

Chapter 15

The History of Religions as a Tool for Citizenship Education of Children: An Experience in a Primary School

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ABSTRACT

In the context of an increasingly multicultural Italy, teaching young people about different cultural and religious identities is in order. The presence in schools of a growing number of children from different cultural backgrounds, languages, and religions begs for the creation of a constructive and respectful dialogue that helps to develop the ability to listen to others, promoting a democratic path of inclusion. This project puts forward a course on Religious Education, already active in a second grade class of an elementary school in Turin, and in several elementary schools in the province of Latina, as from 2011. The methodology of the project involves a series of classroom workshops based on the recollection of personal experiences of students, free participation in group dynamics, and discussion about the different lifestyles. It aims at teaching a correct religious terminology, the historical and geographic development of religions, and several religious customs. This approach to Citizen Education through the knowledge or religious traditions is a pioneering initiative in Italy.

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INTRODUCTION

These observations led to the idea of setting up a course catered for the needs of elementary schools in the provinces of Turin and Rome, in order to encourage the debate about the meaning of democracy and plural coexistence, based on the knowledge of the various religions present in our territory.

The methodology involves a series of classroom workshops: educators of the associations ACMOS and UvaUniversoaltro conduct discussions and in-depth workshops about the following topics:

- Discussion and definition of the concept of religion, ranging from the children's pre-existing knowledge and experiences to prejudices and stereotypes.
- The concept of religious pluralism in the democratic context.
- The main religions of the world presented through their symbols, traditions, history and celebrations.

Starting from the recollection of personal experiences within the educational environment, the project is structured in order to introduce the students to the knowledge of the religious dimension through the use of conceptual maps, geographic locations and creative interaction. The project aims at teaching cultural differences through the analysis of symbols, the comparison and contrast of rites and culinary traditions. In this way, it is possible to work on the concept of cultural diversity.

The latter, perceived both in terms of content and images, shapes the theoretical basis on which to educate for active citizenship, facilitating the free participation of the students in group dynamics that promote respect for each other's identity, through the discussion and recognition of different lifestyles. This contributes to the development of

new forms of associative memory and relational attitude, important factors for the future achievement of cross-cultural maturity.

Along history, Italy has always welcomed communities of different faiths: the Jewish community has been present in Rome for 2,000 years; Lutherans arrived in Venice in the 1500s and the Waldesians established themselves in Piedmont in the 12th century. With the current flow of immigration into Italy, the number of religions has risen dramatically. A CENSUR study (www.cesnur.it) recognizes the presence of over 600 of them. It has been established that there are now living in Italy approximately one million Muslims -of which 400,000 are Italian-born- over 100,000 Italian Buddhists, and last but not least, a less numerous Jewish community that -their number notwithstanding- possesses an invaluable cultural heritage.

Despite all this, the Italian school system is still not capable of dealing with this religious diversity. Any attempts at intercultural education have deserved only occasional attention (M.Giorda, A.Saggioro 2011).

In classes composed by children with different faiths, knowledge of different religions is essential as they represent a cultural identity that cannot and must not be ignored, if an improvement in social coexistence is to be attained.

Following several episodes of cultural miscomprehension of students' parents (read here: <http://acmos.net/2010/10/caso-%E2%80%9Cburqa%E2%80%9D-a-sonnino>), the Istituto Leonardo da Vinci elementary school in Sonnino, Latina, asked religious history students and members of the UvaUniversoaltro association to devise and deliver a course on Religious Education. The project began on an experimental basis in Turin in October 2010 under the academic supervision of Mariachiara Giorda, PhD. The pilot project was first implemented in an elementary school. A class of 23 second-graders -of which eight were Italian, two Chinese, one Albanian,

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