

Chapter 14

Educating to Democracy and Social Participation through a “History of Religion” Course

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the potentialities and the limits of the Italian Religious Education and the healthiness of the knowledge about religions, this chapter introduces an experimental method to teach religions created in the last few years in some Italian secondary schools. The experimentation the article is focused on is one of the consequences arisen out of the debate on the option of an education about religions rather than into or from one religion. The background is the inadequacy of the Italian educational proposal related to the cultural and religious pluralism of our society, not only in a scholastic context, but also in a more popular level of the public debate. Since in a democratic and intercultural society the comprehension of different religious realities is indispensable, the development in Italy - as it already happens in other European countries - of a new knowledge about religions should undoubtedly serve this purpose: educating to democracy and social participation is possible through a “History of Religion” course.

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INTRODUCTION

The need to examine religious pluralism as a component of intercultural education as presented in the Debray report in 2002 was confirmed in the conclusion statement of the Conference of European ministers of education dedicated to the theme of intercultural education (Athens, 10-12 November 2003) and in Toledo Principles (Osce/Odhir 2007): in our society made by different cultural and religious pluralisms, education about religions is an urgency concerning both the cognitive and the emotional approaches to religions, faiths and beliefs.

In the diversified European landscape of different relationships between political institutions and school systems, an important role could be played by the academic institutions, meaning the world of historical and religious studies in constant dialogue with the world of theological studies, in order to trace common paths for an education concerning religion/religions in compliance with the principles of secular societies. The final goal should be to find solid “common European points” for an education which is more and more tightly bound to research.

For the present, in the framework of current and future school reforms, planned in every EU country, Religious Education has been included in an overall process of renovation, with results sometimes greatly differing from country to country; in some cases this subject has a cognitive role, in others it has ethical and civic duties, and there is no doubt that there is a strong distinction between a confessional teaching of religion and a cultural one. An important and widely accepted objective is to educate a culturally and religiously heterogeneous school-attending population to the nature of a multicultural world. As far as the latter is concerned, we are *grosso modo* facing two different models: the “out of religion” one which means to start the acknowledgement of a clearly defined religious knowledge within school sub-

jects taught all over Europe and the second model which is “learning about,” including “learning from the study of” religions: this approach should be able to establish a connection between religious subjects with the daily lives and experiences of the students and to open up important windows relative to the interpretation of the links tying religion/morality/lifestyles.

In Italy, 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.

Since in Italy thanks to some experimentation there is the chance to teach and learn *about religions*, this paper describes one of those experiences for the students of secondary schools aiming to deepen religions as a cultural and historical result. The program of this course of “History of Religions” includes the history of the most important monotheistic religions, from West to East, studied in relation to modernity and contemporary thought, with particular attention to the pluralism of the contemporary global society.

The first significant example concerning the teaching of History of Religions in schools dates back to 1978 and went on up to the ‘80s; it was planned and carried out by Prof. G. Piccaluga, Professor in Religion of the Classic World at “La Sapienza” University in Rome. In order to approach historical and religious topics at school the use of Greek mythology and tragedy was chosen as an anchor point. These narrations allowed the introduction and development of several essential topics concerning History of Religions: characteristics, structures and meanings of sacred stories, types and meanings of rituals, analysis of the forms and objects serving the cult, cosmological basics concerning the existence of man and social behaviour. The teachers of History of Religions read and commented Greek texts with students and

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