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## **Religious education in Italian public schools: what room for Islam? \***

**SOMMARIO:** 1. Introduction - 2. Religious education in Italian public schools: general framework - 3. Religious education in public schools: the situation of Islam - 3.1. Some data about the Islamic presence in Italy - 3.2. Religious education and Islam - 4. The religious education in plural Italy: challenges and gaps - 5 - Muslims at school and Religious Education: which solutions? - 5.1 Alternative 1: private schools - 5.2 Alternative 1-bis: Homeschooling - 5.3 Alternative 2: introduction of lessons *about* religion - 5.4 Alternative 3: Muslim pupils and their participation in the Catholic religion lessons - 6. Conclusions: challenges, problems and future perspectives.

### **1 - Introduction**

Religious education in public schools has always been a debated matter in Italy, because of the strong religious roots of the country and for the mainly public character of the Italian educational system. The Islamic presence in the country, that is quite recent<sup>1</sup>, has posed new questions on the endurance of the religious education system and on its convenience for the training of new generations of pupils, both from a religious and from a general point of view.

Before analyzing the presence of Islam in public schools and the issues concerning Islamic education, I will draw a brief picture of the educational system in Italy and of the main characteristics about religious education in public schools. Some data about the presence of Islam in Italy will also be provided.

Then I will highlight problems and gaps in the legislation about religious education, in order to discuss whether this type of education is useful in a plural society, as the Italian one, but also to see in what way this legislation is applicable to Islam. As we will see, problems arise with regard

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<sup>1</sup> As we will see (par. 3.1), Islam was almost absent in Italy until the 1970s, when the first migration flows from Muslims countries began.



to Muslim community, because there are limits regarding the possibility to have a specific Islamic education in public schools.

Finally, I will point out some possible solutions that the public school system could develop, and that would answer to the requests of Muslim families with regard to religious education. I will also reflect on the possibilities of using the private educational system for an adequate Islamic education.

## 2 - Religious education in Italian public schools: general framework

Italy is among the European States where religion is taught in the State funded school system. Religious education in Italy has some peculiar characteristics: historically, it has been dominated by the teaching of Catholicism, which is also the model for other types of religious education.

The only religious education in public schools in the past was indeed the teaching of Catholicism. Article 36 of the Concordat of 1929 between Italy and the Holy See provided for a compulsory Catholic education in all the degrees of State educational system, with a strong role for the ecclesiastical authorities: it was for the Catholic Church authorities to organize lessons, and teachers needed an authorization from them. The Concordat consecrated an existing system of teaching: Catholicism has always been strongly rooted in the Italian society and, in those years, it was the State religion. Thus, the teaching of Catholicism was commonly organized in the public schools, well before the signature of the Concordat<sup>2</sup>.

This teaching was seen as a presence of Catholic religion in the public schools, permitted by the State: Catholic education had quite the same aim as catechism activity, organized in a public structure<sup>3</sup>. This situation can be explained considering that Catholicism was the State religion at the time and that it has always been strongly rooted in the Italian society. In other words, as Catholicism shaped Italian national identity, the presence of Catholic religion lessons in the State-school system has been regarded as something 'normal'.

One peculiarity of Italian educational system is the importance and the predominance of state-schools. On the contrary, the creation of private denominational schools, with the purpose to give a specific religious education, has never been perceived as a real necessity. Even today, the

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<sup>2</sup> A. FERRARI, *Libertà scolastiche e laicità dello Stato in Italia e Francia*, Giappichelli, Torino, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> A. FAMÀ, *L'insegnamento della religione cattolica nelle scuole pubbliche. Un lungo cammino*, in OLIR.it ([http://www.olir.it/areetematiche/69/documents/Fama\\_Unlungocammmino.pdf](http://www.olir.it/areetematiche/69/documents/Fama_Unlungocammmino.pdf)), 2044.



development of religious private schools is less strong in Italy than in other states. Moreover, the few private schools that exist are mostly Catholic, especially nursery schools and these are generally recognized by the state (they are called *paritarie*, that means a state recognition of studies certifications issued by the private schools)<sup>4</sup>.

