

READY - Religious Education and Diversity

Sharing experiences of, and approaches to,
teacher education in the context of
"Education and Training 2020" (ET 2020)



Religious Diversity in Italian schools

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Nowadays, Italy can no longer ignore the history of those religions - the many Christian denominations, Judaism, Islam, the oriental traditions - which have contributed to forging its identity during the centuries and which animate a present day characterized by pluralism and by continuous exchange and mobility. In 2013, people belonging to religious communities, different from Catholics (Caritas-Migrantes 2013; Cesnur 2013; Salvarani in Melloni 2014), were between 4.343.000 and 6.428.307 (7-10,5% of the population: among them 26% Italian citizens and 74% non Italian citizens): Muslims (1.500.000) orthodox (1.400.000), evangelicals (650.000), Jehovah's witnesses (400.000), Hinduist (135.000), followed by protestants, Jewish, Sikh, Mormons e Baha'i (below 60.000 units). In comparison with other situations in Europe (Perez-Agote 2012), Italy appears to have become secularized while remaining faithful to its image (in collective representational terms) as a Catholic country, thanks to the Church's organizational strength.

Especially due to immigration fluxes during the last two decades, Italian schools today are characterized by a strong pluralism: Italian residents with foreigner origin (3-17 years) are 851.579, 10% of the population; this is a constantly growing number when we consider that in 1994/1995 they composed less than 44.000 students (Colombo and Ongini 2014)¹. Though national census in Italy does not include questions about religious affiliation, and, though relevant statistics according to Ferrari and Ferrari (2010: 431-433) are not totally reliable, a majority of the population, one way or the other, still identify as Catholic and are affiliated to the Catholic Church, while about four percent are members of other religions or other Christian denominations. Here, as in many other countries in Europe, an increasing number of the population are Muslims (about one million),

¹ <http://demo.istat.it/strasa2014/index.html> e <http://demo.istat.it/pop2014/index.html> (last accessed 8/05/2015).

primarily due to immigration, in particular from Morocco.² Catholicism, furthermore, is often said to be central to Italy's collective identity as well as to its culture and national heritage. However, critics as well as younger generations and pupils attending school observe that the Italian culture and life are no longer as Catholic as they claimed to be (Mazzola in Willaime 2014).

How do Italian schools accommodate religious diversity, situating it in the European context?

The majority of pupils in Italy are educated at public schools (about 90% of the students in 2014; about 65% of non State schools are Catholic)³. Private schools are mostly Roman Catholic (75% is the average of the last 20 years)⁴: Concordat of 1984 (Act No. 121 of 1985) strengthens the general protection granted by Article 33 of the Constitution and the general laws regulating the inclusion of private schools in public education.

Concerning the teaching of religion in public schools, the political environment, which had so radically changed with the passage to a Republic and with the adoption of constitutional regulations, did not change the established agreements of 1929⁵: in Italian schools, the usual period of religion as catechetical education, a compulsory discipline from which parents were allowed to withdraw their children, continued for several decades after 1946. It was only in the '60s that it began to appear necessary to identify and implement choices, which could establish a new relationship between school and religion. Discussions which were held in the late '70s were crucial, and they paved the way for the turning point in 1984: different points of view were discussed and collided, sometimes expressing positions which could not find a common ground.

2 According to statistical figures from OECD annual report 2013, Morocco is one of top three immigrant countries in Italy (OECD 2013, 324). In Pajer (2007) the statistical numbers of religious adherence are Roman Catholic (85,0%), Protestants 0,9 %, Orthodox 0,9%, Muslims 1,5%, Jewish 0,05% and Others 12,1% of the total population of 57,8 Millions. (Ferrari and Ferrari 2010: 431).

3A comprehensive description of the Italian education system (reference year 2012-13) is presented by EU through *Europedia (European Encyclopedia on National Education Systems)* https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Main_Page (11/2014) and in UNESCO (2012). Both presentations have provided the background for this passage.

⁴ Data: Italian Ministry of Public Education and the Catholic schools federation FIDAE 2011-2012.
⁵ The Lateran Pacts, including the Concordat, a Treaty establishing the State of Vatican City, and a financial settlement, were signed on 11 Feb. 1929 and ratified by the Italian Parliament on 27 May 1929 (L 27 May 1929, No. 810).

