice it is difficult to establish a powerful voice. Similarly, young Italian Muslims struggle to establish a voice in a cultural and religious context where they are often overlooked. The use of storytelling, as well as a provocative and proactive style, is helpful to make *Yalla* an interlocutor for issues of multiculturalism and to become more attractive for a wide readership. *Yalla*, indeed, attracts a high number of readers' comments, which sometimes reveal anti-Muslim and racist attitudes.

Yalla was originally founded as a magazine, which allowed for alternative discourses about religious and cultural change, but had limited interactions with the readers. The passage to the digital space maintained the same format but increased the opportunities for confrontation. The blog attracts a high number of comments that both support or criticize the presence of second-generations in Italy. Specifically, the anonymity of the digital space allows for articulation of xenophobic and anti-Islam comments the bloggers have to deal with.

Yalla's bloggers always reply to comments, even when they are explicitly offensive and provocative. Pillitteri explained to me that they usually publish all the comments, even the most disrespectful opinions, and the bloggers are required to answer the comments within few days of publication. In a post (05/16/2012), the blogger Lubna Ammoune addresses some of the negative comments received to previous posts written by herself and other bloggers. In doing so, she openly invites the anonymous authors of the comments to *Yalla*'s newsrooms, so they can discuss the issue facing the bloggers. One of the comments, which states that second-generations and Muslim do not have the right to "feel" Italian, illustrates a critique *Yalla*'s bloggers often face:

> You don't need to be a rocket scientist to understand that, if I come from four generations of Italians and I can prove it, I am a thousand times more Italian than someone who "feels" Italian only because he is born here only twenty years ago from immigrant parents (05/16/2012, my translation)

Such comments, which are clearly provocative, reveal a diffused fear certain Italians have for different cultures and religions, often reinforced by a superficial understanding of Islam. This anti-Islamic attitude is not infrequent in Italy. As analyzed above, the political party Northern League's leader Matteo Salvini centers his political campaigns around fear for Muslims. Salvini's Facebook account[lxxxiv] often receives comments where people express their wish for Muslims to leave Italy, sometimes with violent and offensive tones. *Yalla* receives similar comments, as exemplified by the quote above. However, while these comments are considered normal on Salvini's Facebook page, since they conform to Salvini's political views, they are more problematic when addressing *Yalla.* Because of the ethnical and religious background of *Yalla*'s bloggers, such comments are a direct provocation and attack against the blog. Comments are protected by the anonymity of the Internet, but *Yalla*'s bloggers try nonetheless to engage in conversation with people holding anti-Islamic positions

Addressing such comments is a way for *Yalla*'s bloggers to react to certain media and social stereotypes, and show their ability to speak for themselves without feeling victimized. In doing so, they describe the Internet as a space that does not only enable positive interactions, but also radical and disrespectful opinions. By maturely addressing these opinions without following the Internet logic of censoring or insulting, the bloggers implicitly constitute themselves as trustworthy interlocutors for issues of multiculturalism and religious pluralism, both in the digital space and in the physical one.

In another post, the bloggers publish an email received from a reader, which wants to know more about second-generations. The reader articulates his ideas as follows:

> Reading your biographies, I'd say that you are all boys and girls integrated within society, educated, with interesting jobs, differently from immigrant families I usually see. I am from Piedmont,[lxxxv] and here Arab immigrants are poor and with big problems of integration, and I think this is both our fault and their fault: here [Italian] people are suspicious of other cultures and it is easy for them to become racists, but they [the Arabs] often behave in a way that doesn't help integration (Davide, 04/24/2012, my translation)

By publishing and commenting on this letter, *Yalla*'s bloggers show their openness to dialogue. Also, they use the comment to describe themselves as second-generation Italians that are "integrated, educated, and with interesting jobs," refusing subscribe into the narratives that portray Muslims and second-generations as backwards and non-integrated.

The digital space becomes, therefore, a space to develop a storytelling style that allows for the expression of opinions through narrations of bloggers' everyday experiences. Furthermore, the bloggers employ the Internet to engage in a direct confrontation with readers, including those who openly show anti-migrants and anti-Islam attitudes. *Yalla* is an example of alternative media because it employs a non-

conventional style that provokes without offending and points out social issues without complaining. Through this use of the digital space that makes "media narrations go haywire," *Yalla*'s bloggers articulate narratives that usually are overlooked by mainstream media. These narratives often aim at describing the practice of Islam as non-threatening and compatible with Italian values.

Narratives of Islam in Italy

> [Yalla] describes not only Italy, but also the Muslim world. Islam is very heterogeneous. Probably more so here [in Italy] than in the Middle East, because here you can break certain taboos or reinforce them, you can contrast authority (…) you can be Muslim in your own way (Martino Pillitteri, personal communication, 05/29/2015, my translation)

Yalla is a space of identity construction that puts great emphasis on religious practices and beliefs. *Yalla*'s bloggers feel the stigma of belonging to a Muslim background that, as analyzed above, is often perceived as non-compatible with Western values. The blog employs strategies to describe the practice of Islam in Italy without falling into stereotypes or generalizations. The bloggers distance themselves from Muslims that they judge as excessively strict for what concerns religious practices, and that they believe cannot adapt to the Italian society. Furthermore, *Yalla* employs storytelling to describe the everyday practice of Islam in a way that is similar to the practice of Catholicism among many Italians. As exemplified by the opening quote, they show that they are "Muslims in their own way," and employ the

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digital space to articulate a set of religious understandings and practices that are symptomatic of the heterogeneity of Islam.

Critique of a Monolithic Islam

Yalla aims at defeating stereotypes and going beyond superficial representations of Islam. The bloggers do not uncritically defend Islam, but rather try to capture the nuances of Islam in Italy. For example, they explain that many mosques are just small rooms with carpets and restrooms for ablutions, with no "boogie-woogies, secret cults or people who sharpen their scimitars" (Editorial Staff, 08/16/2011, my translation). With this ironic comment, they expose the fear of mosques as irrational and explain that the majority of Muslims do not constitute a problem for Italians, as mainstream media might suggest. In the post, the bloggers refer in specific to the case of a mosque in Milan, whose building was opposed by conservative politicians. They explain that people have an irrational fear of mosques that is often based on ignorance and racism.

However, in the same post, *Yalla*'s blogger explain that, in the mosque debate, Italian authorities failed to include some Muslim perspectives. The principal interlocutor was CAIM[lxxxvi], the organization of the Islamic association of Milan. *Yalla*'s bloggers, as other moderate Muslims, do not feel represented by the CAIM because they perceive it as excessively conservative. *Yalla*'s bloggers, indeed, operate an internal critique of some attitudes of the Muslim communities. In doing so, the bloggers articulate their identity in opposition to a model of Islam that they

do not see as compatible with their ideas and lifestyles. The critique involves mosques, Muslim groups, and also private family practices.

The blogger Randa Ghazy, for example, criticizes the treatment of women in certain mosques in Italy. She describes her experience in a mosque where women were forced to sit in the back of the room, with no light and no possibility of listening to the Imam. The blogger explains that the Imam did not acknowledge the problem, implicitly negating women's role within the Muslim community. Ghazy ironically describes the Imam as a "cave-dweller" with long beard, who speaks only Arabic, and is dressed in a way that suggests "he came, yesterday, from Saudi Arabia." She concludes the post as follows:

> I can only say that this person [the Imam] doesn't represent me. I deserve more. Maybe I don't know the Muslim community in Italy, but I know my rights. I know that these old pompous guys need to beat feet. They need to let us substitute them, because we are the new generation, able to speak perfect Italian, we have a deep understanding of both cultures, both worlds, and both cultural codes. (Randa Ghazy, 08/31/2011, my translation)

In the post, the blogger creates a dichotomy between two different kinds of Islam: on the one hand, the "cave-dweller" Imam that does not recognize gender equality and is not able to understand modernity. On the other hand is the "new generation" of Italian Muslims that practice their religion in harmony with Italian values and

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culture. In criticizing the narrow-minded and non-inclusive attitude of some mosques, the blogger advocates for a religious change within Italian Islam.

The critique of a monolithic understanding of Islamic precepts extends to lay Muslim groups, as well. *Yalla's* bloggers criticize, for example, the national group *Giovani Musulmani d'Italia*[lxxxvii] (GMI, "Young Italian Muslims"). The association organizes activity for second-generation Italians of Muslim faith, but *Yalla's* bloggers refuse to identify with the group because they see it as unable to adapt to Italian society. A post describes a Muslim girl's experience during a convention organized by the group:

> Girls (many of which wore the veil, despite their young age) were on a bus, and boys on another. The same division was applied every moment during the convention. The division [between sexes] wasn't so sharp even in my country of origin! (Najma, 01/17/2014, my translation)

The blogger explains that the association GMI has been founded with the good intention of forming an "Islamic Italian identity." However, she writes, GMI is not inclusive and does not accept debates with people holding different opinions. For example Khalid Chaouki, one of the founders of the association and currently a politician within the Democratic Party, was eventually expelled from GMI because he was considered "too liberal." The blogger describes Italy as a place where people can live their religion more freely, since it is not necessary to follow strict precepts such

as the division between sexes. The attitude of GMI is, according to the blogger, anachronistic and at odds with Italian society.

The bloggers often criticize religious practices within their families, as well. The blogger Oussama Mansour writes, "At home, sometimes I argue with my father, and I tell him that he is an authoritarian fundamentalist. He answers by telling me that I am…an infidel, that I'll become Christian and I'll regret it, and so on" (12/24/2012, my translation). The blogger explains that his arguments with his father center around a "different vision of life and society": the father tries to convince the son to spend more time within Muslim groups, because this will keep him "protected" from the outside world and will grant him a sense of community that is lost in the migration from the home country. On the contrary, the blogger considers these groups as conservative and monolithic. In his post, Mansour advocates for a model of Islam where religious matters can be discussed and believers can take individual decisions about religious practices.

The posts that critique certain models of Islam exemplify some of the main points of *Yalla*'s critique of religion. The bloggers want to distance themselves from a "backward" vision of religion, which negates, for example, gender equality. This attitude is symptomatic of a cultural clash that characterizes certain second-generations, which often do not completely endorse their parents' values. However, they do not create a sharp dichotomy between Western and non-Western countries; rather, they advocate for a continuous discussion of religious values and for the

freedom to personalize the practice of Islam without blindly following institutional authorities.

Yalla advocates for the creation of a more flexible type of "Italian Islam" that moves away from rigid norms and rules and that will facilitate integration. In doing so, the bloggers often distance themselves from established Muslim communities and groups. A post, for example, talks about the video interview the journalist Gad Lerner[lxxxviii] did with three of *Yalla*'s bloggers about the possible construction of a mosque in Milan (Editorial Staff, 04/17/2014). The three women, which do not wear an headscarf, talk about the fact that the mosque should be inclusive with all Muslims, and not only with the more conservative Muslims groups. The post explains that, following this video, the three bloggers have been harshly criticized by other Muslims. The post explains that some Muslims accused the three women of being "*ragazzette*," which is a diminishing term for "young girls." The post does not clearly identify who are the Muslims that accused the three bloggers, but it is symptomatic on how certain positions claim that young women should not have a voice against established Muslim communities.