The new agreement of 1984 between the State and the Catholic Church, which amended the Concordat, partially revised this system. Article 9 of the new agreement provides that teaching of Catholicism is now voluntary instead of compulsory. Furthermore it should not discriminate, i.e. treat students who do not attend these lessons unfavorably (this principle, consecrated by the Concordat, was stated also by the Constitutional Court<sup>5</sup> and reaffirmed in the legislative decree n. 297 of 1994). Therefore, it is organized by all State schools, but the pupils (or their families, in the first schools cycles) can choose not to attend it.

During the process of revision of the Concordat ('70s-'80s), discussions arose on the opportunity of changing the religious education system, in view of a rising plurality of Italian society. Some proposals were related to the elimination of the Catholic education and its substitution for an hour of education about religion in general, but they were refused, also for the opposition of the Catholic Church. Broadly speaking, most discussions underlined the importance of giving a "cultural" character to the Catholic religion hour, useful to understand the history, art and culture of Italy<sup>6</sup>. In fact, the agreement of 1984 does not describe Catholic education as a pastoral or catechetical moment, but as an informative subject on Catholicism, justified by the cultural and historical heritage of Italy. In any case, the agreement did not delete these lessons from public schools and gave, again, a strong role to the Church authorities in the organization of the teaching (programs for the different schools cycles, appointment of teachers, choice of textbooks, etc. are controlled by the competent ecclesiastical authorities)<sup>7</sup>.

After the signature of the 1984 Agreement, Italy concluded a number of agreements (*intese*) with other religious denominations (different

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<sup>4</sup> C. SAINT-BLANCAT, *Italy*, in *The Oxford Handbook of European Islam*, edited by J. Cesari, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014, p. 291.

<sup>5</sup> See, among the other judgments, n. 203 of 12 April 1989.

<sup>6</sup> About these discussions see, among others, R. MAZZOLA, *Attualità ed inattualità di un progetto educativo: l'insegnamento della religione cattolica nel sistema scolastico pubblico italiano*, in *Insegnamenti e insegnanti di religione nella scuola pubblica italiana*, edited by D. Bilotti, A. Mantineo, S. Montesano, Giuffrè, Milano, 2014, pp. 21 ff.

<sup>7</sup> See article 9 of the law n. 121/1985 (implementing the 1984 Concordat) and the implementing agreements between the Ministry of Education and the Italian Conference of Bishops (decrees n. 751 of 1985; 202 of 1990; 175 of 2012).



Christian-Protestant churches, Jews, and more recently, Buddhists, Hindus, Orthodox Church), according to article 8.3 of the Constitution. As soon as an agreement is signed, a religious community can organize their religious teaching in the public schools. The model for these lessons is the Catholic education system: lessons are managed by each religious denomination, upon accord with the school authorities. One might say that there is a number of 'institutional' teachings, based on the structure of the Italian system of State-religions relations.

It is interesting to note that almost all these agreements (except from the one with Jewish community) speak about a teaching on the religious phenomenon, and not about a specific religion. The aim of these provisions is to provide minority communities with lessons managed by themselves and not by the Catholic Church, in order to give pupils a general knowledge on religion.

Apart from the intese, different state provisions on education confirm the right of Catholic Church and of religions with agreement to establish religious lessons<sup>8</sup>, but no other teaching about religion, nor interreligious teaching is possible according to the laws on public education.

Until now, no Muslim organization has signed an agreement with the state. This is due to different problems encountered by Muslims in Italy (lack of representation, lack of legal personality of the main Muslim organizations, the existence of many different associations without a common program about the relations with the State, etc.), therefore Islamic community does not have the right to establish religious teaching in public schools. Before analyzing this issue, it is necessary to give some data about the general situation of Islam in Italy.

### **3 - Religious education in public schools: the situation of Islam**

#### **3.1 - Some data about the Islamic presence in Italy**

Except for the settlement of Muslims in Southern Italy during the seventh and eighth centuries, Islam was almost absent in Italy until the 1970s. By the 1970s and 1980s, Italy had begun to attract migrant workers, among them Muslims from North Africa and Albania. Mainly due to these immigration flows, Islam is today the second largest religion in the country, after Catholicism. There is no official census of religious communities in

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<sup>8</sup> See legislative decree n. 297 of 16 April 1994, articles 310 and 311.



