
Adalberto Bernardini / Armando Bernardini

Italy: which direction shall religious education take?

Summary

Adalberto und Armando Bernardini geben einen Überblick über die geschichtliche Entwicklung schulischer religiöser Erziehung in Italien. Sie ist seit der Konstituierung des Königreichs Italien im 19. Jahrhundert durch Verträge mit dem Vatikan konfessionell römisch-katholisch ausgerichtet und gilt für alle Schulstufen, nicht aber für die Universitäten. Erst seit den 80er Jahren des 20. Jahrhunderts gibt es Vereinbarungen des Staates mit anderen religiösen Gruppen wie den Waldensern, Siebenten Tags-Adventisten und der jüdischen Gemeinde, die diesen die freie Religionsausübung einschließlich der Lehraufgabe einräumen. Der schulische Religionsunterricht ist weiterhin katholisch, mit der Möglichkeit der Abmeldung, die bei etwa 10 % der Schülerinnen und Schüler (mit z.T. sehr viel höheren Prozentzahlen in städtischen Ballungsgebieten) ausgenutzt wird.

Die Tatsache, dass für die abgemeldeten Schülerinnen und Schüler schulische religiöse Bildung ganz ausfällt, und dass die Präsenz muslimischer und orthodoxer Schülerinnen und Schüler inzwischen in die Hunderttausende geht, hat eine lebhafte Diskussion um neue Konzepte hervorgerufen. Sie umfassen die Bandbreite von interreligiös ausgerichteten Konzepten, einem Sequenz-Konzept (beginnend mit katholischer Religion und zunehmend über die anderen christlichen Konfessionen ausgeweitet in Richtung der monotheistischen, dann der östlichen Religionen und schließlich des nichtreligiösen Humanismus) bis hin zur Einrichtung eines religionskundlichen Ersatzfaches für die vom katholischen Religionsunterricht abgemeldeten Schülerinnen und Schüler. Dass auf der Ebene akademischer Ausbildung katholischer Geistlicher und Lehrkräfte wie auch für die Ausbildung von Studierenden anderer Konfessionen und Religionen unabwiesbare Herausforderungen bestehen, wird konstatiert, ist aber wie die Öffnung des konfessionellen Religionsunterrichts bisher noch ein nicht erfülltes Desiderat.

An historical Perspective:

In order to understand the present situation of religious education in Italy - and its future perspectives - it is necessary to make a very brief historical overview of religious education in the country.

- Catholicism has been the state religion in Italy up to the mid-1980.

In fact Italian Law dating back to 1848 (Kingdom of Sardinia and Kingdom of Italy) and incorporated later into the *Lateran Treaty* (often referred to as *Concordat*) of 1929 stated in art. 1 “ Italy recognizes and reaffirms the principle established in the

first article of the Italian Constitution dated March 4, 1848, according to which the Catholic Apostolic Roman Religion is the only state Religion”.

The Lateran Treaty was amended in 1985 with an Agreement between the Italian Republic and the Holy See bearing in mind on the part of the Italian republic the principles proclaimed in its Constitution and, on behalf of the Holy See, the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council’s declarations of religious freedom.

Hence art 9 of the 1985 amendment to the *Lateran Treaty* states “The Italian Republic, in conformity with the principles of freedom of schools and teaching...shall guarantee to the Catholic Church the right to freely establish schools of every order and grade and educational institutes”. In addition the same article states “... the Italian Republic considering that the principles of the Catholic Church are part of the historical heritage of the Italian people, shall continue to assure, the teaching of the Catholic Religion in public Schools of every order and grade except for the Universities”.

A new element is introduced in 1985 as the same article 9 states “With respect to the freedom of conscience and educational responsibilities of the parents, everyone shall be granted the right to choose whether or not to receive religious instruction.”

- In the eighties - after the Lateran treaty has been signed - a number of agreements “*Intesa*” have been signed with other religious traditions within the spirit of the republican constitution of 1948 which in art 8 affirms that all religions are equal in front of the state and at the same time guarantees freedom of teaching, organization and to proselytise.