Yalla's refusal to conform to Muslim communities or groups such as GMI is a way to negotiate the identity of the bloggers. Not only *Yalla*'s bloggers are often considered "not Italian," but their opposition to certain traditional Muslim authorities often alienates them from Muslim communities. This contributes to the media marginalization that *Yalla*'s bloggers feel, since they are not part of established communities that more easily attract media attention, both in a positive

and negative way. Therefore, *Yalla* becomes an important space to discuss religious norms and practices with people that do not necessary share the same background, but that have a similar critical attitude to religion. Through *Yalla*, the bloggers can create an informal religious group where they do not necessary find like-minded people, but where they feel safe to discuss religious matters. Debating religion is a way to create an Italian Muslim identity that can coexist in harmony with principles of Western modernity.

Being "Muslim in Their Own Way"

Through the critique of certain religious models, *Yalla* advocates for religious freedom within the Italian society. For the bloggers, it is important that each individual has the freedom to reflect upon and understand religious practices and beliefs and adapt them to his or her own environment.

These reflections are expressed in the blog through the description of everyday practices of Islam in Italy. For example, a number of *Yalla*'s posts elaborate the experience of Ramadan and discuss its meanings and characteristics. A blogger, who uses the nickname "Sheherazade," employs *Yalla* to express her doubts about Ramadan. She explains that she used to observe it when she was younger, out of fear of disappointing her family more than spiritual beliefs. Therefore, she interrogates herself on the meaning of this celebration for her:

> Aren't religion and faith subjective? Don't they belong to the intimate
>
> sphere of a person? Should I be Muslim only because my parents are
>
> Moroccan and they belong to this faith? Do I want to follow a faith or

a religion only as an extension of my ethnic and geographic belonging? (08/08/2013, my translation)

In the post, Sheherazade reflects upon the meaning of Ramadan, and, while she does not observe it because she feels disconnected from Islam, she respects the values attached to it:

I cannot but agree with the meaning of Ramadan, because during fasting Ramadan makes people truly equal. The rich fasts as well as the poor, people refrain from vices and understand vices, and they start giving meaning to small things again (idem)

The post exemplifies a religious approach where the Ramadan is appreciated not for its cultural or religious value, but rather for the universal meanings it conceals. It is considered an important celebration even for a person that is distancing herself from institutional religiosity. Other posts describe different understandings and practices around Ramadan:

When they ask me "Bahija do you observe Ramadan?" and I answer with a convinced YES, I always face grimaces that make me understand how incredulous they are. I don't understand why they're so prejudiced. Ok, I don't change my dress habits (maybe I'm showing my décolleté a little too much?!?), I listen to music and I go dancing (obviously during the evening), I make exceptions one or two days to have lunch with my colleagues. (…) I admit I'm not the emblem of the

perfect Muslim, I just commit sins like everybody, don't I? (Bahija

Monssif, 08/17/2012, my translation).

For the blogger, Ramadan has value regardless of exceptions such as listening to music or dressing in a provocative way. She recognizes that she is not "the perfect Muslim," but she normalizes her behavior underscoring that "everybody" commits sins. Despite her personalized approach to Ramadan, she considers herself a Muslim. These descriptions of Ramadan mirror different ways of understanding Muslim precepts among *Yalla*'s bloggers. For example, certain bloggers refrain from eating pork and drinking alcohol, following the Quran, while others do not. Some women within *Yalla* wear a veil, while others choose a different dressing style. Pillitteri told me, during his interview, that bloggers often argue about Islam. However, these religious debates do not weaken *Yalla*'s positions; on the contrary, they mark the heterogeneity of religious practices within *Yalla* and contribute to construct its religious identity on the notion of religious freedom.

The description of religious practices allows *Yalla'*s bloggers to articulate their own understanding of Islam. For example, they often discuss the meaning of secularism within Islam, and whether it is possible for a Muslim to reconciliate secular and religious values. Among different viewpoints, a post provides the following definition of "secular Muslim:"

I consider myself a secular Muslim. I was born Muslim and I chose to

be one. I am secular because I believe in freedom of other people and

in my own freedom, without limits of any kind, apart from my own

conscience. (Sabrina Mandouh, 12/24/2013, my translation)

The quote reveals an understanding of the secular based on the idea of freedom of practice. It describes a model of Islam that is compatible with the Italian lifestyles of the bloggers. Employing storytelling to describe their religious practices, the bloggers reflect upon the meaning of the secular within Islam and contrast the idea that Christianity alone is compatible with Western values. The definition of "secular Muslim" indicates, indeed, that Islam is able to accept the values and laws of a Western country.

Yalla's bloggers describe the practice of Islam in Italy as similar to that of Catholicism. They implicitly endorse a model of "belonging but not believing" which, as analyzed in Chapter One, allows them to follow certain precepts of Islam and to recognize their cultural belonging to the faith without uncritically following religious authorities and texts. The blogger Oussama Mansour, for example, creates a parallelism between Islam and Christianity by saying "I am Muslim no more and no less as the majority of Italians are 'Catholic'" (12/29/2014, my translation). With this description, Mansour normalizes the practice of Islam as a religion that is not necessarily totalizing, but rather as a faith that can be personalized and adapted to the environment it is practiced in. Similarly to Italian Catholics that often separate their religious beliefs from secular values of the country, the bloggers adapt their religious practices to the surrounding society.

Yalla's bloggers criticize, on the one hand, the Italian media system and society that, through monolithic understanding of Islam, often support Islamophobia. On the other hand, the bloggers do an inner critique of certain Muslim communities. *Yalla* contrasts stereotypes about Islam showing that it is possible for the bloggers to be "Muslims in their own way," ignoring the precepts that are not compatible with Italian culture and lifestyle. Through the description of lived individual religious practices, the bloggers redefine the concept of authority and refuse to follow religious leaders without critically thinking about religious values and precepts.

By expressing their religious ideas and describing their religious practices, the bloggers constitute themselves in an agonistic space based on the freedom of choice. As theorized by Mouffe (2005), minorities in a democracy often lack spaces for participation in a constructive debate. In the case of *Yalla*'s bloggers, they feel a lack of participation on two different fronts: they have difficulties in entering the Italian public sphere because they are a religious minority and Italians feel anxieties in relation to the growth of a non-Catholic religion, but they also fail to engage in debates with established Muslim communities. In addition, mainstream media and political discourses usually fail to distinguish moderate and conservative Muslim positions, assuming that Islam is a monolithic entity. The bloggers promote dialogue about religious matters because they need to establish their presence both in relation to non-Muslims and Muslim communities. Therefore, the blog becomes an agonistic space because it aims at contrasting the unbalanced power structure that prevents its voice to be taken into account in the definition of the country's

consensus. This agonistic attitude claims a space of expression in between Catholicism and secularism and underlines that Italian identity is not necessarily inscribed in these two categories alone. Rather, it problematizes the "Catholic secular" dichotomy by proposing an alternative and more inclusive religious model for Italian identity.

Articulating a Muslim-Italian Identity

> My hijab always attracts weird gazes:
>
> John Doe: Are you Muslim?
>
> Me: Yes I am
>
> John Doe: Why are you voting?
>
> Me: Because I'm an Italian citizen
>
> John Doe: How can you be Italian if you are Muslim?
>
> Me: When did religions start to have a nationality?
>
> John Doe: oh Jesus
>
> (Sabrina Mandouh, 05/26/2015, my translation)

Yalla is a space where bloggers articulate their understanding of Islam through the description of their practices and experiences. In creating a model of Islam that is similar to the mainstream practice of Catholicism in Italy, *Yalla*'s bloggers normalize their religious practices and prove them compatible with the Italian culture. In doing so, they use *Yalla* as a space of identity construction, where they constantly negotiate their life in-between different religions and cultures. As exemplified by the quote above, which describes the experience of a blogger while voting in the

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national elections[lxxxix], they often struggle to be considered Italians because of their religion and their background. Therefore, *Yalla* is a space where bloggers reiterate their Italianness by explaining that being Muslim is not at odds with the concept of citizenship. The blog becomes a way to engage in social change and it is active in promoting alternative models for gaining Italian citizenship, which currently constitutes a problem for many second-generations.

Building Italian Identity

  Yalla is a platform of negotiation of religiosity and cultures that are not mainstream for Italy, and in doing so *Yalla'*s bloggers often reiterate their Italian identity. The blog is often used as a performative space of identity construction, where the bloggers talk about understanding of Italianness often not found in other venues. Through their knowledge of Italian language and culture, the bloggers explain that for them it is natural to feel Italian: "I am Italian. Not because I say so, not because I have the citizenship, not because some members of my family are [Italian], but because everybody I have ever met always considered me Italian" (Zeina Ayache, 04/03/2014, my translation). In her post, the blogger Zeina Ayache explains that she always considered herself as Italian, despite being a second-generation and having a foreign name. For her, being Italian is something that does not need to be proved.

  However, the articulation of Italian identities needs to take into account the different religiosity and background of the bloggers. They often present themselves as being able to conciliate different cultures within the same family, and underscore

how this "double identity" does not make them feel "less Italian." The blogger Sara Zennaoui, for example, describes herself as follows: "I am eighteen years old, I speak with the accent from Brescia[xc], I feel Africa in my blood. I have Western culture in my brain, and traditions from Maghreb in my heart" (02/04/2014, my translation). The description underscores the blogger's ability to live in-between different cultures.

The articulation of this "double identity" is often a strategy for *Yalla*'s bloggers to conciliate the values of their families with their Italian lifestyle. While it is natural for them to feel Italian, the creation of the double identity is not a simple process, but rather the result of identity negotiations:

> We are even more Italian because we choose to be Italian, you are born Italian and never questioned it, but we questioned our identity and chose to be Italian. Therefore, we promote Italianness and the Italian culture that raised and educated us. WE ARE ITALIAN (Sara Abd Alla, comment to a post, emphasis in original, 03/13/2013, my translation).

The quote is the blogger's response to xenophobic comments that claim second-generations and Muslims are not Italian. Abd Alla explains that second generations constantly question their identity, and the choice of being Italian is reflected by their respect for Italian culture and education.

Yalla is an important space of articulation of this "double identity." When I interviewed some of *Yalla*'s bloggers, they explained to me that writing for *Yalla*

often comes from the urge of defining their own identity. The blogger Andrea Boutros, for example, told me that, before starting writing for *Yalla,* he felt "hundred percent Italian and hundred percent Egyptian." However, through writing, he discovered that he feels more Italian, even if he considers his background as relevant to define his personality. (personal communication, 06/16/2015).

This identity formation process helps form what Bhabha (1990) defines as "hybrid identities." *Yalla*'s bloggers, as often happens to colonial subjects, find their identities in a third space that is neither their culture of origin, nor the Italian culture. They negotiate their identity in-between cultures and traditions. This identity construction process is symptomatic of how alternative media can be used tactically not to create direct dissent, but rather to advance an alternative model of national identity. In this sense, I consider *Yalla* as operating social activism because it indirectly aims at changing society's perception on its own identity. The construction of this hybrid subjectivity is effective because it does not preclude the bloggers from feeling Italian from a cultural and social point of view. However, from a legal point of view, many of the bloggers do not have the Italian citizenship, or they obtained it only as adults. The issue of citizenship is often discussed within *Yalla* and it is often considered an identity problem, as well.

Advocacy for a Different Model of Citizenship

In Italy, citizenship is granted according to the principle of *Jus Sanguinis.* Differently from the *Jus Soli,* which automatically grants citizenship to children born in the country, *Jus Sanguinis* sanctions that children have the same citizenship of

their parents, regardless of the place of birth. As a result, many second-generations, while born and raised in Italy, do not have the Italian citizenship. According to the Italian law, it is possible to start the procedure for the Italian citizenship at the age of eighteen, unless parents are able to apply for it when children are underage[xci]. Before they are adults, second-generations need to periodically renovate their visa with their parents waiting in long queues at police stations. Furthermore, once they reach adulthood, the bureaucratic process to gain the citizenship is often long and expensive.

The question of citizenship has been discussed in a number of social and political debates, especially because of the growth in number of second-generation Italians. In particular, the Minister Kyenge, in charge from 2013 to 2014, was vocal in proposing the introduction of *Jus Soli. Yalla*'s bloggers and other second-generations considered Kyenge an inspirational character not only because of her political ideas, but because she had a similar experience to that of many second-generations: she had to apply for citizenship as an adult and was able to obtain it only through marriage with an Italian man. In addition, as often happens to second-generations and Muslims in Italy, Kyenge endured episodes of racism. For example, the Northern League politician Roberto Calderoli publicly called her "a orangutan."[xcii] This racist comment aimed at diminishing her as someone "non Italian" and "inferior." Calderoli did not explicitly refer to the citizenship law, but implicit in his comment is the idea that her stances, as well as those of other second-generations, could not be taken seriously because she is "different."

The question of citizenship has been explored also by the filmmaker Fred Kuwornu. Even if mainstream media do not accord much space to issues of second-generation Italians such as citizenship, Kuwornu's grassroots documentary "18 Ius Soli"[xciii] , released in 2011, is powerful in explaining the need of a reform in the existing citizenship law. The filmmaker advocates for *Jus Soli* by showing second-generations in their everyday activities and explaining that not only they feel Italian, but they are also studying and working in order to contribute to Italian society. *Yalla* collaborated with Kuwornu and Pillitteri interviewed him in a video that was linked in a blog post (Editorial Staff, 01/03/2013).

The principle of *Jus Sanguinis* is problematic for *Yalla*'s bloggers because, without citizenship, they have less opportunities than their peers in terms of employment and political engagement. The Italian citizenship is an identity problem, as well: while *Yalla*'s bloggers feel Italian, their citizenship status often shows the contrary. Not being Italian citizens makes them feel non-accepted and contributes to the stigma of belonging to a different religion and culture:

> I was born in Italy exactly like my friend Chiara. Both born in 1985, same musical tastes, same ideals. I still remember our first trip backpacking together when we were underage, ready for adventures with our ID cards in our pockets. But my ID card was different. I couldn't expatriate[xciv], because I was a foreigner in my own country (Wanda Mosgfegh, 07/03/2015, my translation)

In the post, the blogger describes a number of problems she faced growing up without the Italian citizenship, and the difficult process to obtain it once adult. As exemplified by the quote, the citizenship for her is also a social problem: having a "different ID card" means not only that she cannot join her friend in a trip across Europe, but that she is unjustly considered different from someone who shares her same culture and place of birth.

Yalla's bloggers are active in promoting a different model for gaining Italian citizenship. In 2014 they published a proposal on the blog (04/08/2014) and on the printed magazine Vita to advocate for a change in the citizenship law. By doing so, the blog constituted itself as an interlocutor for questions of citizenship and attracted the attention of politicians, such as the current Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. The proposal advocates for the adoption of "*Jus Soli temperato*" ("tempered *Jus Soli*"), which is currently being discussed at political level. According to this model, children born in Italy do not automatically gain the Italian citizenship, but they can do it after they complete elementary school[xcv]. Children born in another country and arrived in Italy before the twelfth year of age could gain Italian citizenship after they complete mandatory schooling[xcvi].

The model of "*Jus Soli temperato*" is a strategy to gradually modify the existing citizenship law without drastically changing it. Furthermore, the elaboration of this proposal is an occasion for *Yalla*'s bloggers to situate themselves within the Italian society and constitute an opinion group for such themes. The model of "*Jus Soli temperato*" puts emphasis on school and education, implicitly making second-

generations such as *Yalla*'s bloggers a privileged category to quickly gain Italian citizenship, since they have been educated in Italy.

In proposing this model of citizenship, the bloggers implicitly distance themselves from other migrants. For example, a blogger describes her ceremony for citizenship as follows:

> [The public official for the ceremony] said: "Do you speak or understand Italian? You know, some people come here and they cannot say a word" (…) "Do I understand Italian?" I thought. "I have been living and studying in this country for twenty years. You can ask such things only to someone who lived in a dark jungle since birth!"
>
> (Maral Shams, 10/08/2012, my translation)

The blogger distances herself from migrants that have a limited knowledge of Italian language and culture, and implicitly situates herself among a group of people that have more rights of having their Italianness publicly recognized. By presenting themselves as educated and knowledgeable of normative and legal issues, the bloggers constitute themselves in a group of "experts" that has the potential of becoming an interlocutor for issues connected to migration. In the articulation of their Italian identity, the bloggers discuss religion, as well. Reiterating the idea that Islam is compatible with Western values, they advocate for the recognition of citizenship for Muslims.

Citizenship and Religion.

The issue of citizenship, while not directly connected with religion, contributes to the stigma that *Yalla*'s blogger perceive from being Muslims. Xenophobic and anti-immigrant discourses often oppose the *Jus Soli* principle for fear of Muslims migrants' children easily gaining the Italian citizenship. This approach is exemplified by a number of Yalla's comments:

> A wise and civil country, because of the EVIDENCE of Islam as persecutor, invader and violent, would NEVER give Muslims the citizenship. Not because of religion but because of politics and the impossibility they have of [reaching] INTEGRATION and becoming really Italian. A Muslim will NEVER be Italian even if he is born here because he is Muslim and he will follow the Islamic law, that is not limited to religion only" (Franco, comment to a post, emphasis in original, 12/30/2014, my translation)

The comment exemplifies certain anti-Islam stances that want to prevent Muslims from becoming Italian citizens on religious bases. This attitude is diffused in Italy and it can be found in a number of media and political discourses, such as those of the Northern League leader Matteo Salvini. The conservative national newspaper *Il Giornale*, for example, published a number of editorials[xcvii] that oppose the *Jus Soli* because it would give citizenship to Muslims. The newspaper frames the issue in terms of safety: if Muslims gain citizenship, they will be facilitated in organizing terroristic attacks. *Il Giornale* refers to previous terroristic attacks in France that were organized by Muslims with French citizenship. With its opposition to the *Jus*

Soli, *Il Giornale* contributes to diffuse fear of Muslims and to consider them as unable to accept the laws of a secular and democratic state.

Yalla's bloggers contrast this type of mentality by criticizing its irrationality and questioning the connection between citizenship and faith. *Yalla*'s critique to this attitude is based on two main points.

First, *Yalla* criticizes the connection between Italian identity and Catholicism. For example, a post highlights that "Some people say that you need to be Catholic to gain Italian citizenship (according to this criteria, at least half of Italians I know would have their citizenship revoked)" (Editorial Staff, 01/24/2012, my translation). In the post, the bloggers criticize the idea that citizenship should be granted on a religious base, referring to a comment of the politician Beppe Grillo[xcviii]. A number of political discourses in Italy advocate against citizenship for Muslim not only for safety reasons, as expressed by *Il Giornale*'s editorials, but also because of an alleged threat to the predominance of Christian values in the country. *Yalla*'s bloggers actively promote the idea that Italian identity is not dependent on Catholicism, and that citizenship is not connected with faith. On the contrary, the religious change that Italy is experiencing needs to account for Muslim Italians, as well.

Second, *Yalla* describes a type of Islam that is compatible with Italian citizenship because it is compatible with the values of the Italian state. In their claim for Italian citizenship, the bloggers articulate their Muslim Italian identity by subordinating their faith to the state. They operate a separation of the public and private sphere by professing their faith mainly in the private sphere. This attitude is

described by the blogger Riham Hamzawi, who writes that she wants to become an Italian citizen because she intends to marry an Italian man. The blogger explains that a woman from a Muslim country can obtain a marriage certificate from her consulate only if her fiancé converts to Islam. She criticizes this rule by saying:

> This is why I want to gain Italian citizenship so badly. To be honest, I don't care if my boyfriend converts to Islam only because of a very old sexist tradition and to stop gossip [among Muslim family members]. I prefer an atheist that respects and loves me. (Riham Hamzawi, 10/02/2013, my translation)

In this post, the blogger criticizes both the "sexist tradition" of certain Muslim countries that do not allow multi-faith marriages and the current Italian law for citizenship. Hamzawi feels Italian and she wants to marry her partner following the Italian civil ritual, without imposing her religion on him. In doing so, she implicitly sets a hierarchy of values where citizenship and the laws of the state come first, and religion remains something she practices in the private sphere. Her attitude implies that Muslims can gain Italian citizenship because they give importance to the laws of the state, and challenges the idea that Islam is not compatible with Western democracies.

By criticizing the connection between Italian citizenship and religion and proving that Muslims are able to separate religion from state, *Yalla*'s bloggers make a strong critique to the existing citizenship law. The bloggers explain that people should have their citizenship recognized because of the contribution they give to the

country: "The modernization of our [citizenship] law would be a sign of civilization and justice in a country that counts also on the willingness, the sacrifices and contributions of migrants" (Editorial Staff, 01/24/2014, my translation). Furthermore, it states that migrants are "no hero, victim or sub-humans," explaining that second-generations' right to citizenship should not be subordinated to a moral or religious connotation, but to the principle of human equality. Implicitly, they criticize the Italian state for not being able of granting equality to its citizens.

The bloggers' advocacy for institutional rights is a way to resist a perceived social stigma against migrants and Muslims. The citizenship law is deeply connected with the idea of "white and Catholic" public sphere, which grants rights only to certain people. The exclusions of second-generation children from citizenship is symptomatic of anxietied against an "otherness" that is inevitably changing the Italian ethnical and religious scenario. By presenting themselves as people that deserve citizenship because of their knowledge of Italian culture and language, the bloggers reiterate their Italian identity. They do so by negotiating the role of religion in the public sphere and underscoring that their religious practices are mainly limited to the private sphere. As a result, the activism to change the existing citizenship model, while formally inclusive, marks a distance between *Yalla*'s bloggers and other migrants, especially those whose practice of Islam is more visible in the public sphere. *Yalla* becomes a space of media activism not only because of the non-mainstream discourses it advances, but also because of its active social and political engagement. By creating this digital third space, the bloggers are able to propose a

different model of Italian society where there is a greater religious pluralism and inclusivity.