Italy, but according to the latest estimates, the number of Muslims, who are mostly Sunnis, is between 1.5 and 2.2 million (2.5% to 3.5% of the total population of about 60 million)<sup>9</sup>. Most Muslims are registered residents without Italian citizenship; moreover, Italy's Muslim community is significantly ethnically diverse: countries of origin are Morocco and other North-African countries, but also Albania, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Syria, and many others. These differences among Muslims in Italy has given birth to many different Muslim associations and organizations that tend to represent only a 'specific Islam' and often gather people belonging to a specific ethnic or national group<sup>10</sup>.

It is worth noting that Italian citizenship laws are based on the *jus sanguinis* principle and provide for strict conditions to acquire citizenship, while obtaining work and residency permits is easier. By consequence, many immigrants who have lived in Italy for years (and their children born there) cannot easily obtain Italian citizenship. The high number of Muslims without citizenship, including illegal immigrants, is understood as one of the obstacles to their integration into Italian society. However, the rising number of family reunifications and the growing number of young Muslims (second and third generation and new families) are changing the picture of the Islamic community living in Italy<sup>11</sup>. For example, there is an increasing presence of Muslim pupils in Italian public schools and this fact poses questions about their education.

### 3.2 - Religious education and Islam

As already said, no Muslim community has signed an agreement with the Italian state, so it does not enjoy the specific right to have a religious teaching in public schools.

This means that Muslims, as the other denominations without agreement, must refer to the "old" legislation of 1929-1930, which still applies since Italy has never approved a newer comprehensive law on religious freedom. In particular, Article 23 of Royal decree n. 289 of 1930 states that religious denominations may use the classrooms of state schools

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<sup>9</sup> See CESNUR survey, *Le religioni in Italia*, tab. n. 1 and 5, at [www.cesnur.org/religioni\\_italia/introduzione\\_01.htm](http://www.cesnur.org/religioni_italia/introduzione_01.htm).

<sup>10</sup> M. BOMBARDIERI, *Mappatura dell'associazionismo islamico in Italia*, in A. Angelucci, M. Bombardieri, D. Tacchini (eds.), *Islam e integrazione in Italia*, Marsilio, Venezia 2014, pp. 11-34; S. COGLIEVINA, *Italy*, in J. Nielsen et al. (eds.), *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, Brill, Leiden, 2014, vol. VI, pp. 334-351.

<sup>11</sup> M. SANTERINI, *Le seconde generazioni e il nodo della cittadinanza*, in A. Angelucci, M. Bombardieri, D. Tacchini (eds.), *Islam e integrazione in Italia*, cit., pp. 137-147.



for religious education, when there is a number of families requesting this and if there is no place of worship available with educational facilities. All the costs are paid by the denomination and an agreement between the religious group and the Director of the Regional School Office is necessary. Moreover, this type of religious education is to be organized off the lesson hours, so it seems to be a quasi-private education, even if developed in the public schools.

There is no other provisions on religious education in public schools during normal school hours, except from those that confirm the presence of a Catholic religion hour and the possibility of religious education organized by denominations with agreement (legislative decree n. 297 of 1994).

Actually, Islamic communities have never used the possibility stated in the Decree n. 289 of 1930. One reason for this is difficulty in the application of this provision; another, connected to the first one, is the scarcity of relationships (or even bad relationships) between Muslim groups and the public local authorities. At this regard, it is necessary to bear in mind that the Islamic community in Italy is mainly composed by non-Italian citizens and that it is ethnically diverse and divided in many different associations. Many Muslims have problems to understand the Italian language as well as the complex Italian bureaucratic system. Moreover, Islamic organizations in Italy lack legal recognition, which may hinder the development of better or official relationships with public authorities.

