



# Conversions to Shi'ism in Italy and Editorial Ventures

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**ABSTRACT** This article presents an in-depth analysis of two interrelated topics, namely Italians' conversions to Shi'ism and their contribution to disseminating knowledge about Twelver Shi'ism in Italy. Employing a combination of historical and sociological methods, the article explores the underlying motivations driving this religious mobility, with a particular focus on the influence of Traditionalist authors such as René Guénon and Julius Evola and the Iranian Revolution on the digital and paper publications of converts. Moreover, the paper investigates the converts' proclivity for editorial initiatives and social visibility, which can be attributed to their penchant for social engagement and political activism. To conduct this investigation, semi-structured interviews, literature analysis, and historical sources were adopted. This research establishes a strong correlation between the reasons for conversion and the portrayal of Shi'ism in the converts' literary works. In summary, the distinct characteristics of Italian Shi'ism are intricately intertwined with the factors influencing conversion to this religion.

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**KEYWORDS** Shi'ism, Italy, conversion, Guénon, Evola, editorial initiatives

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## Introduction

Italy is home to approximately 60 million citizens, primarily from a Catholic background, but with tenuous connections to the Church. The Mediterranean peninsula became the permanent destination of Muslim immigrants later than wealthier northern European countries or countries with a longer colonial background. The first Italian-based Islamic associations emerged in the early 1990s. Therefore, in the Apennine peninsula, despite the medieval Muslim settlements in Sicily and Puglia, Islam is still understood as a migratory phenomenon. As a result, conversion to Islam in this country has received only scant attention from sociologists of Islam. [1]

In Italy, a pioneering extensive sociological study about conversion to mainstream Islam<sup>1</sup> [2] was undertaken by Stefano Allievi in 1999. He conducted an empirical enquiry into the phenomenon, which found further theoretical refinements in 2017. Allievi offered valuable insights into the reasons for conversion and the impact of converts on the evolution of Islam in Italy. However, the elements that he presented as appealing aspects of Islam for Catholics are

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1 Allievi's study regards ordinary Sunnism, not the minor branches of Islam or Sufism.

not necessarily representative of the motivations behind conversions to Shi'ism. It is difficult to attribute conversion to Shi'ism to Catholics' fascination with mainstream Islam, because Shi'ism exhibits certain characteristics. First, proselytizing networks play a significant role in increasing the number of conversions, but most such networks pertain to Sunni Islam. Second, the presumed simplicity and independence from clerical institutions and saints, which, according to Allievi (1998), appeals to Catholics who convert to Islam, do not account for why Italians convert to Shi'ism. In present-day Shi'ism, religious norms are endorsed by *marāji*, the highest-ranking clerics, and alongside the Prophet, a constellation of infallible Imams and saints exists for believers to make their intercessions. These aspects, although not always visible, have persisted even in Italy,<sup>2</sup> where the process of secularization is assumed to be eroding irrational elements. Hence, the primary reasons behind fascination with Sunni Islam do not explain why converts are attracted to its lesser-known branch, Shi'ism.

Next to Allievi's research, the case of female Italian converts and their relation with gender discourses in Italy (Itri 2009; Naclerio 2018) or the converts' adaptation of the Islamic norms to the local culinary habits (Galletti 2017) have become the theme of some articles. Regarding the minor branch of Islam, the activities of Shi'a converts have been scrutinized only in two articles (Vanzan 2007; Mirshahvalad 2020a). Compared to the previous articles on Shi'a converts, this study provides a more complete panorama of the historical and ideological reasons behind conversions to Shi'ism in Italy. It aims to shed light on two interrelated questions: why did and do Italians embrace Shi'ism and how do they contribute to the public understanding of this religion in Italy? [3]

The answers are provided through a synergy of history and sociology. For the sociological features, I opted for qualitative methods due to the limited number of potential informants, rendering quantitative research impractical. Furthermore, the uncharted nature of the topic heightened curiosity about the underlying reasons and motivations behind unfolding events, emphasizing qualitative investigation over its more quantifiable counterparts. Between June 2018 and January 2023, I conducted an empirical investigation with different methods of data gathering, in addition to the analysis of existing online and paper literature produced by converts. I carried out ethnographic fieldwork and held semi-structured interviews with converts. The interviews were conducted to assess the reasons for conversion to Shi'ism, as well as the relationship of converts with Shi'a-born communities. For the purposes of this article, I will focus solely on the first set of questions. [4]

I conducted 27 in-depth interviews with adult Italians, born in Italy, who were formerly Catholics. Male converts were more publicly visible and readily available for interviews. Among my informants, there were six women and twenty-one men, all of whom I encountered at Shi'a gathering places, particularly at three founded and administered by Italian converts to Shi'ism. These locales were Imam Mahdi Association (MC) in Rome, Centro Tarsis in Trieste and *Dimore della Sapienza* ("Dwellings of Wisdom," DDS) in Rome. Besides interviews, I carried out ethnographic fieldwork within these three venues. [5]

The MC boasts one of Italy's most exquisite Islamic prayer spaces. This cultural organization limits membership in its executive committee to Italian citizens only. The prayer hall, spanning nearly 450 square meters, occupies the underground of a residential building. It comprises [6]

2 For instance, an Iranian *maddāh* (reciter of elegies) in Rome recalled how congregants after elegies would come to him, kiss his green neck cloth, and ask him to pray for them. A Pakistani group in Varese used expressions such as *In shā' 'Alī* ('if 'Alī wills') instead of *In shā' Allāh* ('if God wills') and *Mā shā' 'Alī* ('what 'Alī has willed') instead of *Mā shā' Allāh* ('what God has willed'), which caused outrage among their fellow believers in Legnano and eventually led to a split in their community (Mirshahvalad 2020a).

multiple areas and is embellished with elegant Iranian tiles, creating an authentic mosque-like ambiance.

