

PUBLIC SECURITY AND COOPERATION BETWEEN STATE AND RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS

M. D'ARIENZO

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Maria D'ARIENZO

Full Professor of Law and Religion

University of Naples “Federico II”, Department of Law

E-mail: maria.darienzo2@unina.it

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5557-3584>

Abstract

The paper examines the collaboration between the State and religious denominations in Italy in the field of public security. It analyzes four key areas: the Catholic Church's contribution to preventing mafia infiltration; the Holy See's efforts to combat money laundering through alignment with international standards; the role of Islamic communities in countering terrorism and radicalization; and the reuse of places of worship as tools for integration and social cohesion. The study demonstrates that structured cooperation with religious actors strengthens legality, promotes intercultural dialogue, and supports preventive security policies, highlighting the strategic importance of these partnerships for collective safety and social resilience.

Key words: *public security, collaboration between State and religious denomination, mafia, organized crime, shared use of worship buildings.*

INTRODUCTION

The cooperation between public authorities and religious denominations for the protection of public security has distinctive features in the Italian legal system.

In this paper the theme will be examined from four perspectives.

The first concerns the contribution of religious denominations—and in particular of the Catholic Church—in preventing the phenomenon of organized crime, within the framework of their mutual cooperation for the promotion of the human person and the good of the country, as envisaged by Article 1 of the 1984 Villa Madama Agreements amending the 1929 Lateran Concordat.

Attention will also be devoted to the Holy See's commitment to combating the laundering of illicit funds, which has resulted in the adaptation of Vatican law to the international standards in this field.

The third line of inquiry will focus on the cooperation offered by religious communities—and especially Islamic communities—in countering terrorism inspired by fundamentalist ideologies.

Finally, the paper will focus on the significance of reusing places of worship as tools for integration and fight against marginalization.

I. CATHOLIC CHURC AND PREVENTION OF MAFIA PHEANOMENA IN THE ITALIAN LEGAL SYSTEM

Particular significance in the Italian context assumes the collaboration between public institutions and religious actors that has developed, especially in recent years, in the prevention and fight against organized crime, particularly of mafia matrix. In recent times, religious denominations have played a crucial role in combating the mafia through acts of denunciation and resistance, as well as through numerous initiatives aimed at promoting awareness of legality. These initiatives have provided real alternatives — especially for young people — to affiliation with criminal organizations in economically and socially disadvantaged areas (*Balsamo 2019; Mantineo 2017*).

This commitment has been supported by the Catholic Church through the issuance of diocesan norms aimed both at preventing criminal infiltration into Church rites and ecclesial associations, and at repressing organized crime by imposing specific canonical sanctions on those affiliated with mafia groups. In this regard, a particularly abundant body of normative texts has been produced concerning religious processions (*Balsamo 2019, p. 127 ff.; Ognibene 2017*). These have not only raised practical challenges but have also encouraged “mutual cooperation for the promotion of the human person and the good of the country” between the State and the Church, through distinct yet synergistic measures to combat corruption and organized crime.

To enhance the positive impact of the Church's action against the mafia, a notable initiative has been the establishment, in some dioceses, of a Round Table for dialogue with law enforcement and public authorities responsible for the prevention and suppression of crime. Its aim is to ensure better organization of religious events and ecclesiastical funerals while respecting confessional autonomy. Greater cooperation in this area is highly desirable, especially in light of certain incidents that have created tension between civil and religious authorities — such as when public security authorities have imposed the selection of individuals carrying statues during religious processions (*Balsamo 2019, p. 184*). Such imposition represents an undue interference by public authorities in matters that fall within the internal order of religious denominations.

PUBLIC SECURITY AND COOPERATION BETWEEN STATE AND RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS

Regarding religious processions, it is worth mentioning the converging interest of both canonical and civil norms in eradicating the deplorable practice of the “*inchini*” — that is, the pauses made by processions in front of the homes of a mafia boss. This conduct, explicitly condemned by recent diocesan canonical legislation, has also been recognized by Italy’s highest courts as constituting the criminal offence of disturbing religious ceremonies under Article 405 of the Italian Penal Code (*Fuccillo 2021, Balsamo 2021*). In this way, the canonical and civil legal systems mutually reinforce one another in combating mafia manipulation of religious rites, particularly those of popular devotion. Thus, the joint efforts of the State and the Catholic Church to suppress mafia influence on religious practices find a valuable point of convergence in Article 405 of the Italian Penal Code — a provision that can serve as a cornerstone for increasingly fruitful cooperation between the State and the Church in their respective efforts to combat organized crime (*Balsamo 2021, p. 143*).

Equally significant is the cooperation between religious actors and public institutions in the reuse of property confiscated from organized crime. Such assets have been increasingly converted into youth centers, parish halls, and spaces dedicated to education in legality — initiatives often promoted under the project “*Free the Good: From Confiscated Property to the Common Good*” launched by the *Libera network* and the *Italian Bishops’ Conference* through its *National Office for Social Issues and Work*, the *National Youth Ministry*, and *Caritas Italiana* (*Balsamo 2025*).