Legal recognition is also one of the requisites for the conclusion of an agreement with the State. There is a specific legal procedure – stated by the legislation of 1929 – to obtain the recognition of legal personality and religious bodies have to be given greenlight both from a political authority (the Council of Ministers) and from a judiciary body (the Council of State)<sup>12</sup>. At the moment, the only Muslim organization with legal recognition is the Islamic Cultural Centre of Italy (Centro Islamico Culturale d'Italia), also known as the Mosque of Rome, as it is the organisation that promoted the construction of the Mosque of Rome in the 1970s. However, this organization is not considered as representative for the whole Italian Islamic community. Other associations are also trying to obtain legal recognition in order to request the signature of an *intesa*, but divisions among the different organisations, as well as other political obstacles, have hindered the community's efforts to sign an accord<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> See article 2 of Law n. 1159 of 1929.

<sup>13</sup> For an overview, see **S. COGLIEVINA**, *Annotated Legal Documents on Islam in Europe: Italy*, Brill, Leiden, 2016, pp. 30 ff.





#### 4 - The religious education in plural Italy: challenges and gaps

The Italian religious education system is under intense discussion today. It is, as we have seen, established decades ago and structured on the basis of the strong and majoritarian presence of Catholics in the country. The changes of the legislation in the 80s-90s thus provided some tools that take into account religious pluralism. However, today these tools seem to be only partially useful and the increasing religious diversity in the country poses new questions about how to organize religious education and how Islam can have a room in the Italian public schools.

There are at least three challenges arising with regard to the existing Italian religious education system.

The first one is the loss of importance of the Catholic education. There are less and less pupils who choose to attend the Catholic religion teaching. The loss of participants to the 'Catholic hour' is not always the same: it changes with regard to different regions and school cycles, but it is a trend since many years<sup>14</sup>. Someone has observed that Catholic education is seen like a specific confessional and ecclesiastical lesson, not as a cultural necessity or as something linked to the national identity (as it was in the past). Furthermore, many argue that national identity needs to be re-thought, taking into account religious pluralism and different values in Italian society (especially among young people)<sup>15</sup>.

Secondly, there is a debate around new forms of religious education and the emerging need for a pluralistic religious education. Many different religions are spread among the Italian population, also among young people and pupils. If we look at the ethnic origins, the number of young people of foreign origin has been increasing in the last decade (they represent a 22% of all the foreign population) and they represent 7% of all the students in Italian schools<sup>16</sup>. The educational system has to consider the presence of children of different cultures, learning to have relationships with their foreign families too<sup>17</sup>.

Scholars and (in some cases) politicians have questioned the presence of a Catholic education in public schools, due to the decreasing number of

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<sup>14</sup> See data on the website of the Italian Conference of Bishops: (<http://irc.chiesacattolica.it/category/dati-avventisi/>).

<sup>15</sup> R. MAZZOLA, *Attualità ed inattualità di un progetto educativo*, cit., p. 13 ff.

<sup>16</sup> Data of the 2009 report of Caritas (CARITAS/MIGRANTES, *Immigrazione. Dossier Statistico 2009*, IDOS, Roma, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> M. AMBROSINI, E. CANEVA, *Tolerance and Cultural Diversity Discourses in Italy*, Accept Pluralism Research Project, Firenze: European University Institute, 2010, p. 13 (available at <http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/19776>).



pupils attending it and to the changing needs in the Italian society. They claim that a more comprehensive teaching *about* religions would be more useful for a better understanding of contemporary plural society<sup>18</sup>, as stated by the Toledo-OSCE principles<sup>19</sup>. It is also worth noting that religious denominations with agreement often don't organize religious education – due to practical problems or to the scarcity of funds and requests from the families – so the Catholic lessons often represent the only existing form of religious education in Italy. However, as already noted, a pluralistic religious teaching or a cultural teaching *about* religion is not included in the Italian legislation in force.

The third challenge is represented by the increasing requests from Muslim families. Among foreign pupils, many are Muslim. Muslim families are sometimes living in Italy since many years and they present their requests on accommodation of religious needs in school. Claims from Muslim families include to have a specific religious education in public schools and to have their religious practices recognized and accepted (dietary habits, Islamic veil, etc.) at school<sup>20</sup>. However, the legislation in force does not give many specific rights to Muslims in this field. While religious needs as halal food in the school canteens, or the use of certain clothes, are normally accommodated (mainly because of good practices and good will of school authorities), the issue of a specific Islamic education would need to be considered by the policies and the legislation. The lack of an agreement with Islam and the lack of other legislative or political initiatives have made it impossible to think about Islamic education in the Italian public schools.