Located in the heart of Trieste, the Centro Tarsis can be found in a humble 80-square-meter apartment. The primary meeting space is furnished with carpets and kilim cushions, establishing a cozy environment. The walls are decorated with Islamic symbols, giving it the feel of a *zāwiyah* (Sufi gathering place). [7]

DDS is the name of a circle of Italian convert intellectuals with diverse religious backgrounds. They convene in a modest space, likely a previous garage, measuring approximately 40 square meters. This unassuming hall also serves as the headquarters for a publishing house called Irfan. Both DDS and Irfan are founded by the same Italian convert to Shi'ism, Giuseppe Mahdi Aiello. Irfan specializes in publishing books on Shi'a philosophy, theology, and related topics pertaining to esotericism. The journal *Quaderni della Sapienza* (Notebooks of Wisdom) features shorter publications from this circle. [8]

All three gathering venues are equipped with exceptionally rich libraries or book collections (a notable difference to the gathering places of Shi'a-borns). My competence in Italian and Shi'a background facilitated this study, while my previous publications on Shi'ism, which disclosed my political positions, hindered relations with some converts. Being a woman also eased my relationship with female converts, who may be less inclined to participate in interviews. All interviews were conducted in Italian, and the mentioned fragments are translated by the author. All interviewees were adults, mentally sound, and fully aware of the purpose and scope of the interviews. Written consent forms from the interviewees were obtained before the pre-arranged interviews with a voice recorder. [9]

Determining the total number of converts to Islam in Italy remains challenging due to an Italian law prohibiting census questions concerning religious affiliation. Moreover, in the post-9/11 era, many converts prefer not to disclose their adherence to Islam, avoiding the use of Islamic names, even in private, and some female converts refrain from wearing the veil outside worship halls lest they lose their jobs and support from family and friends. Some converts to Shi'ism practice *taqiyya* (dissimulation) and present themselves as Muslim rather than Shi'a. Moreover, they are dispersed across different cities, making it difficult to track them. [10]

Nevertheless, some estimates are available. In 2002, it was suggested that the number of converts to Islam might have been around 10,000 (Allievi 2002, 110). However, in recent years, these estimates have shown a significant increase, reaching approximately 100,000 by 2018 (Ciocca 2019, 33). The notable surge in conversions is primarily attributed to marriage with Muslim women, because Islam does not allow them to marry non-Muslims. Consequently, such unions have significantly contributed to the rise in conversions. If we set aside conversions resulting from marriage, which often do not bring significant changes to the lifestyle of male converts (Allievi 1999), the number of Italian Shi'a converts, based on observations, appears to constitute no more than 2% of the total Shi'a population in Italy. If we apply this percentage to the number of Shi'as in the peninsula, Shi'a converts can be around 1000 people.<sup>3</sup> Despite their small number, as will be seen, converts play an important role in the divulgation of Shi'ism in Italy. The reason why converts play such a role has a deep tie with the factors that encourage them to embrace Shi'ism. [11]

3 In 2020, based on the data provided by ISTAT (the Italian national institute of statistics) and the existing literature about Muslims population in Italy, I estimated the number of Shi'as in Italy at around 70,000 (Mirshahvalad 2020b).

## Reasons of Conversion

Like conversion to any other religion, conversion to Islam is a multi-layered and processual phenomenon that passes through various stages (Rambo 1993; Roald 2006, 2012). Depending on the context, it can acquire a variety of meanings (Taylor 1999) and a series of push–pull factors are responsible for its occurrence (Maslim and Bjorck 2009; Rambo and Farhadian 2014). These factors shape the convert’s relationship to his or her new and former religions (Wohlrab-Sahr 1999). [12]

Regarding the reasons of abandoning the Catholic Church, both the existing literature on conversion to Islam and my interviewees have presented a series of push factors: Hardly explainable dogmas such as Trinity, redemption, and the divine nature of Jesus; the lack of a juridical dimension, putting the believer in a state of guidelessness, causing moral laxity; and the linguistic non-originality of the Bible are criticized in Christianity. The indispensable clerical mediation for the performance of sacraments is considered an unacceptable, complicated, and counter-intuitive aspect of Catholicism. The clerical mediation may cause complaints about the superficiality of the church services or the non-availability of sacerdotal functions in the moment in which they are needed. The following are two examples of female converts who expressed their dissatisfaction with the Roman Catholic Church services: [13]

A 56-year-old female convert in Trieste complained about the superficiality of the sacrament of penance: [14]

You know, before I tied the knot, I thought it would be a good idea to go for confession and take communion. But, let me tell you, the priest’s response left me feeling so disheartened. He said, “What could you possibly have done wrong? I absolve you.” It really hurt because I knew I had a bunch of wrongs weighing on my conscience, but I just couldn’t bring myself to spill it all out to him. I mean, I could almost imagine him thinking, “What on earth could she have done, like some kind of murder or theft?” It’s just this part of Catholicism that bugs me, you know? They don’t seem to get it; they don’t understand your mistakes and struggles. And that just leaves you without the chance to really repent and find that inner cleansing. It’s like they want to sweep it all under the rug, but that’s not what I needed. I was left feeling so dissatisfied with the whole thing. I believe a priest’s role should be more about helping folks confront and deal with the evil that might be hiding inside them. But it was like he didn’t want to go there. That whole experience really pushed me into a personal crisis, let me tell you. It made me question a lot of things about my faith and the way things are done in the Church. It’s been a tough road to navigate, but I’m trying to figure it out. [15]

