

2017

Italy, Islam and the Islamic World. By Charles Burdett

Simone Brioni Dr.
simone.brioni@stonybrook.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/eng-articles>

Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License

This work is licensed under a **Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License**

Recommended Citation

Brioni, Simone Dr., "Italy, Islam and the Islamic World. By Charles Burdett" (2017). *Department of English Faculty Publications*. 12.
<https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/eng-articles/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at Academic Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Department of English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Academic Commons. For more information, please contact mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu.

Italy, Islam and the Islamic World: Representations and Reflections, from 9/11 to the Arab Uprisings. By CHARLES BURDETT. Pp. x + 228. Bern: Peter Lang. 2016.

Although Italy and Islam have a history of interactions that stretches back centuries, the presence of Muslims in Italian society is a recent event that came as a result of migratory flows. Islam is Italy's second-largest religion, with Muslims accounting for 2% of its population. Although Italian Muslims are almost entirely Sunni, they are far from being a cohesive community given that they come from countries as diverse as Morocco, Albania, Tunisia, Senegal, Egypt, Bangladesh, and Pakistan among others. The fragmentation of Italian Muslims is perhaps one reason why this social group has fallen victim to such derogatory and unilateral attacks in the mainstream Italian media.

Charles Burdett's *Italy, Islam and the Islamic World: Representations and Reflections, from 9/11 to the Arab Uprisings* examines the debate about Islam in Italy. It employs close textual analysis to put in dialogue and in contrast some of the most important voices that have discussed this topic. *Italy, Islam and the Islamic World* focuses not only on literature, but also other "cultural practices of signification" such as social commentaries, reportages, and other fact-based publications (7). Its key themes include the construction of otherness and selfhood, and the use of the cognitive apparatus of literature as a means to condition perceptions and to evoke emotions, in particular, fear.

The book is divided into five chapters, plus an introduction and afterword. Chapter 1, "9/11: The Islamic World as Other in Oriana Fallaci's 'Trilogy'", analyzes the work of one of the most popular authors of best-selling non-fiction books in Italy: Oriana Fallaci. The clarity of expression that Burdett recognizes in Fallaci is also a

feature of his own book, as if *Italy, Islam and the Islamic World* aims not only to deconstruct the constitutive elements of anti-Islamic narratives, but also to speak to an audience that goes well beyond academia. Fallaci's racist idea that radicalism and the destruction of Western society are elements at the core of Muslim identity, and her claim that Muslims want to colonize the West by changing its demographics, are challenged by focusing on the rhetorical expedients that Fallaci employs to construct her voice as authoritative and to manipulate the classic orientalist imaginary with the purpose of portraying Muslims as a faceless mass rather than individuals.

Chapter 2, "The War on Terror: Journeys of Writers and Journalists through Iraq and Afghanistan", is perhaps the chapter that is more intrinsically related to Burdett's previous research on travel literature and Italian colonialism as well as his 2007 landmark book *Journeys Through Fascism: Italian Travel Writing Between the Wars*. The texts analyzed in this chapter include Tiziano Terzani's *Lettere contro la guerra* (2002), Giuseppe Goffredo's *Il cielo sopra Bagdad* (2006), Sergio Ramazzotti's *Liberi di morire: dentro la guerra sulle strade dell'Iraq* (2003), Giuliana Sgrena's *Fuoco amico* (2005), and Lilli Gruber's *I miei giorni a Bagdad* (2003). These works denounce the failure in planning the "war on terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq, which saw Italy's participation. This chapter "seeks to inquire how the authors all attempt to write themselves, their perceptions and their emotional responses, into the events that they see playing out before them and in which they all, in some sense become inextricably involved" (17). The theme of travel – "with the sensations that it affords, the inter-subjectivity of the encounters that it fosters, and the estrangement from received ways of thinking that it encourages" (86) – is employed to provide readers with a global view of the effects of these wars. Moreover, these authors show that "only by interrogating our own sense of selfhood and its necessary

imbrication within the societal structures that surround us that we can gain a meaningful insight into the world that is likely to be constructed through our actions” (201).