## 5 - Muslims at school and Religious Education: which solutions?

Is there any alternative to the model shaped by the agreements with religious denominations? What can Muslims do to get religious education

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<sup>18</sup> M.C. GIORDA, *L'insegnamento della storia delle religioni nella scuola italiana*, in G. Arrigoni, C. Consonni, A. Però (eds.), *Proposte per l'insegnamento della storia delle religioni nelle scuole italiane*, Sestante, Bergamo, 2014, pp. 149-176; R. MAZZOLA, *Attualità ed inattualità di un progetto educativo*, cit., pp. 15 ff.

<sup>19</sup> See: OSCE, *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, 2007 (available at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/29154>).

<sup>20</sup> R. GUOLO, *Islam e scuola pubblica. Orientamenti di genitori di religione islamica in Piemonte*, in *Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica*, 4, 2 (available at [https://www.unicef.it/Allegati/Islam\\_e\\_scuola\\_pubblica.pdf](https://www.unicef.it/Allegati/Islam_e_scuola_pubblica.pdf)).





in Italian schools? As we have seen, the possibility given by the Decree of 1930 is not used: so, which alternatives are possible?

### 5.1 - Alternative 1: private schools

One possibility could be private schools, since the legislation in force gives quite wide possibilities to open private and faith schools. First of all, article 33.3 of the Constitution entitles organizations and private individuals to set up schools and educational institutes at no cost to the state.

As for specific religious schools (faith schools), religious communities must comply with many pre-requisites in order to have their own private schools. Again, religious denominations with an agreement with the State have been ensured the right to establish and maintain denominational schools. For denominations without such an agreement (like Muslims in Italy), article 24 of Royal decree n. 289 of 1930 gives recognized religious bodies the opportunity to open private schools at no cost to the State; however, only bodies with legal personality can establish this type of school. As already said, the Italian Muslim community has only one recognized body (the Islamic Cultural Centre, based in Rome) that has never availed itself of this opportunity.

Outside the legislation of 1929-1930 and apart from the agreements between the state and religions, a general Act on private education system (n. 62 of 2000) has defined the rules on establishing non-State schools. Basically, we can distinguish two types of schools: merely private schools and private schools with an equal status for the State. In particular, Act n. 62 of 2000 establishes that private schools can be recognized on an equal basis with State schools, in accordance with Article 33.4 of the Constitution: schools can apply for equality of status if they comply with some requisites (about programs, teachers, etc.) and, if they obtain equal status, they are called "scuole paritarie". Paritarie are publicly subsidized; they also have the authority to issue certificates with the same legal value as qualifications from State schools. Private schools with non-equal status (scuole non paritarie) can also operate in Italy; however, they cannot receive public subsidies and they are totally funded by the founder private entities<sup>21</sup>.

Muslim communities can establish (in theory) both types of schools, but they often encounter difficulties. Establishing a paritaria private school becomes problematic because the school authorities shall demonstrate to offer a public service, which is quite difficult to show if the founding

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<sup>21</sup> A. FERRARI, S. FERRARI, *Religion and the Secular State, The Italian Case* (Italian National Reports to Washington 2010), in *The Cardozo Electronic Law Bulletin*, vol. 16 (1), Special Issue (available at <http://cardozolawbulletin.blogspot.it/search/label/16>).



principles of the school are strictly religious<sup>22</sup>. Another problem is related to costs. In fact, private schools can be established at no cost to the state (according to the Constitution and to Act n. 62 of 2000) and if a school cannot apply for the equal-status will not receive any public subsidies. In addition to that, as we have seen, Muslims in Italy are mainly not Italian citizens and often have no financial resources in order to open schools at their own expenses<sup>23</sup>.

This is one of the reason why some attempts have been made for opening foreign schools, another type of non-state schools, financed by Muslim majority countries. Projects for the establishment of Islamic foreign schools have created objections and opposition; therefore we have few cases, mainly in the north of Italy.

A quite famous case, which caused a wide political and public debate, was that of the school of Via Quaranta in Milan. This school included a nursery school, a primary and a secondary school. Its purpose was not only to teach Islam and Arabic to children (mainly Egyptians), but also to prepare them for the final exams at the Embassy (in order to have a school title recognized in the countries of origin). Connected to these aims, a project of integration was promoted with the support of the Regional Educational Department and the Milan municipality, with the organization of Italian language courses, in order to avoid educational segregation of pupils. Nevertheless, the municipality took initiatives to close the Islamic school, stating that the building was inadequate and highlighting problems of hygiene. It was also stated that the school was not recognized by the state and that the attendance of Italian state schools would be a better way for the integration of children. Besides these reasons, there were probably political motives and the fear of creating a ghetto for Muslim pupils, or not to control the contents of educational programs in that school. The school closed in 2005.

Another case is the Arab school in Via Ventura, on the outskirts of Milan. This school also encountered many difficulties before it could open in 2006: there were bureaucratic problems (i.e. problems in obtaining permission to use the spaces for educational purposes; urbanistic

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<sup>22</sup> M. PARISI, *Parità scolastica, educazione religiosa e scuole islamiche: problemi e prospettive*, in V. Tozzi, M. Parisi (a cura di), *Immigrazione e soluzioni legislative in Italia e Spagna. Istanze autonomistiche, società multiculturali, diritti civili e di cittadinanza*, Ed. Arti Grafiche la Regione, Ripalimosani, 2008, pp. 41-85.

<sup>23</sup> It is to note that Muslim groups in Italy often have problems also to find resources to maintain places of worship.



problems...) that hid ideological/political reasons. The school continues to operate today (although with some criticism)<sup>24</sup>.

In summary, legislation in force gives quite wide possibilities to open private and faith schools, but religious communities must comply with many prerequisites and this path is not always easy. Moreover, we have to remind that the private educational system is not so spread in Italy and Muslim families often prefer to use the public education system, which is also a way of integrating children in the Italian society, giving them qualification for the job market and so on<sup>25</sup>.

## 5.2 - Alternative 1-bis: Homeschooling

Under certain conditions, parental schooling (“homeschooling”) and merely private schools are permitted in Italy and can satisfy the requirement of compulsory education<sup>26</sup>. Parents or caregivers are responsible for the completion of the cycle of compulsory education; the supervision of its implementation is the responsibility of school directors and of local authorities where pupils live. At the end of a school cycle, pupils must pass an examination in order to get a certification, which is necessary for continuing to study in a state educational institution (for example to access upper secondary schools or university).

In theory, Muslim families may give private education (including religious education) to their pupils following this system, but many declare the need to make their children attend public schools, in order to foster their integration in the Italian society and give them knowledge of Italian language and culture, etc.<sup>27</sup>. Moreover, homeschooling is a quite unknown system in Italy, so it is difficult to imagine such a solution carried out by Muslim families, mainly composed by foreign citizens.

## 5.3 - Alternative 2: introduction of lessons about religion

As already mentioned, nowadays a general teaching about religions is not included in Italian schools. The lack of knowledge on religiosity, on values that are common to different religions and that can foster the “living

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<sup>24</sup> See the press releases at <http://www.coreis.it/comunicati/comunicato.php?id=182> and <http://hubmiur.pubblica.istruzione.it/web/ministero/cs020713bis>. See also **A. ACQUAVIVA**, *Scuola pubblica e privata e Islam*, in C. Cardia, G. Dalla Torre (eds.), *Comunità islamiche in Italia. Identità e forme giuridiche*, Giappichelli, Torino, 2015, p. 474.

<sup>25</sup> **A. ACQUAVIVA**, *Scuola pubblica e privata e Islam*, cit., pp. 451-478.

<sup>26</sup> See art. 111 of legislative decree n. 297 of 1994.

<sup>27</sup> **R. GUOLO**, *Islam e scuola pubblica*, cit.



together” in a plural society have been pointed out by both academics and politicians.