A 53-year-old female convert in Milan remembered her dissatisfaction with the church: [16]

Let me tell you, I’ve had some messed up experiences with the church and those priests. Every time I went to church, I ended up feeling even worse, you know? It got me thinking, like, is something totally wrong here?... Then things got even more messed up when my dad passed away. Can you believe they didn’t even welcome him at the church for his own funeral? Like, what’s up with that? And get this, it wasn’t because he did anything wrong; it’s because the priest had some other commitment that day. Seriously, that’s so unfair! Nobody gets to pick when they [17]

kick the bucket, right? I think a priest should always be there when you need him, no questions asked. So, we had no choice but to go straight to the cemetery. And guess what? Nobody from the neighborhood showed up, just me and my hubby, and a handful of others. Talk about a tough time! Anyway, not just that, there's a whole bunch of stuff in Christianity that I can't wrap my head around. Like those dogmas and all, I never bought into them even before I became a Shi'a. Take Jesus, the son of God thing, for instance. It's a real struggle for me to fully buy into that idea, you know? But, hey, let's not get into all the nitty-gritty of those dogmas right now.

Examples of this kind besides complicated Christian dogmas encourage some people to abandon the Church in search for alternative sources of spirituality. At the same time, the reasons that encourage Italians to abandon the Catholic Church, although part of the explanation of this religious mobility, do not clarify why Shi'ism may be seen as the "better" religion. In addition, as mentioned above, the prime reasons for fascination with Islam hardly explain why converts should be attracted to its minor branch. [18]

The backgrounds for interest in Shi'ism slightly vary from one convert to another. A person may initially be attracted to Shi'ism for a particular reason and then develop other interests in this religion over time. A significant number of the converts interviewed, especially men,<sup>4</sup> mentioned an interplay between two main factors that encouraged them to believe that Shi'ism could serve as a convincing alternative to Catholicism. The first factor regards the ideas of the spiritual and cultural crises of Europe and the constant quest for a remedy to these crises, promoted i.a. by the French Muslim convert René Guénon (1886–1951). The solution to these presumed crises could be sought by adhering to the remaining forms of the Integral Tradition. The latter, always written with a capital "T" by Guénon, is considered an absolute, unchangeable, and impenetrable divine gift that unites the primordial origin of all "authentic" spiritual forms.<sup>5</sup> As described in the *Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues*, among Eastern religions, for Guénon, Islam was the nearest to the West. Guénon's school, here referred to as *Traditionalism*, entered Italy through authors such as Arturo Reghini (1878–1946), Guido de Giorgio (1890–1957), and Julius Evola (1898–1974). [19]

The second factor consists in the ways and the period in which the alleged revolutionary potentials of Twelver Shi'ism was discovered in the West. As will be elaborated later, during the decade following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Islamic Associations of Iranian Students (IAS) and Iran's political representatives played a pivotal role in promoting Shi'a culture in Italy through their editorial initiatives (Salati 1995). The first Italian translation of sermons of Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989) in Najaf seminary entitled *Il governo islamico* (Islamic Government) was published by the cultural center of the Iranian embassy in Rome in 1983. This book, along with other Italian translations of the ideologues of the 1979 revolution, such as Murtada Mutahari (1920–1979), presents Shi'ism as an ideal instrument against Western cultural values. The Iranian Revolution and these publications emerged during a period of spiritual crisis that affected conservative Catholic circles following Vatican II. [20]

4 While male converts were primarily drawn to the perceived revolutionary potential of Shi'ism, women, although recognizing the cultural and spiritual crises in the West, found themselves captivated by the devotional aspects of Shi'ism. It was not for nothing that the editorial initiatives were predominantly undertaken by male converts.

5 On the social conditions that gave rise to the sense of existential crisis in the early twentieth century, see the second chapter of Mirshahvalad (2024). For a concise and accessible introduction to the modern Occultism, see Hanegraaff (2013, 36–42).

Among Italian propagators of Guénon's school, Evola offered the most significant contributions to the development of this intellectual trend in Italy. As reported by interviewees, he was among the authors who sparked curiosity to embark on a journey towards spirituality. The fulfillment of this path has also been driven by dreams and visions. The most impressive case was a 43-year-old male high school teacher of philosophy and history whom I interviewed on October 28, 2018 in Legnano (a town in Northern Italy). He was an active member of DDS and had so far published two volumes through the Irfan publishing house. He had been studying Evola since he was 15 years old. Later he dedicated his bachelor thesis to Evola and published a book a year after our conversation entitled *Tradizione dal punto di vista dell'Azione* (Tradition from the viewpoint of Action). In this book, he highlighted the connections between Evola and Shi'ism. In the introduction, he emphasized that the book aimed to show how Evola implicitly had demonstrated that Shi'ism was a shield against the crisis of the modern world. [21]

During the interview, he said: [22]

You know, Evola never flat-out mentioned Imam Mahdi, but it's like you can read between the lines and see he was hinting at some divine presence, you know? He wasn't into Catholic stuff, but he was all about that spiritual quest. And when it comes to Shi'ism versus Sunnism, Shi'ism takes the cake in valuing spirituality big time... It goes way beyond just religious rituals; they really dig deep into the spiritual side of things. [23]