The Intesa are considered sometimes - because of their broad range of socio economic matters covered - as “mini concordat”. Following is a list of the “Intesa” signed as of 2006:

Religious Tradition	Year
Tavola Valdese (Waldensian Church)	1984
Seventh-Day Adventist Church	1986
Assemblies of God Council	1986
Jewish Communities	1987
Baptist Church	1994
Lutheran Church	1995

- The teaching of Theology at the University level - since the suppression in 1873 of the faculties of Theology in State Universities - is confined to the religious institutions of each religious tradition.

It must be born in mind that the decision taken in 1873 has been the result of the will of politicians who feared that the teaching of Theology would have determined a clerical influence in the Italian state.

A couple of attempts to resurrect the teaching of theology within the State Universities - in more recent times - have been made. They have not been successful. Apparently as a result of an interpretation of the article 9 of the revised Lateran treaty of 1985 which states that the Italian Republic shall assure the teaching of the Catholic Religion in the public schools of every order *except for the Universities*.

Present status: the centrality of the public school

Since the beginning of its existence the Italian state (1861 Kingdom of Italy) has dedicated many efforts to develop a system of public school i.e. of a school system financially supported by the state.

According to the data provided by the Ministry of Education in Italy there are approx. 8.0 millions students enrolled in the public system and about 0.9 Millions students in privately supported schools. About half of the latter are students enrolled in the maternity school (which is not compulsory). We can therefore say that out of 100 students approx 94 % are enrolled in the public schools and only approx. 6% - excluding therefore those at the maternity schools - are enrolled in the private schools.

The private schools - according to art. 33 of the Italian Constitution - are : "... institutions and private individuals have the right to establish schools and institutes for education without financial support from the state ..."

Within public schools the curricular teaching of religion is mono-confessional - as provided by the art 9 of the Lateran Treaty 1985 mentioned above - i.e. Roman Catholic Religion. In addition, it should be mentioned that the teachers are selected by the Italian Bishops Conference (IBC), and textbooks and curricula are also be determined by the IBC. At the same time the teachers are considered civil servants and paid by the state.

We may ask: what happens to students who belong to another religious tradition?

Art 9 of the 1985 amended Lateran Treaty states: "... With respect to the freedom of conscience and educational responsibilities of the parents, everyone shall be granted the right to choose whether or not to receive religious instruction. When they enrol, the students or their parents shall exercise this right at the request of the school authority and their choices shall not give rise to any form of discrimination".

At the present approx. 10 % of the student population does opt out. In certain metropolitan areas however the percentage of those opting out reaches 50%. This is somehow considered as a symptom of the present system's inadequacy to adapt to an evolving society.

What the present system does not determine is: what does the student who is opting out do instead? There are miscellanea of activities which have been proposed and practiced - human rights, public relations, sport activities etc. The student can also walk out of the school.

The future of public schools in a multiethnic Italian society

Italian society is changing rapidly and the Italian school system is changing too. During the last 10 - 15 years the population of immigrants has reached approx. 3 %. The foreign student population - according to the Ministry of Education figures for academic year 2005-2006 - has reached approx 5 % of the total student population. What should be noted is however the relatively strong concentration in certain metropolitan areas and territories where the numbers reach well over 7 % - 8 %.

The nationalities more represented are:

Country	% Foreign Students	Prevalent Religion
Albania	16.3	Islam
Morocco	14.0	Islam
Rumania	12.4	Orthodox Church
China	5.2	Buddhism
Serbia Montenegro	3.3	Orthodox Church
<i>Partial subtotals</i>	53.2	<i>Islam (20.3), Orthodox Church (15.7),</i>

(Source Ministry of Education 2006)

It is obvious that the immigrant population expresses cultures and religions very different from the majority of the Italian population.

Therefore we must start reasoning, in Italy, about a “new religious pluralism” which is more significant - in terms of sheer numbers - than the “historical religious pluralism”. In fact in Italy there has been since millennia a Jewish Community in the metropolitan areas of the Center at first and subsequently the North. For several centuries a Waldensian Community has existed (highly concentrated in certain regions notably in Piedmont); more recently there has been a growing number of followers of Witnesses of Jehovah and Pentecostal Churches.

All the above historical religious presences have been rather limited in terms of numbers (measured in 10’s of thousand). Only during the last 15 - 20 years we have witnessed a massive presence -measured in 100’s of thousands and due to immigration- of the Muslim Community and the Christian Orthodox Community.

The phenomenon of immigration - coupled with its visible religious pluralism – represents a great challenge to the educational system.

Some members of the new religious communities have demanded the inclusion of a confessional religious education similar to what has been granted to the Roman Catholic Church by the Lateran Treaty.

It is indeed more and more evident that in order to build a cohesive, respectful and peaceful society a better knowledge of the different religious identities, traditions, values, festivities and rituals must become a part of the knowledge of each citizen.

Therefore the need of providing information on religious matters, at school age, beyond what is presently granted by the confessional Roman Catholic teaching is recognized by many.

Several proposals and experiments have been made to meet the above have stated demands. I would like to mention here only a few of them which might have - in my opinion - a distinct significance in view of what has been discussed so far:

- The “***Vallombrosa Abbey Group***” This proposal has been launched in 2005 by scholars of the University of Florence and Siena. The project, well developed and articulated, recognizes the difficulty of providing separate religious education for students of different religious traditions and the potential danger of creating subgroups of students with the risk of isolation or worse. The curriculum would instead favour a common itinerary of religious culture which would start from Roman Catholicism - given its relevance for the majority of the population. This would be followed by other European Christian traditions (Orthodox Ch., Reformed Ch. and Anglican Ch.)

Subsequently the curriculum would expand to the great Abrahamic religions (Judaism and Islam) and to the other great world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.) to conclude with religious humanisms.

This curriculum would be designed to meet different ages - maternity school through high school - and the educational needs of the students.

- The “***Interreligious Table***”. This project is ongoing on an experimental basis in Rome since 1998 in about 68 schools. It offers the possibility to meet with members of several religious traditions to discuss their rituals, traditions and values. Similar experiments are now tested in several cities in the country.

- “***Association October 31***”, proposes the development of an interdenominational curriculum on religious matters within a perspective that will take into account the growing confessional pluralism of the country. Ideally this curriculum - in the mind of the proponents - should replace the confessional course presently in force. This project is still being developed and it is basically formulated only on a conceptual level.

- “***The Double Track Proposal***”, acknowledges the fact that the Italian Republic recognizes the principles of Catholicism as part of the values of the majority of the Italian people. Hence it proposes that the state, on the basis of art 8 of the constitution would offer, to all the students who opt out for the teaching of Roman Catholicism, a compulsory course on religious matters. The curriculum would be approved by the state who would also select and pay the teachers. This proposal is quite similar to the

one recently approved in Spain for the students who do not follow the confessional Catholic course.

- **“The Islamic Theological Academy”** A proposal set forth by the *Co.Re.Is. Italiana* The acronym stands for Italian Islamic Religious Community. This Islamic community consists mainly of Italian citizens. They have made a concrete proposal and seek state support, for the creation of an Islamic Theological Academy. The objective of the academy would be the formation of Imams, who would be able to speak Italian, and be able to integrate the Islamic doctrine within the context of the Italian values and Constitutional rights. The formation of Imams is recognized by Co.Re.Is.Italiana as a crucial point to care the Islamic Community without foreign influence, risk of integralism thus representing a significant contribution to the autonomy of the Italian Islam.

Conclusions

Numerous proposals and experiments are stirring a healthy debate in a country which is witnessing an increasing religious pluralism.

The festivities, during which students do not show up at school, are no longer marked only by the Christian calendar! The Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist and other religious festivities are becoming more visible to the teachers as well as the student population at large.

It is necessary to explain why in a given day a student is absent from school. It is also necessary to explain the fundamental values, the ethics and the history of the different religions.

The teaching of religion is therefore a social need to be fulfilled within the programmes of the public schools.

All social indexes indicate an interest in the religion for the “men on the street”. Major newspapers are offering copies of religious texts or manuals with historical and religious focus. Just before departing for Nuremberg the major Italian newspaper distributed - free of charge - the first volume of the “Bible of Jerusalem”.

The reality of a growing “new religious pluralism” seems not to be properly satisfied neither in an exclusive relationship between State and Church (the present mono-confessional status) nor by a rigorous separation model - dating back to the French revolution - between State and Church.

With the evolution of a new demographic reality we should witness the development of curricula where the fundamental cultural and historical values of religions are taught to students.

The State should play an important role in defining the framework within which the religious culture should take place, in accordance to the general objectives of a coherent educational programme, the appointment of qualified teachers, all in agreement with the constitutional values of the state.