Following the initiatives of families or teachers, some projects have been developed in some public schools (especially in the Northern Regions of Italy), in order to have a more pluralistic and interreligious education for pupils<sup>28</sup>. In some cases, for example, different religious leaders (including imams) have visited schools and presented their beliefs and communities to the students; seminars on different cultures and religions have also been organized<sup>29</sup>.

These projects are normally arranged outside the hour dedicated to religious education, and sometimes also outside school hours, as a sort of complementary activity. From a legislative point of view, there are some general provisions about the possibility of organizing optional educational activities, free of charge and under the responsibility of the school, taking into account the interests and requests of families. Among other provisions, Article 7 of decree n. 59 of 2004, defining the teaching programs and objectives of the primary school cycle, states this possibility. The provision does not mention religious aspects, but lessons about religions may be included in such optional activities. This ‘solution’ can give, at least, some sort of education about Islam, but it is subordinate to the single initiatives and to the good will of schools authorities.

Among other initiatives, in 2012 an agreement between one of the Italian Islamic organizations (the Co.Re.Is., Religious Islamic Community, based in Milan) and the Ministry for Education was signed, in order to foster projects of intercultural and interreligious education in public schools<sup>30</sup>. However, the real impact and the concrete initiatives taken, following this agreement, are not very well known.

It is worth noting that Muslim families are normally in favor with regard to these initiatives, but they do not want to substitute the request of an Islamic religion hour with this type of lessons<sup>31</sup>.

#### 5.4 - Alternative 3: Muslim pupils and their participation in the Catholic religion lessons

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<sup>28</sup> A. ACQUAVIVA, *Scuola pubblica e privata e Islam*, cit., p. 470.

<sup>29</sup> M.C. GIORDA, *L'insegnamento della storia delle religioni nella scuola italiana*, cit.; R. GUOLO, *Islam e scuola pubblica*, cit.; D. BIANCHINI JESURUM, *Ruolo della famiglia e della scuola nel cammino verso l'integrazione*, in C. Cardia, G. Dalla Torre (eds.), *Comunità islamiche in Italia*, cit., pp. 413-449.

<sup>30</sup> See the press releases at <http://www.coreis.it/comunicati/comunicato.php?id=182> and <http://hubmiur.pubblica.istruzione.it/web/ministero/cs020713bis>.

<sup>31</sup> R. GUOLO, *Islam e scuola pubblica*, cit.



This solution is a 'no-solution' but it is often practiced by Muslims in order to accommodate their needs about religious education at school. In fact, Muslims families often permit their children to attend Catholic religion lessons, in order to give them some notions on religion at least<sup>32</sup>. In order to understand this choice, it is worth noting that Catholic education has not a catechistic approach and it includes in the programs information about other religions of the world, general concepts about religiosity and spiritual attitudes of humanity, moral values, and so on.

This 'solution' has pros and cons: on the one hand, the participation of Muslim pupils in Catholic lessons could give a more pluralistic perspective to religious education itself; moreover, this encourages integration and dialogue among students belonging to different faiths. On the other hand, the success of such a solution depends from the attitudes of pupils, from each Catholic religious education teacher, from other characteristics of the concrete situation. Moreover, the programs of Catholic lessons and teachers training are established – according to the Agreement of 1984 – by the Catholic Church authorities, so from a Catholic point of view. Therefore, this cannot represent a very pluralistic teaching: this can be a provisional way of covering the need for a cultural integration and for a pluralistic religious education, but cannot be the best solution for giving a room to Islamic educational needs.

## 6 - Conclusions: challenges, problems and future perspectives

As we have seen, the religious education system in Italy is structured in a way that we can synthesize as follows:

- a) a strong and historical presence of Catholic education;
- b) a denominational character of religious education, mainly disciplined through agreements with religions and considered as a matter concerning religious denominations and their relations with the State;
- c) scarce possibilities for religious denominations without agreement to have their own religious education in public schools without agreement;
- d) no provision on teaching *about* religion.