As confirmed also by Allievi (1999, 2017), conversions to Islam in Italy are usually encouraged by a series of authors who can be considered affiliates of Guénon's school. Besides Evola, notable figures in this intellectual pantheon include Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (c. 1870–1949), Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984) and Michel Valsan (1907–1974).<sup>6</sup> If Guénon is regarded as a foundational author for conversions to Islam in Italy (Sedgwick 2004, 7), Henry Corbin (1903–1978) undoubtedly captures the interest of anti-modern intellectuals in Iran. While Guénon did not view Islam's sectarian divisions as authentic, both Evola and Corbin provided romanticized portrayals of Iran, Shi'ism and Infallible Imams. Besides Evola, converts to Shi'ism often cite Corbin, who did not adhere to Guénon's school of thought but shared some of his concerns, such as objections to historicism and a belief in *Philosophia Perennis*. [24]

Evola's books, besides other Traditionalists' works, could be found on the bookshelves of converts' gathering places. The DDS affiliates hold online and offline conferences on his thought.<sup>7</sup> Despite the long correspondence and collaborations between Guénon and Evola, the Italian intellectual was anything but a faithful epigone of Guénon. He reinterpreted Guénon's school and proposed revolution against the modern world as the only solution for the dominant spiritual and cultural crises. By passing through Evola's lens, Italian Traditionalism developed moments of overlap with fascism. For instance, both Italian Traditionalism and fascism are elitist, misogynist, and support moral essentialism. Nonetheless, Evola did not share Mussolini's type of fascism. The 1929 Concordat with the Roman Catholic Church was described as the "neo-Guelphian transformation of Mussolini" (Rossi 2006, 54). Evola looked for a caesaropapism where the emperor was responsible for both the throne and the altar. Due to the church's impact on Mussolini, Evola's ideal state was never realized because the church [25]

6 On these intellectuals, see Sedgwick (2004).

7 See, for instance, this conference held in 2018 in Brescia on the relationship between Guénon and Evola: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LB8Gzu2ud0E> (accessed on April 29, 2024).

obviously could not tolerate the reemergence of a pagan empire. Therefore, relations between Evola and the fascist party became strained (Evola 2009, 2013).

Although Evola reproached Guénon for his conversion to Islam (Evola 2017), he provided some categories that in post-WWII Italy unwittingly set the stage for other conversions. For instance, he coined the category of “spiritual racism” as an alleged alternative to the biological racism of the Nazis. “Spiritual racism,” conversely to the biological one, does not preclude the possibility of improvement of the individual status. For Evola, participating in military action was a method for enhancing one’s quality of spirit (Evola 2013). Moreover, in his magnum opus *Revolt Against the Modern World* ([1934] 1995) he praised Muslims for three main reasons. One of them was their alleged proclivity for heroism in warfare.

When militant fascism came to its end with Italy’s defeat in WWII, Evola, who had remained “innocent” during the war,<sup>8</sup> became a reference point for neo-fascist organizations (Ferraresi 1995). In postbellum Italy, the Italian veterans of fascism faced an ideological crisis. Fascism could not foment mass movements anymore both for its lack of credibility and legal constraints.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, new trenches for the fight against Bolshevism were sought in different and contradictory directions. Diverging approaches towards the ways Muslims fought colonialism and US imperialism created rifts among neo-fascist groups (Albanese 2023). Some neo-fascists championed Muslim anti-colonial struggles and even participated in them in hope of an enhancing their spiritual quality, as was promised by Evola. Some others backed the USA as the best bastion against socialism. This crisis was accompanied by spiritual challenges that had hit the conservative Catholic milieu since the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). The council was perceived as a betrayal of the Catholic tradition by the Church (Venuto 2013). It was seen as the last component in the long chain of “errors” that had started with Martin Luther and the Reformation. Moreover, according to these environments, the 1968 upheavals were evidence of a serious moral crisis for which the Church did not have any solution. In such circumstances, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 was perceived as the silver lining for these actors because Khomeini’s program seemed a fascinating alternative to the capitalism-communism binary.

Prior to Khomeini’s activism in the late 1970s, Italians, similar to scholars in other Western contexts, had only a vague idea about Shi‘ism and its different branches.<sup>10</sup> Khomeini’s political success attracted attention to Twelver Shi‘ism and presented it as the religion of revolution and martyrdom. The conviction about the alleged political potentials of Twelver Shi‘ism paved the way for conversions to this religion.

During the years leading up to the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini found himself in Neauphle-le-Château, a suburb of Paris. This location facilitated interactions between Khomeini and

8 Evola never officially joined Mussolini’s party. This fact has been heavily emphasized by his post-war apologists, such as De Turris, as a sign of his innocence (see, for instance, De Turris 1984, 1997).

9 In 1952, in order to hinder the re-institution of the fascist regime, Italy laid down a legal disposition against any type of apology and support to fascism and its expressions. Art. 4 and 5, law of June 20, 1952, n. 645, sanctions anyone who “promotes or organizes, in any form whatsoever, the establishment of an association, a movement or a group having the characteristics and pursuing the aims of reorganizing the dissolved fascist party, or anyone publicly extolling exponents, principles, facts or methods of fascism, or its anti-democratic aims” (see the portal of the State acts <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:1952-06-20;645!vig>, accessed on April 29, 2024). Based on this law, any kind of apology of fascism and its moral values is punishable by imprisonment from 18 months to 4 years.