In 1984 a Concordat⁶ was signed by Bettino Craxi and by the secretary cardinal of the Vatican, Agostino Casaroli: it established a non-compulsory confessional period of Catholic religion, no longer intended as catechetical education, but rather as a cultural approach to the religious phenomenon from a Catholic point of view. It was also established that Catholicism was no longer the only religion in the Italian State and, with respect towards the right to freedom of conscience and towards parents' educational responsibility, it was guaranteed that every student of every kind of schooling level or type could choose to attend the catholic religion period or not.

Thus, since 1985, the teaching of Catholic religion in public schools, of every level and type, is imparted in compliance with the doctrine of the Church and in respect of the students' freedom of conscience, by teachers who have been considered suitable by the religious authority and have been assigned, in full agreement, by the school authority.

In kindergartens and primary schools, a class teacher who has been considered to be suitable by the religious authority and who agrees to do it, can teach this subject. An agreement between the appropriate school authority and the CEI - Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (Italian Episcopal Conference) has established the following: the curricula for the various types and levels of the public schools; the ways in which said subject is organised, including its position within the frame of the other lessons; the criteria for choosing textbooks; the professional profiles for choosing the teachers. Currently, the Ministry, subject to an agreement with the CEI, establishes the curricula for the religion's lectures for each level and type of school, in the understanding that it is the latter who has the competence to define their conformity with the doctrine of the Church. IRC is thus provided, financed and guaranteed by the State and space is provided for it in the normal curriculum of the public school (Giorda and Saggiaro 2011).

Kindergarten is assigned a yearly total of 60 hours (one and a half hours per week), primary school is assigned two hours of IRC per week, while I and II level secondary school are assigned one hour of IRC per week. Catholic schools of every level and type were assigned additional hours, in compliance with the Educational Offer Plan established by each school.

As for the teachers, the criteria necessary to be able to teach this subject are established by the Agreement between the Italian State and the Catholic Church, according to which in kindergarten and elementary schools IRC can be taught by section or class teachers, which the religious authority has deemed to be suitable. It is possible for laymen and deacons, priests and religious people

6. The 1984 Concordat amends the 1929 Concordat and voids art. This is 1 of the 1929 *Lateran Pacts*, concerning the confessional nature of the Italian State. For the English version of the *Accordo di Villa Madama* at: <http://www.religlaw.org/document.php?DocumentID=578>

possessing the necessary qualification (diploma issued by an institute for religious sciences recognized by the CEI) to teach religion.

Since 2003, after having passed an open competition (written and oral test concerning general teaching and training techniques), 70% of the teachers are hired permanently; all religion teachers possess not only a professional license, like other teachers, but also a special warrant issued by the local Bishop who recognises their suitability to teach; it should be noted that in the last years this activity has more and more taken an interest with laymen and women rather than religious people (Giorda 2009b; Giorda and Saggiaro 2011).

The amount of students attending IRC declined during the 2012/2013 school year (OSReT 2014)⁷:

- 88.9% of students attending IRC (-0.4%)
- 11.1% of students not attending (+0.4%)

Only in secondary school:

- 82.1% of students attending IRC (-0.9%)
- 17.9% of students not attending (+0.9%).

Alternatively to the IRC, the regulation provides for several options: an alternative activity period established by the school itself which should, as suggested by the 1986 Ministry Circulars Nos. 128, 129, 131, and 131, address topics concerning ethics, values, tolerance and peace. This activity should be imparted by any teacher who is available at the time. Another option is tutoring (revision, in-depth studying) or, for high school, a study activity without the presence of any teacher, within the school premises; lastly, an option that is often used is the early exit from school (or delayed entry). Statistic data from 2013 shows that 55,6% of the upper-secondary schools choose this option, while only 7,2% offers an alternative educational option (OSReT 2013)⁸.

The agreements between the state and religions and denominations other than the Catholic Church (“Intese”), also concern teaching their religion in public schools⁹. They identify and defend the right

7. Data are aligned with the trend over the last twenty years. All schools:

- 93.5% of students attending IRC in 1993/1994 school year
- 92.7% in the 2003/2004
- 88.9% in the 2012/2013

See: <http://www.osret.it/it/pagina.php/100> (08/2015).

8. See: <http://www.osret.it/it/pagina.php/100> (08/2015).

See also S. Ciatelli *Il contesto legislativo e amministrativo per l'effettiva attivazione delle attività didattiche alternative all'Irc*: http://www.ircagliari.it/back_end/files_news/29.pdf (11/2014).