This system was originally thought as open to religious pluralism: in fact, the conclusion of agreements between the State and non-Catholic religions should have given to them similar rights as the Catholic Church has. However, the conclusion of an agreement is a difficult path for some

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<sup>32</sup> A.T. NEGRI, S. SCARANARI INTROVIGNE, *I ragazzi musulmani nella scuola statale. Il caso del Piemonte*, Harmattan, Torino, 2008.





religious communities (especially Muslims), therefore the organization of religious education has demonstrated to be not so pluralistic<sup>33</sup>.

What is, then, the room for Islamic education in Italy?

As we have seen, in addition to the very limited rights for Muslims within the public education system, also the possibilities to use private schools for their religious education are scarce.

This situation is not only due to the characteristics of the education system in Italy (and of the religious education). In fact, these problems are also linked with the status of Islam in Italy. For example, an argument used to explain the situation of Islam in Italian schools is the lack of an agreement with the state. Moreover, the lack of a unitary representation of different Muslim organizations does not help in this sense. The system of legal recognition of religious denominations has only rarely been applied to Muslim organizations, the reason being that Italian society and system of relationship with religious communities are historically shaped by Catholicism. Consequently, non-Catholic religious organizations have difficulty in obtaining recognition by institutions, and by the society too.

More generally, the State does not have a clear and defined political approach or legislation to address the presence and the requests of Muslims, who are believed to undermine the traditional notions of identity and citizenship (strictly linked to Catholicism, among other factors)<sup>34</sup>. The status of Islam is often considered as a security issue and not as an integration and religious freedom issue. The Italian State does not respond to the Muslims' requests in a structured way, but on a case-by-case basis and often in an informal way. Sometimes, relationships between the local institutions and Muslims are well developed, so Muslims' needs are accommodated; in other cases, accommodation depends from the good will of the authorities of each public structure.

With regard to the school system, this approach towards Muslims emerges clearly, together with a traditional approach about religious education. In fact, Catholic education has always been confirmed and rarely someone calls it into question; because it is provided by the agreement with the Catholic Church, it is also difficult to change its organization. Sometimes Catholic lessons are even considered as a way of offering general religious education open to non-Catholic pupils, and as a solution for integrating Muslim students in Italian society. Someway, the strong

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<sup>33</sup> **G. CIMBALO**, *Gli 'altri' insegnamenti religiosi nella scuola pubblica: un modello di pluralismo ancora attuale?*, in *Insegnamenti e insegnanti di religione nella scuola pubblica italiana*, cit., pp. 65-104.

<sup>34</sup> **M. AMBROSINI, E. CANEVA**, *Tolerance and Cultural Diversity Discourses in Italy*, Accept Pluralism Research Project, cit.





roots of Catholic education in Italian schools hinder a frank and open discussion about other models of religious education and about other solutions for the integration of Muslims at school.

This does not mean a complete lack of accommodation of Muslims' requests. As already said, needs of Muslim families are sometimes taken into account, through specific cultural or interreligious projects. So, again, we have a case-by-case approach towards Muslim requests, which can be useful until Islam has not an agreement with the state; however, this approach subordinates religious freedom in education to the willingness of school authorities or to different free initiatives of families and local communities.

Apart from these initiatives, indeed, religious education in Italy seems to be a blocked system. There is no changes in the legislation or in school policies, which remain anchored to the presence of agreements with different religious denominations. For Muslim communities, this means: no specific (denominational) Islamic education, nor a general religious education in public schools.

This situation is problematic, and not only for Muslims. A set of denominational teachings of religion could be useful in the past, but less today: leaving to each religious community its own religious school-course can hardly help to create integration, emphasizing, on the contrary, different belongings and cultures. Scholars underline the need for a deeper thinking on religious education, with a focus on common values and on a general knowledge of different faiths; there is an urgent call to revise religious education system in a more pluralistic perspective. This is true also if one considers the very poor culture on religion that emerges among Italians<sup>35</sup>.

In conclusion, I would like to argue that Italy should improve attention for Muslim situation at school, for a better integration of Islam and Muslims in Italian society. Moreover, a more complete cultural program on religions, using school hours, is needed, and it would be useful for everybody, also in the view of an improvement of the knowledge on Islam.

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<sup>35</sup> A. Melloni (a cura di), *Rapporto sull'analfabetismo religioso in Italia*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2014.