10 Twelver Shi‘ism is the largest branch of Shi‘ism in terms of the number of its followers. It is the predominant Shi‘a denomination in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Among various other existing branches of Shi‘ism, we can mention Zaydis prevalently in Yemen and Islamilis in the Indian Subcontinent and Eastern Africa.

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representatives from various European neo-fascist factions. According to a male convert based in Turin, Khomeini, while in exile in Paris, met with delegates from Italian and German far-right groups who had come to pay homage to him. This encounter reportedly led to Khomeini urging them to “spread Islam in Europe.” Among the attendees was Giovanni Oggero di Carmagnola (?–2010), a former Freemason and member of the paramilitary and far-right organization *Ordine Nuovo*, an Italian far-right organization. Inspired by this encounter, Oggero converted to Shi‘ism, adopting the name Ruhollah (after Khomeini) and subsequently establishing Arktos publishing house in Turin. He also supervised a magazine titled *Jihad*.<sup>11</sup>

The Iranian Revolution was propagandized also by the IAS and by Iran’s political representatives in Rome. The IAS branches in Rome, Turin, and Perugia, with their activism and publications, brought the message of the nascent revolution to Italy (Mirshahvalad 2023). They reinforced the conviction that the revolution was the realization of an anti-modern and spiritual state in Iran. An example that reflects the impact of such a cultural climate can be found in the first issue of *Jihad* from 1980. In this issue, Khomeini is described as a great artist guided “exclusively by meta-political convictions beyond any desire of power and the material benefits it entails,” while his revolution was called “spiritual asceticism.”<sup>12</sup> This encounter with Iranian students provoked the first conversions to Shi‘ism in Italy. The first generation of converts appeared in the late 1970s among Traditionalists, who launched Shi‘a worship halls and cultural associations, first in Naples and later in Rome and Trieste.

In 1979, the Italian branch of IAS was headed by Qadiri Abyane (b. 1953), then an Iranian student. As one can read on his personal website,<sup>13</sup> Qadiri obtained a master’s degree in architecture from Florence University. He was among the Iranian students who visited Khomeini during his exile in Neauphle-le-Château. On the same day that the Pahlavi monarchy was officially brought down (February 11, 1979), he occupied the embassy of the Iranian monarchy in Rome. Between 1978 and 1981 he was attaché and spokesman of the Iranian state in Italy.

During the Iranian hostage crisis (1979–1981), the Italian TV invited Qadiri and journalists from Italy and the US to discuss the issue. Following this program, Qadiri was contacted by Eduardo Agnelli (1954–2000), son of the industrialist patriarch of Fiat, and they developed a close relationship.<sup>14</sup> After some time, Eduardo decided to convert to Shi‘ism and took the name Mahdi. He is believed to be the first Italian to embrace Shi‘ism, and his conversion sparked both interest and controversy. In Iran, Eduardo is portrayed as a martyr who was assassinated by Israeli agents, and a foundation in Tehran has been named after him, dedicated to international converts to Shi‘ism.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, in Italy, he is depicted as a drug-addicted and depressed millionaire who committed suicide to escape his seemingly meaningless life.<sup>16</sup> Despite these differing narratives, Eduardo’s story represents the political aspirations of

11 The meeting between Oggero and Ayatollah Khomeini, as well as matters concerning Arktos Publishing House and the *Jihad*, have also been recounted by Allievi and Dassetto (1993, 208–9).

12 In literature produced by certain Traditionalists, particularly converts, post-1979 Iran has been depicted as a utopian society—a realm where Platonic-Evolian ideals have materialized. The purportedly anti-modern revolution in Iran has led converts to superimpose Evolian racist ideals, intertwined with Corbanian romanticized descriptions of Iran, onto this idealized realm. Publications by converts prominently showcase such narratives. More than a mere influence of Italian-based Iranians, such narratives seem to stem from a psychological need of Traditionalists. For an in-depth analysis of this corpus of literature, see chapter eight in Mirshahvalad (2024).

13 See info and photos on Qadiri’s website <http://ghadiri.ir/post/398> (accessed on April 29, 2024).

14 On this matter see, for instance, the interview with Qadiri on <https://www.aparat.com/v/oTnjZ> (accessed 15 September 2023).

15 See the website of the foundation <https://rahyafteha.ir/> (accessed April 29, 2024).

16 See, for instance: <https://www.rivistacontrasti.it/edoardo-agnelli-juventus-calcio-islam-conversione-religione-fiat-azienda-boniperti-morte-suicidio/> (accessed April 29, 2024).

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a generation of young Italians who sought solace from their existential crises in the embrace of a newly born Islamic state.

The contacts with Iranian students also led to another significant conversion among Traditionalists. Luigi ‘Ammar de Martino (c. 1937–2019), a convert from Naples, had a different trajectory from Eduardo. He lived long enough to gain visibility, build networks, and initiate a chain of conversions to Shi‘ism in Italy. In 1979, De Martino was a member of the *Ordine Nuovo*. Influenced by readings of Guénon, Evola, and Burckhardt, he underwent a religious journey from Catholicism to Evangelical Protestantism, and eventually from Sunnism to Shi‘ism. In 1982, he encountered an Italian convert to Sunnism named Claudio Mutti, who encouraged him to embrace Sunni Islam. A year later, inspired by Corbin and the enthusiasm of Iranian students, De Martino converted to Shi‘ism. Subsequently, his wife, daughter, and son also converted to Shi‘ism. ‘Ammar’s son, Marco Amir De Martino (b. 1964), in an interview with the author (March 2023), shared his father’s fascination with the concept of hierarchy and the “Platonic sacred leader” in Shi‘ism. In the late 1980s, ‘Ammar established the *Ahl al-Bayt*<sup>17</sup> Association in Naples, which became the first community of Shi‘a converts in Italy and also served as an editorial office (Filesi 2001, 152–53). [33]