9. The cults which are currently permitted in Italy are partially regulated by an Agreement (Intesa) with the State; concerning the latter case in these agreements, the status is as follows: agreements were signed with the Waldensian Church on 21st February, 1984 and on 25th January, 1996, with the

of pupils and parents belonging to the relevant denomination not to attend classes teaching Roman Catholicism. While IRC is also a 'regular' school subject in terms of the fact that grades are given to the pupils attending it, this is not so in the case of other kinds of confessional RE. This system also stipulates the right of the relevant denomination to organize the teaching of religion in State schools, under two conditions: a congruous number of students will have to request the activation of the teaching; teachers shall be paid by the denomination.

In the last decades, cultural and academic environments have promoted projects, petitions and events concerning religious education, which have had, or have at least attempted to have, political repercussions. I shall take into account projects on a national level, as addressing the multitude of local experiments would take this paper too far away from its original intent (Giorda 2013).

Exploratory alternative teachings have been conducted on a local basis, often upon the initiative of a coalition of non-Catholic denominations supported by local councils. Freelance historians, anthropologists and sociologists have also been involved in projects of this kind, along with many teachers of Roman Catholicism. Innovative textbooks have been prepared, announcing a new era in which non-denominational comparative religion will be taught along with, or instead of, doctrinal Catholicism (Willaime 2014; Andreassen and Lewis 2014). However, the level of intellectual, cultural and juridical movement has never, at least until today, been met with any form of national-level result: every attempt to change status has been frustrating. Projects and designs have remained on paper and have never been made into concrete options, neither *de facto* nor *de iure*.

The confessional religious education, the IRC, has become closely linked to the politically powerful idea about Italian culture and national identity as deeply influenced by Catholicism, and it seems, also with regard to the Constitution, difficult to imagine that secularization and the increase in religious and cultural diversity can lead to rapid and immediate changes (Mazzola in Willaime

Assemblies with the Lord in Italy on 29th December, 1996, Act No. 516 dated 22nd November, 1988 approved the agreements of 29th December, 1986 and, again on 6th November 1996, with the Unione Comunità Ebraiche in Italia (UCEI – Union of Jewish Communities in Italy). Agreements with the UCEBI, Unione Cristiana Evangelica Battista d'Italia – Union of Christian Evangelic Baptists in Italy, were signed on 29th March, 1993 and approved with Act No. 116 dated 12th April, 1996 and with the CELI, Chiesa Evangelica Luterana in Italia – Lutheran Evangelic Church in Italy, on 20th April, 1993, approved with Act No. 520 dated 29th November, 1995; the Apostolic Church in Italy, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Holy Archdioceses in Italy and the Exarchate for Southern Italy, UBI – Italian Buddhist Union), the Italian Hindu Union were approved in 2012 act. No. 246 and the last in 2015 was approved with Soka Gakkai; agreements were signed, but are not yet approved, on 4th April, 2007 concerning the Christian Congregation of Jehovah's witnesses.

Source: www.governo.it/Presidenza/USRI/confessioni/intese_indice.html#2 (11/2014).

2014; Ferrari in Davis and Miroshnikova 2013). As Enzo Pace has recently put in light (Pace 2013b), in comparison with other situations in Europe, Italy appears to have become secularized while remaining faithful to its image, memory and identity as a Catholic country, thanks to the Church's organizational strength. It is no longer a Catholic country in terms of many Italian people's practices (Marzano and Urbinati 2013), but Christian Catholic Church and Catholics conserves its authority and influences politics, economics and culture (Ferrari and Ferrari 2010).

For all this reasons the European project named READY – Religious Education And Diversity, promoted by an agreement among the Universities of Aberdeen, Torino, Tubingen, Wien and Karlstad, is an innovative and interesting way of exploring the differences in teaching the RE in Europe. Every Country, as this article tries to explain, has its own tradition, cultural and religious, and the consequences on the school systems are deeply concerned with it.

Trying to compare the different systems, and researching on the RE among different European States are the aims of the project, which will surely provide interesting outputs, not only for the Academic World, but also for public policies.

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Camilla Cupelli, Mariachiara Giorda, Heinz Ivkovits, Kerstin von Brömsssen and Peter Kliemann at an extraordinary READY project meeting in Vienna on January 7th, 2016