Chapter 3, “Representations of Islamic Communities in Italy” examines books that have provided an informed image of Muslims in Italy, in contrast to narratives that have created “a fearful projection of an imaginary Islam” (97). The analysis focuses on different typologies of texts written by authors whose expertise include history (Franco Cardini), sociology (Khaled Fouad Allam, Renzo Guolo, and Stefano Allevi), and religion (Sergio Yahya Pallavicini, the imam of the al Wahid mosque in Milan). These texts show that the recent presence of Muslims in Italian society cannot be divorced from the long historical relationship between Italy and Islam. A specific focus is given to the changes in the Italian landscape that have been operated by the presence of Muslims in Italy, and the debate regarding the construction of mosques, given that xenophobic parties like the Northern League have occasionally denied Muslim communities the right – sanctioned by Article 19 of the Italian Constitution – to build places of worship. Burdett focuses, in particular, on how the self is enmeshed in or distances oneself from what he or she describes. The texts included in this chapter offer an everyday image of Muslim women and men, and they aim to “demystify the role that religious conviction plays in the lives of Muslim men and women in Italy” (119), by seeking “to imagine how the world appears from the perspective of people who are on the other side of a religious or cultural divide” (201).

Chapter 4, “Literary Representations of Islam and Italy” presents a critical analysis of literature, including Alessandro Perissinotto’s *Semina il vento* (2011), Amara Lakhous’s *Divorzio all’islamica a viale Marconi* (2010), Younis Tawfik’s *La*

straniera (1999), Randa Ghazi's *Oggi forse non ammazzo nessuno* (2007), and Sumaya Abdel Qader's *Porto il velo, adoro i Queen* (2008). This literature is "intimately concerned with questions – and problems – of cultural translation" (17), and it shows that "we should be conscious of the nature of our fears and look more closely at the emotions that underlie the identifications that we habitually make" (206). Burdett emphasizes the role of fiction in responding to the dominant representation of Islam. Imaginative fiction features characters whose identity is not clearly defined but is constantly involved in a process of transformation. The performance of their multiple identities implies the negotiation or interiorization of stereotypes, highlighting through humor that stereotyping is an absurd way of grasping an unknown reality.

In chapter 5, "Voices of Tahrir Square: Representations of Egypt and the Arab Uprisings", the views of director Stefano Savona and journalists including Domenico Quirico, Vincenzo Mattei, and Imma Vitielli on the democratic uprisings that spread across the Arab world in 2011 are presented. The analysis focuses on "how the texts seek to involve their reader or viewer in the events and life stories that they represent" (18). Burdett examines the rhetoric employed to place the reader or viewer in dialogue with the protagonists of the action narrated, therefore promoting "a process of reception, comparison and identification" and expanding "boundaries of self or subjectivity but more basic modes of cognition of the other" (190).

In conclusion, *Italy, Islam and the Islamic World* is an extremely relevant, well-researched, and thought-provoking monograph that tackles a topic of crucial social and cultural importance for the study of contemporary Italy. Although it questions issues that are at the core of the Italian national identity such as the construction of individual and collective identities, *Italy, Islam and the Islamic World*

is transnational in its scope and might be useful to illustrate the transnational commonality of anti-Islamic feelings across many countries. In this regard, one should note that some of the authors considered – such as Oriana Fallaci and Amara Lakhous – are internationally-known writers, as they live and work in the United States and their works are translated in English and other languages. Most importantly, Burdett interrogates the future direction of Italian Studies by asking readers questions – including “what is the nature of the Italy that we study? What is the meaning of the nation state in a transnational world? How can we think beyond territorially bounded notions of Italian culture? Are our methodologies adequate to address a social, cultural and *religious* reality that is, under the pressure of globalization, changing at an extremely rapid pace?” (198) – that are not possible to ignore if one attempts to study the postcolonial, multicultural, and multireligious identity of contemporary Italy. *Italy, Islam and the Islamic World* clearly shows that “though it may be tempting to think of Italian culture as in some way self-contained, separate and distinctive from other cultures [...] it is continually defined and redefined by its interactions with social and economic phenomena from across the globe” (15). Indeed, a shared feature that Burdett recognizes in all of the texts that are presented is their concern with the future, and their use of this concept to either threaten or make their readers more conscious about the world they live in, and, in so doing, deconstruct the false dichotomy between the Islamic world and the West.

Simone Brioni

Stony Brook University