## Converts’ Publishing Activities

One of the characteristics of Shi‘ism in Italy is its relatively young presence compared to the UK, where Shi‘a migrants from the ex-colonies, namely the Indian subcontinent and Iraq, have settled since the 1960s and have established various cultural infrastructures, such as mosques, libraries, and educational institutions. As a result of this relative youth, among Italian-based communities, the second generation has not formed yet or does not have any significant role in the decision processes of the communities. In Italy, the first generation of Shi‘a-borns with or without Italian citizenship are either linguistically incapable of producing publications in Italian, or are intimidated and unwilling to externalize their religious belonging (Mirshahvalad 2019). In the absence of an active second generation of Shi‘a-borns who could have introduced Shi‘ism in Italian, converts play this crucial role through their digital and printed texts. They are the main intellectuals who publish Italian Shi‘a literature and multimedia content (Bellucci 2002, 2005; Arcadi 2013; Corbucci 2017; Ferraro 2019; Rada 2013, 2019; Tabano 1995, 2002, 2010, 2017, 2021, 2022; Tratto 1998; Aiello 2022). The handful of Italian academics who write about Shi‘ism produce works for intellectual consumption in secular environments only, while the apologetic and propagandist language of converts is perceivable. [34]

Unlike the situation in Paris, where Muslims due to the colonial ties are mainly Sunnis from north-African origins, the non-European propagators of the Shi‘a cultural heritage in Rome are exclusively Iranian (Salati 1995). Soon after the Iranian Revolution, the propagandist literature about Shi‘ism was produced and subsidized by Iran’s representatives in Rome. From 1980 to 1990, the *Iranian Cultural Institute* in Rome, an extension of Iran’s embassy, was very active as an editorial enterprise. It launched the journal *Jihad* in 1980, which was supervised by Carmagnola. Towards the end of the 1980s, Carmagnola left the publication. In 1990, the *Iranian Cultural Institute* launched another journal, called *Il Puro Islam* (Pure Islam). From its second number, this publication was entrusted to the already mentioned Luigi ‘Ammar De Martino, who edited it almost until his death in 2019. [35]

‘Ammar hosted weekly evening gatherings of *Kumayl*<sup>18</sup> and *Tawassul*<sup>19</sup> prayers in his house [36]

17 Lit. “People of the House.” It is an expression indicating Prophet Muhammad’s household.

and welcomed many visitors from other cities and abroad. His house, therefore, gained an important social function. ‘Ammar became an inspiration for many other Italians who felt a sense of crisis and looked for remedies. Throughout his life, he was a zealous missionary and proselytizer. Indeed, his house was called the “conversion factory” to Shi‘ism (Allievi 2003, 67). He would transliterate Islamic daily prayers and place them next to recent converts during prayer sessions. In 2007, the Neapolitan association and its founder moved to Alba (in north Italy). Afterwards, the association adhered to the *Ahl al-Bayt* World Assembly, which is an Iranian NGO established in December 1990 by Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. ‘Ammar’s organization promoted numerous conferences in different Italian cities about Shi‘ism, the Iranian Revolution, Hezbollah, and other germane topics. It organized summer excursions to the Tosco-Emilian mountains, in the presence of Khamenei’s representatives in the European countries, to strengthen the network of Italian and other European Shi‘as and their links to Iran. In these annual gatherings, around 200 converts with their families from different parts of Italy would gather to reinforce communal bonds.

In 2004, a group of a new generation of converts, all initiated and educated by ‘Ammar, gained independence and founded the Imam Mahdi Association (MC) in Rome. This information was provided by the association’s administrator during our conversation in June 2018. Based on an interview with another pupil of ‘Ammar, Giuseppe Mahdi Aiello, in 2007, Aiello established the *Irfan* Publishing House and, eight years later, annexed the *Dimore della Sapienza* to it. As I observed, this venue hosted weekly gatherings of Traditionalists from different religious backgrounds, besides converts to Shi‘ism and Sufism. [37]

Although publishing activities comprising translation and publication of Shi‘a treatises were initially promoted by Iran’s representatives in Rome, the low quality of these translations and publications eventually spurred converts to take this activity into their hands. Besides Rome’s organizations, the Trieste community contributes to these publications. Eugenio Tabano (b. 1956) and his Trieste-based community translate the Shi‘a treatises from English, French, and sometimes Persian to Italian. Tabano has published several works about Shi‘ism viewed from a Traditionalist perspective (Tabano 1995, 2002, 2010, 2017, 2021, 2022). The Trieste community is called *Tarsis* and has strong proclivity for esotericism and mystic interpretations of Shi‘ism. I visited the plain headquarters of Tarsis in May 2022. Unlike MC and DDS, *Tarsis* affiliates maintain a low public profile and do not have constant relations with Iran’s political representatives in Italy. Despite their differences, the *Tarsis* affiliates have the same inclination for intellectual productions, but their publishing activities are less formalized than those of MC. [38]

As expressed by the MC administrator, MC has a group of translators that gather once a year and choose the books and articles that should be translated in Italian. They receive subsidies from around 100 Twelver Shi‘a Khoja<sup>20</sup> merchants who support the publishing activities of autochthonous Shi‘as from Bosnia, Italy, and Bangladesh. In Europe, the Khoja merchants exclusively subsidize converts instead of Shi‘a-borns in their publishing initiatives. Moreover, the MC translators receive some financial support from other members of this organization. Apart from *Irfan*, publishing houses such as *Cerchio* and *All’Insegna del Veltro* host [39]

18 *Kumayl* is the name of a prayer that Imam Ali taught to his companion Kumayl ibn Ziyad. Shi‘as recite it specifically on Thursday evenings.