This commitment recently gained further momentum in Sicily following the signing, on May 5, 2023, of the *Memorandum of Understanding for the Promotion of a Culture of Legality and the Prevention and Fight against the Mafia and Organized Crime*, concluded between the *Sicilian Bishops’ Conference* and the *Regional Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry and Oversight on the Mafia and Corruption of the Sicilian Regional Assembly*. The memorandum established an observatory composed of ten experts (five appointed by the Bishops’ Conference and five by the regional commission) tasked, among other things, with “identifying and disseminating guidelines and good practices for promoting the culture of legality” and “creating networks of cooperation among local organizations engaged in social anti-mafia work or in combating organized crime, as well as in supporting vulnerable groups, particularly in contexts at risk of social marginalization.” In immediate implementation of the *Memorandum*, the Sicilian Bishops’ Conference committed to inaugurating “two new community centers in each diocese to promote solidarity and social anti-mafia initiatives” (*Balsamo 2025*).

II. THE COMMITMENT OF THE HOLY SEE TO COMBATING THE LAUNDERING OF ILLICIT FUNDS AND THE ADAPTATION OF THE VATICAN LEGAL SYSTEM TO INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS.

In last fifteen years Holy See has devoted greater attention to preventing the use of funds of illicit origin in collaboration with other State and international institution. Specifically, the Holy See commitment has taken shape through the adoption of specific regulations aimed at aligning the Vatican legal system with international standards (*d'Arienzo 2022; Zannotti, 2022; Rivetti 2013*).

Even before the Holy See's adhesion to the United Nations Convention against Corruption (the Mérida Convention) in 2016, and prior to the publication on 29 April 2021 of the *Apostolic Letter issued motu proprio containing provisions on transparency in the management of public finances* for the Vatican City State, Law No. CXXVII of 2010 had already established the *Financial Intelligence Authority* (AIF), now known as ASIF (*Supervisory and Financial Information Authority*). ASIF is the competent institution of the Holy See and of the Vatican City State for supervision (oversight and regulation) aimed at combating money laundering and the financing of terrorism, as well as for financial intelligence activities and prudential supervision and regulation of entities professionally engaged in financial activities.

ASIF is a member of the *Egmont Group*, the global forum that currently brings together the financial intelligence units of 152 countries and jurisdictions, within which rules and best practices for cooperation and the international exchange of information are shared. At the bilateral level, ASIF has entered into *Memoranda of Understanding* for the international exchange of information with the competent supervisory and financial intelligence authorities of various jurisdictions.

In this context, a fundamental element in the Vatican's efforts to align its legal system with international standards in the fight against money laundering has been the Holy See's participation in the *MONEYVAL Committee* — the Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism (Sarais 2012). MONEYVAL is a permanent monitoring body of the Council of Europe tasked with assessing compliance with the principal international standards to counter money laundering and the financing of terrorism, as well as the effectiveness of their implementation. It is also mandated to issue recommendations to national authorities regarding necessary improvements to their systems.

The progress made by Vatican legislation in preventing and combating money laundering of illicit origin was acknowledged by the MONEYVAL Committee in its 2021 report (*d'Arienzo 2023b, p. 274; Durisotto 2023, pp. 207-216*). This objective has been further pursued through the strengthening of judicial cooperation between the Vatican legal system and other jurisdictions.

III. THE COOPERATION BETWEEN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND PUBLIC AUTHORITIES FOR THE PREVENTION OF TERRORISM INSPIRED BY RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

PUBLIC SECURITY AND COOPERATION BETWEEN STATE AND RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS

A further aspect of cooperation between the State and religious denominations in the field of public security concerns the role of recently established religious communities in preventing and countering terrorism inspired by religious fundamentalism.

Following the terrorist attacks carried out by Islamic extremists in Europe in recent years, prejudice has spread against Muslim migrant communities, often perceived as a potential threat to public security. In Italy, this gave rise to the need to promote a “moderate Islam” — that is, one that is not extremist but capable of integrating within an accepted framework of civic coexistence — through the establishment of dialogue mechanisms aimed at fostering a unified representation of the diverse Muslim communities present in Italy.

The culmination of this process was the signing, in 2016, of the National Pact for an Italian Islam. This Pact explicitly required Islamic associations to commit to countering all forms of religious radicalism expressed through propaganda, actions, or strategies contrary to the laws of the State. According to the Pact, Islamic associations in Italy pledged to “continue combating religious radicalism, including through forms of cooperation that provide authorities and institutions with tools for understanding a phenomenon that threatens collective security — including the safety of citizens and residents of Islamic faith.” The associations were also called upon to act as mediators for the full realization of civic principles of coexistence, promoting integration among Muslim immigrants and countering radicalism and fanaticism in synergy with Italian institutions (*d'Arienzo 2018*).