Conclusion: the Religious Pluralism Utopia

> Second- generations do not know any absolute truth, they have no easy answers for every question, they do not match a pre-determined model. They defeat the dichotomies of secular and religious, radical and moderate, communitarian and integrated; they went beyond these dichotomies. (…) These concepts destroy mainstream media narrations (Editorial Staff, 12/10/2012, my translation)

Yalla is a third space of identity construction that negotiates religious belongings. Through their critique of the Italian mainstream media system, *Yalla*'s bloggers choose the Internet as a venue to employ a storytelling style that contrasts superficial and negative representations of Islam. The critique of national media is centered around the idea that mainstream representations do not capture the inner heterogeneity of Islam in Italy. The bloggers describe this heterogeneity by writing about their lived religious practices. They self-identify as a minority because they are not Catholic, but also because they refuse certain Muslim authorities, and they feel culturally Italian. As exemplified by the opening quote, they refuse to fix pre-determined categories, and they aim at going beyond dichotomies. They distance themselves, on the one hand, from racist Italians that do not understand the importance of cultural and religious pluralism; on the other hand, from conservative Muslim groups and migrants that are not able to adapt to the Italian culture.

Yalla is an example of third space because it is connoted by this in-betweeness of different cultures and religious belongings. It is a space to articulate a "hybrid identity" that is often overlooked by mainstream media, and that is not easy to negotiate. This identity is connected both to Italian values and to the belonging of Islam, which are not seen at odds with each other. In order to conciliate the different aspects of their identity, the bloggers question religious authorities and employ *Yalla* as an alternative space of religious discussion. Often disconnected from Muslim communities, *Yalla*'s bloggers constitute an online third space where they negotiate religious authorities by advancing the notion of religious freedom. As a result, Yalla constitute an alternative Muslim community whose members define their religiosity through debate and the description of their everyday practices.

Yalla is an agonistic third space because it provocatively criticizes both the Italian society, which it perceives as not enough inclusive, and certain Muslim communities, which are unable to adapt to Western modernity. This agonistic space is created in opposition to a perceived "white and Catholic" hegemonic public sphere. This public sphere is the result of the intertwinement between Catholicism and culture, and it excludes people from other ethnicities and religions. While media do not overtly state that Italy needs to be "white and Catholic," the sense of marginalization that *Yalla*'s blogger feel is symptomatic of how the country is still not inclusive with certain minorities.

This public sphere does not ignore Muslims, but rather focuses only on more extreme Muslim positions, that would fit certain media stereotypes and confirm to a vision of Muslims as "threatening others." This cultural hegemony builds itself on the notion that Italy is Catholic and secular at the same time. Hegemonic Italian identity suffers anxieties in late modernity because of changes in society and culture. As a result, the identity is often preserved in opposition to an allegedly threatening "other," as exemplified by xenophobic discourses of political leaders analyzed above. Islam tends to be identified as the "other" to Italian culture, incompatible with Catholicism and secularism. Italian identity is often defined in relation to this notion of "otherness." As a result, second-generations such as Yalla's bloggers that conciliate secular principles with Muslim values do not fit the stereotype of Islam as "other." On the contrary, they could modify the existing cultural hegemony by showing that it is possible to be Muslim and Italian at the same time. The Italian public sphere, according to *Yalla*'s bloggers, accepts more easily an idea of Islam that cannot be assimilate in Western societies and will remain "other," rather than the notion that Italian identity is inevitably changing.

In opposing this hegemony, *Yalla*'s bloggers self-identify as a minority but refuse to present themselves as victims. On the contrary, with their stories their aim at defeating the stereotype of a "threatening Islam" and at explaining that the presence of second-generations can benefit Italian society. The ability to articulate a double identity translates in a resource for the society rather than a mark of marginalization. The blogger Fatima Khachi, for example, explains that second-generations are important for the Italian society and that they will have an

increasingly prominent role in the future. She describes second-generations as follows:

> They [second-generations] are good-looking (at least the majority of us), they have different colors and somatic characteristics, and they're smart: they speak three languages without any need of studying them. They have contacts all around the world. Academics, conference organizers, and media like them. In particular, they're a resource for the country. To summarize, the labor market is looking forward to hiring them. (Fatima Khachi, 11/06/2014, my translation)

Kachi's post on second-generations is a way to describe herself and her group of peers as people that should have more opportunities on the labor market. While ironically describing them as "good-looking", she also offers an analysis of the potential second-generations have to create a more diverse society. Furthermore, she explains that second-generations capture the attention of academia and media, because, breaking stereotypes about migrants, they are a category that is sociologically interesting. Second generations, therefore, are people that can potentially improve the Italian society and labor market.

Yalla's blogger describe second-generation as a resource for the country to defeat stereotypes against migrants and Muslims, as well. *Yalla*'s bloggers often feel the need to prove wrong those people that misjudge their potential because of their

cultural and religious background. In another post, the blogger Khachi addresses an

open letter to a former teacher that did not believe she could achieve success in life:

> Dear professor, don't be concerned [about me], I didn't get married at
> 18, I am not a clerk, a waitress or a cleaning lady, as much as I respect
> these jobs. I have a degree in foreign languages, English and Chinese, I
> studied International Relations with good results and I'm now a
> graduate student (…) I write for a blog, I have been interviewed by
> many national television channels, I speak at many conferences and
> I'm still at the beginning of my career. Can you see what the
> immigrant from Morocco can do? (Fatima Khachi, 04/12/2012, my
> translation)

The blogger employs a provocative style to defeat certain stereotypes that want

second-generations as less likely to be successful than Italians. *Yalla* often

reiterates the fact that the double identity of the bloggers makes them more

adaptable and open-minded than their peers and gives them more opportunities to

contribute to the Italian society.

Yalla is an important space for the articulation of these discourses, because it

represents for many bloggers the only platform where they could be recognized as

"citizens with a potential" instead of "victims." During his interview, the blogger

Oussama Mansour talked about the fact that "*Yalla* saved his life." He expressed

his gratitude for Pillitteri because, before discovering *Yalla*, Mansour was not sure

of his cultural and religious identity, and he felt frustrated for not being able to achieve his goals. According to the blogger, Pillitteri was the first to see a potential in him and showed that he could have a voice to change both his personal situation and the society he lives in (personal communication, 06/09/2015). The idea of being able to contribute to the society makes *Yalla*'s bloggers self-aware of the role they have in establishing a more religiously pluralistic society, helping them achieving their personal and professional goals.

The Secular Religious Pluralism

The description of everyday Muslim practices as normalized within the Italian society is a strategy for *Yalla*'s bloggers to advocate for a different model of society. They do not openly criticize Catholicism or other religions, but they advance the idea that society needs to be more inclusive with people from different cultural and religious backgrounds. In particular, they stress the importance of freedom of religion by presenting their being "Muslims in their own way." The bloggers advocate for a more plural Italy that recognizes different religiosities; this pluralism concerns private practices and beliefs rather than institutional religions.

Yalla's bloggers promote a greater integration of Muslims in the West. They problematize and contrast the idea of a "white and Catholic" Italian identity by advancing a model of multiculturalism that is compatible with late modernity and forces a re-thinking of the Italian hegemonic values. By distancing themselves from conservative Muslim communities and non-integrated migrants, the bloggers imply

that Italianness needs to be the result of a mutual effort of the Italian states and second-generations. They create and advocate for a model of Islam that is compatible with Western secularism because it keeps religion in the private space, while the public space remains secular. Through this "secular" model of religious pluralism they constitute themselves in a group of non-threatening Muslims whose religiosity is easily assimilated to the practice of Italian Catholicism. However, this model is not inclusive, because it inevitably excludes Muslims that do not embrace secular principles. *Yalla* addresses social stigma only from the perspective of a specific second-generation group, without extending their claims to all Muslims.

The model of religious pluralism *Yalla*'s bloggers advocate for is utopic because it still does not exist in the predominantly Catholic Italian society. It is utopic because it advances the idea of a society where different religions coexist, but it does not include certain types of institutional religions. While *Yalla* often analyzes social problems and advocates for inclusivity, it is not itself an inclusive space for all Muslims. Therefore, on the one hand it normalizes the practice of Islam to create a society where there is a greater mutual acceptance; on the other hand, it distances itself from certain forms of religiosity that seem to not have a place in this religious utopia.

However, *Yalla*'s bloggers are self-aware of the fact that there is a possibility for this religious utopia to come true, and they will have a role in it. *Yalla*'s founder Paolo Branca said in his interview that he often encourages the bloggers to tell their everyday experiences in their posts. He does that because he believes that the

bloggers are a "message." Italians do not know that such second-generations exist and function within society, and *Yalla*'s stories in their simplicity send a powerful message to the readers, exposing them to a reality that mainstream media and social discourses often overlook (personal communication, 05/31/2015). The knowledge that this form of Islam already exists in Italy, according to Branca, would help Italians understand that Muslims do not represent a "threatening other."

Showing that Muslims and second-generations have a potential for the Italian society helps the country accept an inevitable change in the religious landscape, that does not need to be sharply divided into "white and Catholic" and "non-integrated Muslims". As the name *Yalla* suggests, the bloggers feel that they have the potential to move on from a non-inclusive society to a more multicultural Italy. Their posts explain that they feel confident they will have a role to change Italian identity. Through their effort to change the existing "white and Catholic" hegemonic identity, *Yalla*'s bloggers prepare themselves to have a no longer marginal or invisible role within the utopic and plural Italian society they aim at creating.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Valeria Solesin was a twenty-eight years old PhD student who lived in Paris. She was the only Italian killed on the 13th of November 2015 during the terrorist attack that had made more than one hundred victims, and was attributed to Islamic fundamentalism. The funeral for Valeria Solesin in St Mark's Square, Venice, became a media event and a moment of reflection about religion in Italy.

Valeria's parents, Alberto and Luciana Solesin, decided to hold a civic funeral. A number of local and national political authorities attended the ceremony, including the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella and the Minister of Defense Roberta Pinotti, who read a message from the French President Francois Hollande. Instead of explicit religious symbols, Valeria's family requested that the Italian and the French anthems be played at the funeral. A civic funeral is uncommon in the "belonging but not believing" Italy, where the majority of citizens usually perform Catholic weddings and funerals, even if they self-identify as atheists. Alberto Solesin explained this choice[xcix] by saying that Valeria did not receive a religious education. What was considered even more surprising by media is the fact that Alberto Solesin welcomed the presence and the blessing of various religious leaders, including the Imam of Venice, Hamad al Mohamed[c].

Valeria's funeral became, indeed, an occasion where different faiths interacted in the same space. As different media pointed out, St Mark's Square

hosted the three religions that are more established in Venice: Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam. This multi-faith approach to the funeral was precisely the intention of Valeria's family. Alberto Solesin declared to the national newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* that they "wanted something that would not belong to someone [representing a specific faith], that would not create divisions, but that would unite."[ci]

Alberto Solesin was praised for his open-minded approach and because he refrained from blaming the Italian Muslim community. The Imam of Venice offered solidarity and condolences for Valeria's death, distancing the Muslim community from terrorist attacks. The president of UCOII, the Italian Union of Muslim Communities, formally thanked Alberto Solesin for inviting a Muslim representative to the funeral; in this way, he said, Valeria's family proved that terrorist attacks failed in provoking hatred. The funeral was not only an occasion to reiterate the need for peaceful coexistence of multiple religions, but also a new way to conceptualize the public space in relation to the secular and the religious.

St Mark Square, indeed, was used as a secular space where a civic funeral was held. Every religion was invited to take place in the ceremony, and religious prayers and blessings were encouraged rather than prohibited. Symbolically, Valeria Solesin's funeral has become the paradigm of a new way to deal with religion in Italy in late modernity: the creation of secular spaces that are welcoming of every religious community that wishes to participate in them. The funeral formally offered an equal space for the expression of all religions, without establishing a hegemonic set of religious values that would prevail on others. St Mark's Square became a space

of mourning that was charged by a number of different values, secular and religious alike.

Media events are usually considered a form of civic religion, which express hegemonic values of the society (Dayan and Katz, 1994; Couldry et al. 2009). In addition, they often have a reconciliatory role, making the viewers and participants agree on the meanings and values behind the event. However, in the case of Valeria Solesin's funeral, the media event only took into account a part of the Italian hegemonic values. Certainly, the funeral created a space and time where the secular was in harmony with religious pluralism, but Italian hegemonic consensus is more complicated when it comes to religion and it is still far from being fully inclusive with certain groups.

The apparent consensus that Valeria Solesin's funeral created was indeed criticized by some newspapers[cii]. The conservative national newspaper *Il Giornale*, for example, considered the funeral as problematic for two main reasons. First, employing St Mark's Square, famous for the cathedral that holds the same name, for a civic funeral is a negation of the Judeo-Christian roots of Italy. According to the newspaper, a funeral that aims at being "multicultural" lacks in identity, and Italian identity needs to be Catholic. Secondly, this lack of identity results in a spiritual vacuum that could be filled by Islam. In framing Islam as threatening for Italian society, *Il Giornale* denounces the fact that the Imam Hamad al Mohamed was the only religious leader that publicly prayed for Valeria. The article comments on the funeral as follows

The secular religion of the state is a spiritual void. This secular religion nullifies identities, and its void is filled by people that have a strong message, that know what to say, that are able to make Allah a part of secular funerals without any reserve. Civic funerals represent, indeed, a disrespect to Christianity, which tried to be present with its cross from the dome of St Mark (Renato Farina, *Il Giornale*, 11/25/2015, my translation)

With its description of the funeral, *Il Giornale* identifies the Judeo-Christian tradition, and Catholicism, specifically, as what should constitute the dominant set of values in Italy. Secularism is not considered as a negative ideology *per se*, but it is problematic because it lacks in spiritual values and creates a "void." Therefore, secularism is seen as a "non-ideology" that cannot offer moral and ethical guidance to the citizens. Islam is referred to as problematic for the Italian society, and described as a religion that cannot integrate in the West because it is not able to adapt to liberal democracies. In particular, the article criticizes the Imam's gesture of praying as a disrespectful "public display" of Islam, while Catholic and Jewish leaders only did "discrete" blessings. Even if the Catholic Patriarch of Venice pronounced a long and emotional discourse that was reported by many mainstream media, *Il Giornale* considered it insufficient to contrast the presence of Muslim leaders, implicing stating that certain religions have a better claim than others to occupy public spaces.

Il Giornale's analysis perfectly summarizes the controversial principle of "Catholic secularism" that exists in Italy. Catholicism is considered the hegemonic

Italian religion not only for its connection with tradition and culture, but also for its connotation as the only resource that can fill the "secular void" of the state. Islam is indeed criticized in the article both because it is the religion that inspired the terrorist attack that killed Valeria, and because the Imam did not refrain from praying in public. The visibility of Islam during Valeria's funeral is disturbing for *Il Giornale* because it occupies a public space that is traditionally Catholic and filled only with Judeo-Christian elements. With its article, *Il Giornale* advocates for a public space that is charged with Catholic values, connoting secularism as a neutral force that needs to be influenced by "positive" Christian values instead of "negative" Muslim principles.

The debate around Valeria Solesin's funeral exemplifies how Italy still has to determine and regulate the influence of religion and secularism in the public sphere, and how these two elements do not always coexist in harmony. It shows the complicated relationship of media, religion, and space, as well as their relevance in late modernity in Italy. While not directly connected with the three case studies analyzed in this dissertation, Valeria's funeral is an example of the tensions generated by the interplay of secularism, Catholicism, and Islam in Italy. Critiques and reflections around the funeral show how different religious groups often have unequal participation in media and physical spaces. As a result, atheists, Catholics and Muslims, alongside with members of other religions, tend to be in competition in relation to the hegemonic consensus and to what they perceive as mainstream religious values in Italy. Digital media can, therefore, become a venue to contrast the perceived hegemonic consensus and address lack of participation in the public

sphere. Through the articulation of non-mainstream discourses, the three case studies of this dissertation discuss the space religion should occupy in Italy and problematize the monolithic Italian identity presented by mainstream media.

The Italian Hegemonic Religious Public Sphere

The three case studies analyzed in the course of this dissertation employ their blogs in opposition to a perceived religious hegemony. While they are ideologically very different, the three blogs build their discourses in relation to anxieties that the "Catholic secular" hegemony generates. This hegemony is perceived as dominant in Italian mainstream media.

The blogs do not offer a clear definition of hegemony, but it seems that the three groups put themselves in relation to the mainstream Catholicism that is represented by national media. The singing performance of Sister Cristina, as mentioned in Chapter One, is an example of this perceived "Catholic secularism." Sister Cristina embodies a moderate model of Catholicism that does not focus on religious precepts and that is compatible with modernity and with secular entertainment. The Iranian Kimia Ghorbani participates in the program "The Voice," but with the implicit premise that she endorses secularism: she takes off her headscarf in a sign of freedom and acceptance of Italian values. While Catholicism is normalized and appreciated in pop cultural spaces, other religions, such as Islam, need to find a way to establish their presence in relation to the secular.

This "Catholic secularism" is hegemonic in the Gramscian sense: it is not a system of domination, but it is rather based on the consensus of Italians, because it is perceived as part of tradition and society. As a result, Catholicism is often seen as the only religion that coexists in harmony with the secularism of the Italian state, being part of its culture and traditions. As expressed by *Il Giornale*, Catholicism tends to be considered as able to infuse secularism with a set of moral values.

Sister Cristina, indeed, was welcomed by the singing coaches of "The Voice" not only for her talent but also for her religious values. The self-identified atheist singer J-AX, for example, declared that he was "spiritually enriched" by the presence of Cristina at the program and he wished he had encountered a nun like her when he was younger. J-Ax explained that he was raised Catholic, but eventually lost his faith because he felt disconnected from the Church and he was unable to reconcile Catholic values with his own lifestyle. This attitude is not uncommon among Italians, who often do not feel themselves neither particularly engaged with the values of the Catholic Church nor completely refusing them, in a "belonging but not believing" approach to religion. J-Ax saw in Sister Cristina the potential of bringing a religious message to young people in a way that can fit with modern identities. Indeed, J-Ax told Sister Cristina that he hoped she could "change things [within the Church] and give an example to others." [ciii]

However, praises and critiques to the performance of Sister Cristina from the Italian audience are symptomatic of a confusion about the place religion should occupy in the Italian public sphere. In addition, the idea of "Catholic secularism" is

often paired with the idea of whiteness in the costruction of a "white and Catholic" identity. The notion that Italian identity is connected with certain ethnic and religious qualities is not explicit, but rather indirectly created and sustained by many mainstream media discourses. The mediation of religion in Italy is, indeed, inscribed into understandings of the national identity that privilege a certain type of Catholicism. This identity construction is perceived as problematic mainly by those groups, such as Muslims, which are clearly excluded from the representations of Italian identity. Atheist groups, while not marginalized because of their ethnicity, feel threatened by the predominance of Catholic values in the national identity representation. On the contrary, some Catholics advocate for a restauration of the "white and Catholic" identity that they see as losing power because of the growth of secularist positions.

This idea of "white and Catholic" identity is complicated by the lack of agency some religious groups have in their own media representation and in controlling the mediation of their symbols and practices, as well as in participating in the definition of the religious culture of the country. Therefore, the three case studies of this dissertation are counter-hegemonic in trying to create different social situations to address their lack of participation within the hegemonic system. The three blogs do not explicitly talk about "Catholic secularism," but through their reflections on media and society they implicitly offer their ideas on the perceived religious hegemony. In particular, different reactions to the participation of Sister Cristina at "The Voice" exemplify the groups' positions in relation to religion and the secular.

The UAAR opposes the idea that Italian secularism needs to be "Catholic". The sense of marginalization of Italian atheists derives from the construction of the Italian identity as tied to its Judeo-Christian traditions. The UAAR advocates for a society where the secular is neither considered as "a void" nor judged as a non-moral ideology, but rather a resource for defining the Italian identity. The association criticizes the performance of Sister Cristina at "The Voice" as another example of the pervasiveness of Catholicism in Italian media. The UAAR argues that Sister Cristina was probably selected for the singing competition to attract the curiosity of the audience. The association criticizes the incapacity of Italian media to distinguish between religious and secular values: not only they accepted as normal the fact that the nun prayed on live television, but they also refused to consider that her religious background, while potentially interesting for the audience, was incompatible with the logic of secular entertainment. Indeed, while Sister Cristina was considered by many, such as the singer J-Ax, as representing a more progressive kind of Catholicism, she is still part of a non-flexible religious hierarchy. For example, the UAAR notices, Sister Cristina would not be able to continue her singing career, because she has to respond to the rules of her religious order. By criticizing the choice of Sister Cristina as participant and winner of "The Voice," the UAAR reiterates how the Italian "Catholic secularism" is problematic in forcing a connection between Catholicism and secularism, when they represent two different and often contrasting sets of values. (A Ragion Veduta, Editorial Staff, 06/10/2014)

Sentinelle in Piedi, on the contrary, advocate for a Catholicism that is not influenced by secularism. The group aims at re-creating a state where social matters,

especially those regarding family life, are regulated on the basis of Catholic principles. *Sentinelle in Piedi* opposes the "Catholic secularism" because it does not accord the necessary attention to religious practices and precepts. Costanza Miriano mentions Sister Cristina in relation to Pope Francis, stressing her religious qualities rather than her connection with secular media. Miriano, indeed, insists on the religious message of the nun, explaining that Sister Cristina was inspired by Pope Francis to "go out and arrive where Christ did not arrive." Implicitly, Miriano reiterates the role of Catholicism as able to infuse the secular with ethics and morality: Sister Cristina operated in a secular venue, but she is a positive character because she was able to transform the media space into a Catholic venue to diffuse religious messages outside churches. From Miriano and *Sentinelle in Piedi*'s perspective, the "Catholic secularism" is positive only if there is a predominance of religious values over the secular, as it happened with Sister Cristina's performance (Il Blog di Costanza Miriano, 03/13/2015).

The blog *Yalla* contests the concept of "Catholic secularism" because not only it marginalizes non-Catholic religions, but insists on the idea that Christianity is the only religion to be compatible with secularism. By distancing themselves from more conservative Muslim communities, they show that the "Catholic secularism" can be paired with a non-threatening "Muslim secularism." The performance of Sister Cristina can be, according to the blogger Lubna Ammoune, an inspiration for Muslims, as well. Ammoune, indeed, explains that the nun was a rare example of someone showing the "beauty of being religious" in a secular venue and in a way that is more powerful than traditional sermons. *Yalla* often discusses the lack of

positive and inspirational Muslim characters on television: Ammoune reflects on the idea that there is a need of a "Muslim Sister Cristina" to establish an Islamic presence in Italian media. Sister Cristina is seen as a positive example of intertwinement of religion and the secular that should not be limited to Catholicism, but extended to Islam. Kimia Ghorbani might represent the "Muslim secularism" that *Yalla* tries to establish, but so far the fact that only a nun could easily occupy certain secular venues is symptomatic of the marginalization that Muslims still suffer from. *Yalla,* therefore, does not criticize the "Catholic secularism" *per se,* but rather finds faults with the impossibility of Muslims to take part in it (Yalla Italia, Lubna Ammoune, 04/14/2014).

These three different perspectives on the "Catholic secularism," exemplified by criticisms and praises to Sister Cristina, show that the groups connote Italian hegemonic values from different viewpoints. The concept of Italian religious hegemony is not always clearly defined, and the three groups tend sometimes to create counter hegemonic discourses against an hegemony whose characteristics are neither clear to all groups nor widely agreed on. For example, while on the one hand the UAAR perceives Italian hegemonic values as overwhelmingly Catholic, on the other hand *Sentinelle in Piedi* lament the secularization of the public sphere. The idea of the Italian society being based on some sort of "consensual Catholicism" is contrasted by these counter-hegemonies that articulate different positions and cannot be conciliate with one another.

Despite the ambiguity of the Italian public sphere, the three groups' reflections similarly show that late modernity is characterized by anxieties for diversity and that the public sphere is often not able to take into account non-mainstream points of view. While the three case studies are very different from each other in advancing contrasting sets of values, they have in common the fear of being marginalized by mainstream society. These anxieties generate from the difficulties to define an identity that could take into account changes in late modernity without excluding certain groups.

The three blogs similarly frame Italian mainstream media as an important venue that promotes the model of "Catholic secularism" they oppose. While the three groups articulate their media critique in different ways, they all consider mainstream media as unable to grasp the nuances of religion in late modernity. In their description of media, the groups oppose what Couldry (2012) defines as "mediated center," the idea that certain media have a privileged role because of their proximity with structures of power. The three groups create their identities and articulate their blogs in relation to the fact that they perceive some media as gaining power from the validation of a set of hegemonic values. By identifying Italian national media as the "mediated center" of production of hegemony, the three blogs contest existing social values and seek to establish an alternative voice.

The pervasiveness of Catholic topics in Italian national television, radio, and newspapers is seen as problematic both because of lack of acknowledgement of secular positions and other religions and because of the failure to describe the inner

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heterogeneity of Catholicism. As a result, the perceived Italian "mediated center" tends to overlook or misinterpret groups such as the UAAR, *Sentinelle in Piedi,* and *Yalla,* and these groups often refrain from engaging with mainstream media. In their critique of media and society, the groups elaborate alternative strategies to overcome their sense of marginalization.

Digital Strategies against Hegemony

The perceived inadequacy of the Italian mainstream media system is one of the reasons the three groups use alternative venues to spread non-mainstream discourses. The Internet becomes for these groups a space that can be resistive against mainstream values rarely contested in other venues. The Internet allows for narratives that subvert the traditional frames of mainstream media, being often provocative and articulated through non-conventional styles.

While each case study advocates for a peculiar set of values, it is possible to find commonalities in the way they think about and use the Internet. In doing so, the three groups create different strategies: they constitute themselves in counterpublics, establish a digital presence, and seek to enter the public sphere as agonistic forces. These strategies have two main aims. On the one hand, they help address the lack of participation of the three groups in the public sphere. On the other hand, they allow for the creation of oppositional discourses that advocate for a different Italian society.

Blogs allow for a more elaborate exposition of personal opinions that do not need to take into account the interests of a wider audience but rather aim at a specific target. Indeed, the three case studies differ from mainstream media because they do not try to reach the totality of Italians, but rather they are limited to certain groups: atheists, practicing Catholics, second-generations and people that are interested in multiculturalism. In writing for a specific audience, the blogs' primary aim is not to find new members for their groups. Rather, they create counterpublics that contest the hegemonic values of the public sphere. Warner theorizes counterpublics as the result of the circulation of the same texts between strangers and of the tensions with a larger public (2005). In the case of the three groups, counterpublics are created through the establishment of an audience that interacts with the bloggers and that makes private narratives public to articulate religious ideas. These religious counterpublics are characterized by resistive practices that oppose the predominant Italian hegemony, compelling group members to find alternative sources of information. In addition, the groups create discourses that help the definition of identities. These counterpublics are strategies of adaptation that often result in the formation of online and offline communities to establish a presence.

The Internet offers, indeed, the potential of establishing a presence through media practices that often cannot fit within mainstream media narrations. Presencing is defined as the practice of maintaining a presence across space (Couldry, 2012). In relation to the case studies, presencing is a strategy that does not aim at proselytism or a radical subversion of the hegemonic consensus, but rather at

creating a space of participation to oppose a lack of dialogue. The media critique of the blogs is based on the idea that mainstream media do not acknowledge the presence of certain groups. The Internet becomes, therefore, an alternative space where this presence can be established, negotiated, and reflected upon. Through alternative imaginations of the Italian society, the groups contribute to contest religious identities and discourses in Italy. Creating an online presence is a narrative strategy to have non-mainstream voices heard, and to implicitly oppose the idea that there are equal possibilities of participation within liberal democracies.

The strategy of establishing a presence is paired with the creation of agonistic spaces. The articulation of non-mainstream narratives is often in response to problems of the public sphere, where the consensus excludes voices that do not conform to those of the majority of citizens. As a result, certain groups remain marginalized and lack in dialogic possibilities. As theorized by Mouffe (2005), democracy needs debate and discussion among adversaries, or it would otherwise silence oppositional voices. In the case of the three case studies, the hegemonic consensus is criticized through the Internet, where marginal voices discuss what happens at the level of mainstream social values. The Internet allows for the articulation of narratives that are more extreme than those usually found in mainstream media: Catholics that are more conservative that the majority of Italians, people that refuse religion, and second-generations that do not conform to certain Islamic norms. These narratives are useful to show that the Italian hegemonic consensus is not "beyond antagonism," but rather that it needs agonism in order to re-think its identity in late modernity.

However, each group is agonistic in a different way. The UAAR not only aspires to participate in the public sphere, but it also aims at subverting the hegemonic consensus by advocating for a secular state. On the contrary, *Sentinelle in Piedi* want to re-establish a Catholic public sphere that they saw as predominant in the past, and to gain a privileged participation in this public sphere. *Yalla* is, among the case study, the venue that has a more agonistic role in seeking to find a space for participation in the country's power structure, since Muslims generally suffer from greater marginalization than other minorities.

These strategies are examples of alternative media use also in relation to their refusal to engage with mainstream media. Each group elaborates a powerful media critique that is symptomatic of the problems of Italian mainstream media and their incapacity of creating a balanced power structure. Also, the groups' digital activities unveil some of the problems of the relationship between media and religion in Italy, which tends to be confined to certain specific forms of mediation. The blogs are, therefore, tactical media that create dissent and promote restistive dialogues and media practices. While these strategies do not have direct impact on mainstream media, they contribute nonetheless to a change in perception of the Italian public sphere and contrast the power centers of the country.

Furthermore, these digital strategies have two main outcomes. First, the three groups are able to articulate new spaces outside a perceived hegemony. The constitution of a symbolic space is relevant when it has resistive qualities of thirdness in being embedded between established and hegemonic spaces (Hoover

and Echchaibi, 2014). The digital space the groups create is a third space because it is in-between the offline activities of the bloggers and their online discourses. This in-betweennes is based on the negotiation of the private and public in different physical and online spaces. *Sentinelle in Piedi,* for example, constitute a third space by charging the public squares with religious meanings and by using online platforms as the only venues for the articulation of ideas. In addition, the groups use the Internet as a third space that is generative of change. *Yalla* represents a place of negotiation of religious beliefs and authorities for Muslims that distance themselves from a more conservative type of Islam and form a community through the Internet in opposition to certain established mosques. Furthermore, the third space is a venue to describe new identities: *Yalla*'s bloggers negotiate hybrid identities in between two cultures and religions, while the UAAR advances a new model of Italian identity that is disconnected from Catholicism.

The creation of digital spaces is oppositional in relation to existing physical and metaphorical religious spaces in Italy. By situating themselves in-between lived and perceived religious spaces, the blogs force alternative conversations on religion and the secular. The three case studies employ private narratives in a public way to challenge the limits of participation in liberal democracies. This in-betweenness of public and private problematizes the space religion occupies in the Italian society: the social and cultural role of Catholic physical spaces of worship, the ability to charge secular spaces with Catholic meanings through symbols such as the crucifix, the metaphorical space of creation of Catholic identity in mainstream media. The presence of the three blogs shows the need for adding complexity to the existing

religious spaces in order to make them more inclusive of non-mainstream positions. While they are articulated in the online space, the three blogs aim at direct interventions on the physical space and the religious meanings it is charged with, exposing the need for putting different religious spaces in conversation with each other.

Secondly, the blogs are able to establish a voice. Counterpublics, agonistic spaces, and presencing are strategies to contrast the privilege of certain mainstream voices over others. These voices become political in a non-traditional sense. Borrowing Rancière's definition (2009), "politics is not primarily a matter of laws and constitutions. Rather, it is a matter of configuring the sensible texture of the community for which those laws and constitutions make sense" (p. 8). Within a democracy, the power of the *demos* is exercised through political subjects that represent the people. Some minority groups, as the case studies of this dissertation, feel that they are not represented by the political subjects of their communities. As for Rancière's analysis, "they have no specific capacity to rule or to be ruled" (p. 11).

Establishing voices on the Internet is political because it opposes the idea that only certain subjects can interact with democratic institutions representing the entire population, and that those who are not directly represented are excluded from politics. On the contrary, the blogs aim at creating a non-traditional form of politics based on the self-representation of groups with specific and often overlooked social needs. In re-thinking political participation, the three groups equalize themselves to the voices that they consider as hegemonic. The media

practices enabled by the blogs aim at putting the bloggers on the same level as mainstream groups that metaphorically oppress them in denying their claims and their participation. The effort to be equal to mainstream groups is political because it aims at potentially changing the hegemonic culture of the country, as well as its identity.

The creation of spaces and the establishment of voices add nuances to the debates of the religious and the secular in Italy. While the Internet is not able to radically subvert the Italian religious hegemony and to establish an entirely new Italian identity, it offers, nonetheless, a venue to contest the perceived power of the "mediated center". The digital space is not always resistive but, in the case of the three groups analyzed in this dissertation, it provides a counter-hegemonic space that compels Italian society to conceive of culture in a more expansive way. The Internet has the potential to become a space of discussion and definition of the religious hegemony of the country. It can, indeed, provide venues where the ambiguity of the "Catholic secularism" is reflected upon through a dialogue between secular and religious positions. Instread of insisting on the exclusivity of their symbols and authorities, the three groups could employ the digital space to create hybrid venues of discussion that can go beyond the dichotomy between secular and religious. Therefore, the three blogs are relevant case studies because they use the Internet to reflect on how dissident groups have the possibility to criticize the existing status quo.

Significance of the Study and Venues for Future Research

The three blogs show, through their narratives, why it is relevant to study religions on the Internet. The digital space offers not only a venue for negotiation of religious authorities and practices, but also a resistive space to contrast a perceived hegemony. For these reasons, this dissertation adds complexity to the existing debate of religion in Italy and Europe.

This dissertation shows that Italy cannot be uncritically defined as Catholic or as secular, but rather that the alleged religious homogeneity of the country is often discussed and contested. The idea of "Catholic secularism" needs to be taken into account when describing the Italian religious scenario, without assuming that the population is homogenously Catholic. While a number of scholars, such as Naso (2009; 2012) and Pace (2007; 2011; 2013), successfully described religious change in Italy, there is a lack of studies that take into account the direct self-representation of minority religious groups. This dissertation focuses on oppositional discourses, an innovative perspective allowed by the analysis of blogs as primary sources of religious debates. Differently from that of mainstream media discourses, the analysis of the Internet allows for a more complex understanding of the tensions within the Italian public sphere, beyond the perceived religious consensus.

This dissertation completes existing scholarship on religion in Italy. As mentioned in Chapter Four, some scholars analyzed the rise of Islam in Italian society (Salih, 2004; Saint-Blancat and Friedberg, 2005; Frisina, 2011; Cerchiari et al., 2015). However, there is a lack of studies that focus on atheism or Catholic movements that

are not directly connected with the Vatican. The dissertation problematizes the concept of secularism and pluralism in Italy and compels a re-thinking of Catholicism in its heterogeneity.

In addition, this dissertation adds complexity to the study of religion and media in Europe. While European countries present social, cultural, and religious heterogeneity, Italy can be paradigmatic of some of the changes that are occurring at the European level. Recent migration is compelling Europe to re-think its role on the global scene and its understanding of democracy, as well as its identity. The creation of "Catholic secular" identities is not only an Italian phenomenon, but also a European trend that is growing in response to an increasing number of Muslims, as analyzed by Asad (2003) and Casanova (2004). The urge for creating a multicultural and multiconfessional society invests the entire Europe with different implications in different countries; the study of the Italian context helps problematize religious change in an international context, as well.

Immigration in Italy is more recent than in other countries such as France, Belgium, and the UK. Therefore, Italy is now in the situation of redefining its own culture in multicultural terms and has an opportunity to avoid problems of integration that other European countries have already been concerned with. At the same time, Italy is peculiar for its approach to religion and for its media system, as analyzed in Chapter One, and can represent a term of comparison with other European contexts. A venue for future research could be a study of religion and media in relation to Western modernity. Nationalist claims in Europe can be

discussed from the perspective of how the mediation of religion is creating new spaces of cultural and identity negotiation.

This dissertation can, indeed, be put in conversation with similar studies in other countries, in order to add complexity to the study of religion and the secular in Europe. Furthermore, the blog analysis can be compared and contrasted with mainstream media narratives, in order to better understand how oppositional discourses operate in relation to mainstream media representations. Future research on the topic could help connecting the groups' media practices to the larger case of the Italian public sphere. While the three case studies are successful in creating digital spaces and in establishing a voice, it would be interesting to focus more on their impact on Italian identity outside the digital sphere, and to look for signals of religious change in mainstream culture and media.

Conclusion: the Establishment of a Space of Dialogue

The three blogs elaborate strategies to recuperate their voices within a hegemonic structure. They are successful in creating non-mainstream identities that contrast the perceived hegemonic Italian identity and problematize the idea of "Catholic secularism." The establishment of alternative voices is fundamental in challenging democratic participation and in contesting monolithic representations of society and culture. However, the societies the three groups try to establish are utopian because they still do not exist in physical spaces and they do not radically modify the existing social and cultural structures. This might happen because the groups tend to replicate the same lack of participation they criticize in the Italian

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hegemonic public sphere. By promoting a completely secular public sphere, or a Catholic public sphere, or a secular religious pluralism, each group inevitably excludes a part of the Italian society. In creating minority identities in a hegemonic structure, the blogs often fail to engage in meaningful dialogue with both mainstream and minority groups. They establish "heterotopias" where their utopic ideas about a better Italian society are enacted and lived at a community level, and they lament the impossibility to discuss these utopias in the public sphere. However, not only do they fail to interact with mainstream media and society because they are marginalized, but also because they often refuse to do so.

The three groups analyzed rarely dialogue with each other because they start from different premises they are not willing to negotiate. By creating their minority identity as more resourceful than the mainstream Italian one, they consider their ideas as able to improve Italian society. To contrast the hegemonic consensus, they often refuse to take a part in it, imagining parallel social structures where they have a no longer marginalized role. This could be the result of a general problem of the Italian public sphere, which tends to privilege monolithic identity representations rather than trying to capture the nuances of religious and social change. Also, it could derive from the ambiguity of the "Catholic secularism," which can easily dissatisfy groups that do not find their values represented. The tendency for mainstream media to privilege representations of "Catholic secularism" is an example of the lack of diverse voices in the Italian public sphere. The three groups under analysis tend to substitute the hegemonic idea of "Catholic secularism" with alternative models, which are nonetheless still not completely inclusive.

The blogs are the main space of this imaginative exercise, and could potentially lead to a re-thinking of the public sphere and start a more meaningful dialogue. They can help solving the ambiguities of the Italian public sphere and media system by promoting a meaningful dialogue between religious and the secular, as well as between different religious groups. They do compel Italy to redefine its identity in more expansive terms, but they need to go beyond the construction of monolithic identities and advocate for a more fluid concept of culture. The blogs can have an effective impact on Italian society as long as they are able to propose an inclusive model of Italian identity. There is, indeed, a need for an expansive identity that is able to accommodate alternative models of Italianness, going beyond strictly religious or secular terms. In this way, the Italian public sphere can be occupied by different spaces of religious practices and beliefs that do not necessarily contrast each other. The limitations of the Italian liberal democracy should be corrected rather than replicated, and there is a need for the creation of a more inclusive public space to allow for a multireligious and multicultural society to emerge

Valeria Solesin's funeral created a physical space where religions could coexist and dialogue with the secular, without privileging the ambiguous "Catholic secularism" that is predominant in programs such as "The Voice." Valeria's funeral has been criticized by people that saw its interfaith approach as potentially threatening for the Italian identity. These critiques show that there are anxieties that need to be taken into account when trying to define Italian modern identity.

Nonetheless, Valeria's funeral was an attempt to "unite" rather than "divide" different religious approaches, as in her father's words. The major of Venice, Luigi Brugnaro, in his speech at Valeria's funeral, remarked how there is a need for a "new Europe" and how this renovation could start from Venice, a city that historically has been a crossroad of different cultures and religions. The funeral was so far one of the rare occasions where a religious pluralistic space was created not only within the imaginary of the Internet, but also in the physical space. With the Italian society likely to be substantially modified in the next decades because of migration and religious change, the mediation of religion needs to create new spaces of discussion and interaction that cannot be limited to blogs. The three blogs under analysis certainly have an important role in compelling the creation of a more open concept of Italianness, as well as alternative spaces of negotiation with hegemonic forces without which it would be more difficult to re-think identity. It will be interesting to see whether the UAAR, *Sentinelle in Piedi,* and *Yalla,* through their blogs, will generate inclusive spaces beyond the religious and ideological particularism of their own group, where it is possible to debate religious identity, hegemony, and pluralism in Italy.

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[i] The audio of Sister Cristina's prayer is available in Italian:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYi94x8O264

[ii] See http://www.huffingtonpost.it/2016/03/03/kimia-the-voice-iran_n_9371470.html

[iii] It is difficult to assess the exact number of Catholics based on self-identification, as different surveys report different numbers. The Research Institute Doxa, for example, report an higher number of atheists and a 10% of the population self-identifying as "religious but not affiliated to any religious institution", as will be analyzed later in the chapter.

[iv] Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (CEI) is the assembly of the Italian Bishops of the Catholic Church

[v] The complete 'otto per mille' text in Italian is available at the following link:
http://www.uaar.it/laicita/otto_per_mille/legge_otto_per_mille.html

[vi] For further references,
http://www.chiesacattolica.it/ossgiur/siti_di_uffici_e_servizi/osservatorio_giuridico_legislativo/00036965_IMU_ed_Enti_Ecclesiastici.html

[vii] The North of Italy includes the regions of Valle D'Aosta, Piemonte, Liguria, Lombardia, Veneto, Friuli Venezia-Giulia, Trentino Alto Adige and Emilia-Romagna; the Center includes Toscana, Marche, Abruzzo, Umbria, Lazio and Molise; the South includes Puglia, Campania, Basilicata, Calabria, and the two islands of Sicilia and Sardegna. This is the normal repartition of regions in different areas, and Diotallevi's article does not specify which regions he considers among each area.

[viii] The evil-eye, in Italian "malocchio", is a belief diffused in a number of Mediterranean regions that involves the idea that it is possible to curse a person causing him or her bad luck.

[ix] The Waldensians were forced to live in a specific region in the North-West, while Jews lived in ghettos within the cities.

[x] It is difficult to assess the exact number of Muslims in Italy because of the high number of undocumented migrants.

[xi] Data are available at http://www.istat.it/it/files/2015/11/Matrimoni-separazioni-e-divorzi-2014.pdf?title=Matrimoni%2C+separazioni+e+divorzi+-+12%2Fnov%2F2015+-+Testo+integrale.pdf. It is important to analyzing these data in relation to the fact that wedding rate is decreasing especially among Italians, while there are more weddings between an Italian and a foreigner. Furthermore, 16,1% of the weddings are between divorcees, and therefore cannot be celebrated with Catholic ritual.

[xii] These data need to be considered in relation to the fact that Italy has an ageing population and a low birth-rate; many families are therefore constituted by elderly people not familiar with the Internet.

[xiii] Reporters without Borders: http://index.rsf.org/#!/

[xiv] Ente Italiano per le Audizioni Radiofoniche, in English "Italian Institute for Radio Transmission"

xv In English "Italian Radio and Television"

xvi The 1970s in Italy were characterized by the "Red Brigades" (Brigate Rosse), a left-wing group that promoted the use of violence for social change. The group's actions culminated in 1978 with the kidnapping and killing of the Christian Democrat Prime Minister Aldo Moro.

xvii Protestants and Jews are represented in Italian television by the programs "Protestantesimo" and "Sorgenti di Vita"; however, the broadcasting is limited at timeframes, such as late night or early morning, when it is difficult to capture the attention of the audience. There are some radio programs that treat http://www.wired.it/internet/web/2016/04/29/30-anni-internet-in-italia/ non-Catholic religions and have, likewise, limited spaces of broadcasting

xviii See http://www.wired.it/internet/web/2016/04/29/30-anni-internet-in-italia/

xix See http://www.repubblica.it/tecnologia/2016/04/29/news/30_anni_di_internet_la_timeline-138625953/?refresh_ce

xx Beppe Grillo, a former comedian, employed a blog to mobilize citizens against the existing political system, creating the political party "Five Stars Movement" ("Movimento Cinque Stelle"). The party received a huge voting success in the 2013 elections, despite the refusal of Grillo to engage with Italian national media and the critiques of populism and lack of transparency

xxi Indymedia is a global source of alternative journalist that employs in specific web-based blogs and it is connected with global activism.

xxii In Italian, "Unione Atei e Agnostici Razionalisti"

xxiii The term "Millennials" is generally used to indicate people that came of age in the new millennium, including the generation born after 1980.

xxiv With the establishment of the Schengen Area in 1995, it has been established the free circulation of individuals within a number of European countries. This gave substantial opportunities for Millennials to study and work abroad.

xxv Laicite' is a political articulation of secular that considers the state as constituted by non-religious institutions. Laicite', as exemplified by the current religious situation in France, tends to promote a secular public sphere and privatization of religiosity.

xxvi For Taylor, "subtraction stories" endorse the idea that human being have lost, or liberated themselves, from earlier limitations of knowledge that were caused by religious irrationality.

xxvii Italy does not formally prohibit the hijab in public spaces, but its use is often contested; there have been episodes, for examples, of students that were asked not to use it in public schools: http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/friuli-preside-vieta-velo-islamico-scuola-1094648.html

xxviii The Pope's official Twitter account is https://twitter.com/Pontifex

xxix The UAAR employs the words "secular" and "laicism" (In Italian " secolarismo" and "laicita'") in its blog. While the terms have different nuances in meaning, the blog uses them in an interchangeable way.

xxx http://www.uaar.it/uaar/

xxxi Carcano referred to this website http://blogbabel.liquida.it/classifica-blog/

xxxii Retrieved on 06/13/2016

xxxiii The Freethough Report is published annually by the International Humanist and Ethical Union, and monitors the conditions of atheists worldwide. http://freethoughtreport.com/

xxxiv This amount is estimated by the UAAR considering both the tax-exemption of the Catholic Church, the "otto per mille" (as analyzed in Chapter Two) and other benefits. The UAAR's website provides a detailed list of these benefits at the link http://www.icostidellachiesa.it/. While plausible, it is however possible that the amount is not correct because there are no other official statistics or data about it, and the existing estimations report different numbers, as underscored by the UAAR's website.

xxxv The survey is available at http://www.doxa.it/

xxxvi See https://www.youtube.com/user/uaarit

xxxvii AGCOM is the Authority for Guarantees in Communication (Autorita'per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni), its website is http://www.agcom.it/

xxxviii The magazine issue is available at http://www.criticaliberale.it/

xxxix Geca Italia's website is http://www.gecaitalia.it/

xl In Italian "papolatria", "popolatry" is a neologism invented by UAAR to indicate the idolatry to Pope Francis

[xli] A nuncio is a Vatican Ambassador, and he is part of the Catholic Church's hierarchies

[xlii] The Chemtrail conspiracy theory is centered around the idea that chemtrails contains chemical elements illegally released in the atmosphere. Recently, certain politicians in Italy supported this theory especially through the Internet.

[xliii] Carcano mentioned in particular this episode: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxW_v54Qv-A

[xliv] Angelo Roncalli was elected Pope in 1958 with the name of John XXIII

[xlv] The survey is available at http://www.doxa.it/

[xlvi] Leon Bloy is a Catholic French writer

[xlvii] "Sharia" is the Islamic law

[xlviii] *Clericalata* is a slang word that is generally used to diminish and criticize the Catholic Church

[xlix] The Jubilee is the year of remission of sins. It lasts a little more than one year and involves a set of ceremonies and rituals in Rome, as well as a great number of pilgrimages. Therefore, it is an important event for the city of Rome, and it is often financed with public money.

[l] Italians, as European citizens, vote for both the Italian Parliament and the European Parliament.

[li] See https://www.facebook.com/Les-Veilleurs-debout-Officiel-446298395468799/

[lii] The words are quoted in the "Catholic World Report" article available at http://www.tempi.it/sentinelle-ecco-chi-sono-davvero-i-libertari-coraggiosi-che-il-5-ottobre-sfideranno-in-silenzio-insulti-e-sputi-in-100-piazze-d-italia#.VtDIABjgy8I. It is quoted also in the Italian Catholic website "Tempi": http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/3425/in_italy_profamily_sentinels_meet_threats_with_silent_protest.aspx

[liii] www.sentinelleinpiedi.it

[liv] Nonetheless, Sentinelle in Piedi are often defined by mainstream media as a "group" or a "movement". I will refer to them using this terminology in the chapter, but I am aware of the fact that this is not the way they self-identify

[lv] See http://espresso.repubblica.it/attualita/2014/11/24/news/fenomenologia-della-donna-sentinella-tutta-chiesa-smalto-e-tacchi-a-spillo-1.188970

[lvi] http://sentinelleinpiedi.it/

[lvii] Retrieved on 06/15/2016

[lviii] In Italian "Il Blog di Costanza Miriano": http://costanzamiriano.com

[lix] See http://azionecattolica.it/

[lx] The term, a neologism used by *Sentinelle in Piedi,* indicates the censorship of expressions that are not aligned with mainstream ones. It will be talked about later in the chapter

[lxi] The article refers here to Nietzsche's concept of Apollonian and Dionysian explored in "The Birth of Tragedy"

[lxii] The Second Vatican Council, happened between 1962 and 1965, discussed the relationships between the Catholic Church and modernity

[lxiii] The Synod is a special Church council that is usually called by the Pope every three years

[lxiv] See http://occupywallst.org/

[lxv] See https://www.facebook.com/INDIGNADOS-150830908320393/

[lxvi] See http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/3425/in_italy_profamily_sentinels_meet_threats_with_silent_protest.aspx

[lxvii] The Pope, for example, mentioned the "danger of gender ideology" in a speech, often quoted by the group Sentinelle in Piedi http://it.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/01/19/papa,_aereo_trascrizione_integrale_del_testo/1119009

[lxviii] The video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Tk2tJXbmBY

[lxix] See http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/30/world/europe/pope-francis-gay-priests.html?_r=0

[lxx] Rosary is a series of prayers said by Roman Catholics

[lxxi] The term "gender ideology" is extensively employed by *Sentinelle in Piedi* and Costanza Miriano. They provide no clear definition of the term, but it refers to the effort to erase gender differences and promote homosexual unions.

[lxxii] *vox clamans in deserto* is a Latin sentence that means "a voice that screams in the desert"

[lxxiii] http://www.yallaitalia.it/

[lxxiv] *Vita* (which in Italian means "life") is a printed and web publication about the third sector, society, and international events. The website is http://www.vita.it/it/

lxxv http://www.secondegenerazioni.it/

lxxvi Retrieved on 06/16/2016

lxxvii http://www.migradormuseum.it/

lxxviii See http://www.lastampa.it/2015/11/30/italia/cronache/il-caso-della-scuola-di-rozzano-la-cei-attacca-salvini-con-il-presepe-il-natale-non-si-tocca-RF5CI2XtFRgmNslpTdJNfO/pagina.html

lxxix See http://www.huffingtonpost.it/2015/11/14/parigi-giornali-destra-isis_n_8562792.html

lxxx Cécile Kyenge was Minister within the Italian government from 2013 to 2014. Born in Congo, Kyenge was active in promoting a reform for the citizenship law in Italy, as will be explained later in the chapter

lxxxi "Mixed couple" is an expression used in the blog to describe couples where one partner is Catholic Italian and the other is a Muslim (or non-Catholic) second-generation

lxxxii The 7th of January 2015, a group of Muslims killed in Paris some of the authors of the satirical magazine "Charlie Hebdo", which had published anti-Islamic cartoons.

lxxxiii   See   for   example http://www.ilmessaggero.it/roma/cronaca/charlie_hebdo_manifestazione_ambasciata_francese_roma_fiaccolata-791396.html and http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/01/08/news/charlie_hebdo_i_piazza_farnese_la_manifestazione_per_la_libert_di_stampa-104552151/

lxxxiv See https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/?fref=ts

lxxxv An Italian region in the North-West

lxxxvi CAIM means "Coordinamento Associazioni Islamiche di Milano," which literally means "Organization of Islamic Associations in Milan." Website http://www.cai-milano.it/

lxxxvii http://giovanimusulmani.it/

lxxxviii The interview was part of the program "Fischia il Vento" ("The wind Whistles"), available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ccN911Q1Ibo

lxxxix In Italy people need to register by showing their voter ID card before voting, and they vote in person, not via mail.

xc A city in the north of Italy

xci A non-Italian can apply for the Italian citizenship after ten years living on the territory, and the citizenship is transmitted to underage children, as well. However, if migrants cannot legally prove that they continuously lived in Italy for ten years and/or lack the needed documentation from their own countries, they cannot apply for citizenship.

xcii See http://espresso.repubblica.it/palazzo/2015/09/16/news/kyenge-pare-un-orango-il-pd-salva-calderoli-per-il-senato-non-c-e-discriminazione-razziale-1.229691

xciii The documentary is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcLw5DqEsaE

xciv Within the European Union, European citizens can expatriate without a passport, but only with the ID card.

xcv In Italy children start elementary school at the age of six and it lasts five years

xcvi In Italy education is mandatory until the age of sixteen.

xcvii See for example http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/perch-questo-ius-soli-pu-essere-pericoloso-nostro-paese-1182908.html and http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/ius-soli-mentre-leuropa-chiude-frontiere-renzi-vuol-regalare-1210312.html

xcviii Leader of the political party "Movimento Cinque Stelle", Grillo published on his blog a post against the principle of *Jus Soli*

xcix See http://www.corriere.it/cronache/15_novembre_23/senza-valeria-papa-alberto-un-tormento-non-vedere-mia-figlia-858dbbf6-91ad-11e5-98d3-3899a469cdf7.shtml and http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/11/24/news/funerali_valeria_solesin-128034246/

c A footage of the funeral is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVafQIEINgM

ci Idem

cii See http://www.ilfoglio.it/preghiera/2015/11/24/perch-non-andrei-mai-oggi-ai-funerali-atei-di-valeria-solesin___1-vr-135297-rubriche_c211.htm and http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/quelladdio-valeria-nella-terra-nessuno-1198300.html

ciii See http://www.melty.it/suor-cristina-vince-the-voice-il-commento-alle-esibizioni-a127374.html