19 *Tawassul* is the name of various Shi‘a prayers, but there is a specific supplication with this name in the book *Bihar al-Anwar*. Shi‘as recite this supplication on Tuesday evenings.

20 The Khoja were initially Ismaili Shi‘as based in Bombay and Karachi (Indian subcontinent). In the nineteenth century, following the economic growth in Karachi and disputes between Khojas in Karachi and Agha Khan, some Khojas converted to Twelver Shi‘ism (Boivin 2015).

such publications. The new edition of *Il governo Islamico* (2007) and the first Italian edition of the book of French Shi‘a convert Christian Bonaud about Khomeini (2010) are examples of this kind. Besides books and journals, they publish on weblogs and YouTube channels.<sup>21</sup> DDS holds online meetings on different matters related to Shi‘ism, Iran, Traditionalist authors, and geopolitics that are uploaded on YouTube.<sup>22</sup> A network of converts based in different cities administer a weblog where they publish anonymous articles over the relationship between Shi‘ism and other religions, such as Buddhism, Sikhism, and Hinduism.<sup>23</sup>

The converts’ publications indirectly disclose the fascinations of Shi‘ism for them. One can observe that Shi‘ism is tailored to fit the Traditionalist standards of authenticity. The minor branch of Islam is praised for its presumed anti-modern aspects and strong esoteric dimensions: an understanding clearly shaped by Corbin and the aforementioned Traditionalist authors. Shi‘a Islam is romanticized and defined as a religion that possesses cyclical time, apocalyptic eschatology, supernatural Imams, and a strong occult dimension. Guénon’s school clashes with the Hegelian linear notion of time that implies humanity’s progress in history. Guénon intermingled this notion of time with his extreme pessimism towards humans’ historical pathway (Guénon 1927). He believed that we are presently in the *Kali Yuga* or Dark Age, which is the worst phase of “our cycle.” The Dark Age will be concluded by apocalyptic events. The same convictions are behind the converts’ illustrations of Shi‘ism. [40]

I first encountered the concept of cyclical time in this research on March 28, 2021, when the MC administrator, on the occasion of the birth anniversary of the Hidden Imam, published an article on their website, *Islamshia*.<sup>24</sup> It was a translation from an English article authored by Seyyed Ali Shahbaz accompanied by an introduction by the MC. In this introduction, Imam Mahdi was portrayed as the “Savior of Human beings, who will arrive at the end of our cycle.” Interestingly, this idea of “our cycle” or cycles of time was absent in the original English article (Shahbaz 1994), and was an addition by the MC. This instance sheds light on the beliefs and interpretations within the convert community, pointing to the significance they attach to the notion of Occultation and the coming of Imam Mahdi. Another example is the monograph by Giuseppe Aiello from DDS, where he claims that “the rituals associated with the sacred city of *Karbala* illustrate the cyclical nature of sacred time. Cyclical time has been articulated by Shi‘a Islam and influences the life of Shi‘a Muslims” (Aiello 2022, 52). [41]

A corollary to the Guénonian notion of time are apocalyptic sceneries of the end of the time. The COVID-19 pandemic stimulated the head of *Tarsis* to write a book with a title that evokes Evola’s work *Maschera e Volto*,<sup>25</sup> in which he mentions the well-known Shi‘a hadith about the omnipresence of conflict in the world—“everywhere is *Karbala*, every day is *Ashura*” (Tabano 2021, 10).<sup>26</sup> Among converts, Imams become divine beings who coexist with humans (Tabano 2010) and possess the Ancient Persian divine light (*xvarenah*) (Arcadi 2013). Crying for Imams can endow us with the same divine light (Rada 2013). [42]

The Traditionalist mindset among converts is not only perceivable when considering the content of their works, but also through the choice of authors whom they translate, paraphrase, [43]

21 See the MC YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/@islam.italia> (accessed on April 29, 2024).

22 See the DDS YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@centrostudiinternazionale2246/about> (accessed on April 29, 2024).

23 See <https://bakshi786islam.altervista.org/> (accessed on April 29, 2024).

24 See <https://islamshia.org/limam-mahdi-aj-il-salvatore-dellumanita/> (accessed on April 29, 2024).

25 Evola’s work has been translated into English under the title *The Mask and Face of Contemporary Spiritualism*.

26 This narrative, of questionable origins, is extensively employed by ideologues of the Iranian Revolution, including individuals like Ali Shariati, Mutahari, and Khomeini. The phrase was utilized by these figures to emphasize the imperative of a continual struggle against injustice.

or introduce. Despite their clear interest for Iran, one can never find works of Ali Shariati (1933–1977), Jalal Al-Ahmad (1923–1969), Forugh Farukhzad (1934–1967), or reformist politicians such as Muhammad Khatami (1942–...) or Muhammad Mosadeq (1882–1967) in the catalogues of their publishing houses. The socialist, feminist, reformist, and progressist intellectuals and politicians are not considered aligned to their intellectual exigencies. This is a clear influence of both Corbin and Evola. Corbin, in his description of the Islamic schools in *En Islam Iranien*, reproached the rationalist currents such as the *Mūtazilites*, as well as Shi‘a jurists, calling them “arrogant.” Evola published an article in the daily newspaper *Meridiano d’Italia* on March 3, 1957 entitled *L’emancipazione dell’islam è una strada verso il comunismo* (The emancipation of Islam is a path towards communism). A year later, on June 25, 1958, he republished this article in the daily newspaper *Roma*. In this article, he criticized the penetration of socialism and feminism among Muslims, considering them betrayals to the “essence” of Islam.

As mentioned earlier, conversion in this case is considered a remedy for the abovementioned ideological and spiritual crises of the Italian extra-parliamentary far right and Traditionalism. The reasons of conversion influence the ways in which Shi‘ism is understood and described by newcomers. Therefore, Shi‘ism is depicted as an antithesis to the “evils” of the modern world, namely secularism, rationalism, social equality, and materialism. The minor branch of Islam has been described as a religion with a profound secret quality and elitist structure (Arcadi 2013; Bellucci 2005; Feirefiz 1979). The Infallible Imams have been illustrated as superhuman protectors of the vulnerable modern human beings (Bellucci 2005; Rada 2013, 2019; Tabano 1995, 2002) who, according to Guénon (1927), progressively lose their cognitive abilities.<sup>27</sup> [44]

In the case in question, the rationality and simplicity that Allievi (1998) mentioned as attractions of Islam for Italians is completely absent. “Italian Shi‘ism” is a result of skepticism towards the power of human reason and a dominant pessimism towards modern life. These are the typical features of the Shi‘ism that Italian converts have developed due to specific interpretations of Guénon’s school of Traditionalism, on the one hand, and Italy’s sociopolitical realities, on the other. [45]

## Conclusion

By adopting a synergy between historical and sociological methods, this study explored the motivations behind Italians’ conversion to Shi‘ism and their role in disseminating knowledge about Shi‘a Islam in Italy. The influence of Traditionalist authors, particularly Julius Evola’s transformation of René Guénon’s Traditionalism into a political campaign against the modern world, played a pivotal role in shaping the religious mobility of Italians. While Evola’s ideal fascism and pagan imperialism remained unrealized, his theories on spiritual racism sparked hope that individuals could enhance their spiritual quality through militant activism. Consequently, some of his pupils admired Muslim resistance to colonialism and imperialism, making Iran’s anti-Imperialist revolution resonate strongly among Traditionalists. Italy’s defeat in WWII and the ensuing anti-US sentiments among some fascist veterans further contributed to the warm reception of the Iranian Revolution as the promised uprising against the modern world. [46]

The perception of the Iranian regime-change as a spiritual reawakening and a return to [47]

27 For a comprehensive analysis of these features within the converts’ literature, please see chapter seven of Mirshahvalad (2024).

traditions was largely influenced by the activities of Iran's cultural representatives in Italy. Their efforts presented the revolution as a transformative movement, adding to the allure of Shi'ism for Italian converts. The love for editorial enterprise and social visibility among the converts can be attributed to their proclivity for social engagement and pacifist political activism. Translations of and commentaries on Shi'ism serve as powerful instruments in their battle against perceived modern-world atrocities, reflecting a reactionary approach to religion.

The commitment to socio-political change through editorial initiatives is shared by converts to Shi'ism and those Europeans who pursue paths of the mainstream Sunnism (Allievi 2002) or Sufism (Marchi 2023). However, unlike Sufism, Twelver Shi'ism is backed by a unique and distinct patron whose representatives in Europe establish journals and delegate their oversight to autochthonous enthusiasts, particularly converts. Moreover, what distinguishes conversion to the minor branch of Islam is a fervor for the Infallible Imams portrayed as bearers of the ancient Persian divine light, and, in some instances, for a religion that purportedly succeeded in establishing a Traditional order in the era of the Dark Age. [48]

Therefore, these conversions cannot be solely attributed to religious fervor or intellectual curiosity in Shi'ism. They also stem from a fascination with Iran's anti-US positions and its perceived political achievements, prompting Traditionalists to portray Shi'ism as an anti-modern faith. As observed in the literature produced by converts, Shi'ism is idealized to compensate for perceived crises within Italian cultural and political institutions. It appears as though the push factors, in a dialectical relationship, contribute to the formation of the pull factors. The appealing characteristics of Shi'ism are constructed based on cultural and spiritual shortcomings within the converts' milieu. This aligns with Wohlrab-Sahr's theory on how push and pull factors shape a convert's perception of the new and old religion (Wohlrab-Sahr 1999). [49]

The purportedly anti-modern Shi'ism showcases features such as cyclical time or a strong esoteric dimension, which are in conflict with what actually guaranteed the success of the Iranian Revolution, namely Khomeini's pragmatism and realpolitik. The inherent romanticism in the converts' interpretation of the religion and the Iranian Revolution leads us to question whether, in this case, simplicity and rationality can be regarded as attractions of Shi'ism for Catholics who convert to this religion. What this article suggests as the reasons of conversion, which condition the features of Shi'ism in the converts' intellectual production, is an interplay between political and psychological factors. These factors contribute to the multifaceted nature of Italians' conversion to Shi'ism. [50]

Understanding the complex motivations behind this religious mobility provides valuable insights into the dynamics of cultural exchange and its impact on Italian society. Further research in this area may deepen our understanding of religious transformations and their implications in contemporary Italy. [51]

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