Aligned with this goal of preventing any drift toward fundamentalism are the Permanent Tables for Interreligious Dialogue — consultative bodies established for discussion, mutual understanding, and structured engagement between public institutions and religious communities, particularly those newly established in local contexts.

No less relevant for public security have been the Pacts of Sharing and Active Citizenship signed between municipal administrations and local Islamic communities. The first such “Pacts” were concluded in Turin and Florence in February 2016, at the initiative of local Islamic centers, with the goal of promoting integration policies and a shared civic consciousness. These agreements are based on the commitment of Muslim communities to uphold participatory and cooperative citizenship and to affirm common values of freedom, democracy, and equality of rights and duties. Signed in the months following the terrorist attacks in Paris, they carry strong symbolic value as a public testimony of the joint commitment of institutions and Islamic associations to fostering coexistence, mutual respect, and understanding — essential to overcoming distrust and building “shared citizenship” (*d'Arienzo 2018; d'Arienzo 2023*)

Following Turin's initiative, the city of Florence also signed a Citizenship Pact, which included the commitment of Muslim communities to use the Italian language in the khutbah (the Friday sermon), with the assistance of translators from Arabic into Italian. Other cities, such as Bologna and Bergamo, later followed this model, introducing measures such as municipal registers of "Imams and Religious Leaders" and establishing "Official Dialogue Tables" between institutions and Muslim communities. Similar Pacts of Active Citizenship have also been signed by smaller municipalities, including Castelfiorentino and Umbertide. These pacts represent an important step in the ongoing process of dialogue and cooperation among diverse social components toward the construction of civic citizenship (*d'Arienzo 2018, p. 87 ff.*).

To prevent radicalization in prisons, another notable measure was the Memorandum of Understanding signed on November 5, 2015 — and renewed in 2020 — between the Department of Penitentiary Administration (DAP) and the Union of Islamic Communities of Italy (UCOII). This agreement has helped reduce prison radicalization by providing Muslim inmates with stable religious assistance and moral support delivered by adequately trained and qualified ministers of worship (*d'Arienzo 2023*).

IV. THE COOPERATION BETWEEN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND PUBLIC AUTHORITIES FOR THE PREVENTION OF TERRORISM INSPIRED BY RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

The shared use or repurposing of worship spaces among different religious groups have proven particularly effective in promoting peaceful coexistence. The shared management of a place of worship, or the reassignment of a disused one to a recently established religious community, constitutes a powerful tool for dialogue and inclusion (Dimodugno 2022). By addressing the difficulty some religious groups face in accessing suitable worship spaces, such practices contribute to public security by reducing tensions linked to exclusion or marginalization and by promoting mutual respect and understanding.

From this perspective, the shared use of places of worship acquires strategic importance, as it concretely contributes to building a more cohesive, inclusive, and secure social environment. The sharing of religious spaces — whether among different communities or with the support of public institutions — transforms potential places of division into spaces of encounter and mutual knowledge.

From a security standpoint, the regulated and transparent management of worship spaces helps prevent isolation and radicalization. Moreover, it enables public institutions to maintain ongoing dialogue with all religious communities, fostering collaboration and preventing situations in which the absence of suitable worship spaces might drive communities to gather in informal or unmonitored

PUBLIC SECURITY AND COOPERATION BETWEEN STATE AND RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS

settings — contexts that could become fertile ground for extremist messages or social conflict.

CONCLUSION

From the various areas explored, it clearly emerges that cooperation between the State and religious denominations is crucial in preventing conflict, promoting intercultural dialogue, and strengthening social cohesion — all of which are essential elements for ensuring collective security.

The examples analyzed demonstrate that religious actors, when engaged in structured and transparent forms of collaboration with public authorities, can play a decisive role in safeguarding the legal order and fostering peaceful coexistence.

The Church's commitment to preventing mafia infiltration, the Holy See's alignment with international anti-money-laundering standards, the active participation of Islamic communities in countering radicalization, and the shared use or repurposing of worship spaces all highlight how religious communities function not as marginal participants but as indispensable partners in pursuing the common good. These experiences show that security policies are most effective when they integrate the cultural, ethical, and social resources that religious groups can offer — particularly in those contexts where institutions alone may struggle to reach vulnerable or marginalized populations.

Furthermore, cooperation with religious denominations contributes to building a preventive security model rooted not only in repression but also in social inclusion, trust-building, and the dissemination of shared civic values. By promoting legality, transparency, and mutual understanding, such collaboration helps neutralize the risk factors that generate social fragmentation, criminal infiltration, or extremist drift. It also strengthens institutional legitimacy, fosters a culture of responsibility, and reinforces the sense of belonging to a community united around democratic principles.

In this light, the partnership between the State and religious communities should be understood as an essential component of a broader strategy aimed at enhancing the resilience of society as a whole. When adequately supported and regulated, this cooperation not only protects public order but also enriches the social fabric, contributing to the development of an inclusive and pluralistic environment in which diversity is recognized as a resource rather than a threat.

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PUBLIC SECURITY AND COOPERATION BETWEEN STATE AND
RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS