

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM BETWEEN NORMATIVITY AND PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract: *There's no doubt that in contemporary societies, even more complex and mixed, multicultural, religious pluralism is a central matter, connected with problems that derive from the clashes between different groups and identities. Considering the fact that religion and belief continue to play a central role in defining the social, cultural and political structures, even in "secularized" societies, try to solve and mediate the conflicts is the challenge of our century. But how can we face the cohabitation of different necessities, in order to create a homogeneous system, and at the same time guarantee the rights and survival of every religious identity? My study would like to analyze some attempts made in these years, at theoretical and political level, to conceive and theorize some rules and principles usable to regulate the problems linked to religious pluralism, underlining how difficult it is to apply normative and abstract rules on an empirical and concrete level, modified by historical and temporary changes and transformations. In particular, I would like to analyze these issues focusing on two Documents, The Principles of Toledo and the Abu Dhabi Guidelines on Teaching Interfaith Tolerance: the first written in 2007, and the second in 2019, both make attention on the importance of education, in order to build a more equal and plural society, and they show a kind of "normative project" that societies try to create and observe; is this project enough to respond to the complexity of the social order and changes, linked to religious, ethnic and cultural changes?*

Keywords: secularism, religious pluralism, religious education, multiculturalism, liberal democracy.

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Introduction

How can religious diversity be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies?

We can start from this question that emerges from the analysis of the plural and multicultural aspect of contemporary European societies, and of the consequent observation of the clashes and contrasts that often arise, when different religious and cultural requests are in opposition.

I will try to answer the question starting from a theoretical point of view, defining what multiculturalism means, and why it is important to investigate this concept.

The need to carry out this analysis stems from the fact that, in some way, multiculturalism has become an issue that has taken on a problematic meaning, highlighting the dissatisfaction with a language inherited from the past – with the terms *assimilation*, *integration*, *melting pot* - which shows all its inadequacy towards social situations in rapid and constant change, but being itself questioned by the more recent concept of *interculturalism*, for example.

In the second part of the article, I will focus on the programmatic elaborations created at a political level, in particular by the Council of Europe, in order to organize and promote religious education as a means to counter religious conflicts worldwide.

Particular attention will be paid, in the last paragraph, to two documents, the *Principles of Toledo* and the *Abu Dhabi Guidelines*: both are, but in different ways, examples of religious education policies, made in order to create attention on religious pluralism and on religious education as a solution to conflicts and possibility of constructing a more equal society.

1. What is multiculturalism

Talking about multiculturalism implies, first of all, dwelling on the term and its meaning, in order to try to contextualize the issue and its developments, from various points of view.

So, it is possible to start from this point: if, in order to describe the existence of several cultural or ethnic groups within a society, with their distinct identity and traditions, using the term *multiculturality* can be more adequate, *multiculturalism* is a fundamental concept because, as a normative term, it indicates some theoretical efforts and attempts made for reaching a condition of equal expression and coexistence in European contemporary societies. These efforts, in fact, are necessary, and they encounter difficulties when it is essential to think about policies and strategies, in order to conceptualize and then materialize, in an effective way, models of *integration* and *coexistence* between different cultures.

One of the biggest issues seems to be, in fact, the difficulty to integrate the different communities, without forcing them to adopt the “culture of the majority”, but rather allowing them to maintain their own cultures and identities, at the same time being part of the society in which they are, society that needs some general normative political

lines, that has to be valid for everyone. So, multiculturalism has been used as a policy label and as a political science concept to encompass different policies and perspectives on how to deal with individual and collective ethnic, cultural and religious diversity.

We can in fact define multiculturalism as a divergent set of normative ideals and policy programs that promote (in different ways and by different means) the incorporation and participation of immigrants and ethnic minorities into state and society, taking their modes of ethnic and religious difference into account (Triandafyllidou, 2012).

The aspect at stake is, therefore, the evident difficulty of including, in the public sphere, all the visions considered „different“, when the so-called „normal“ ones are already part of it: this critical point is so evident when religion is involved, because it has and maintains a very strong identity connotation.

The simultaneous presence of a plurality of different groups, derived from globalization and immigration, in fact, necessarily involves the structure of the modern liberal-democratic state which has, erroneously, at least in this historical phase, believed itself to be able to eliminate aspects as particularity and difference, characteristics of the identity of a community.

Liberalism, in fact, presents itself as a view with a specific concept of the human being and a specific concept of religion, that elaborates the idea of a “neutral” public space in which agreement can be safeguarded, but which at the same time runs the risk of not being able to get out of its abstract principles and, above all, of not thinking in concrete the relationship with difference and other models of conceiving the public space and religion.

On the other hand, it is true that there is no single model of liberalism, and it is therefore problematic to define it unambiguously: we can just think of the debate that has developed between the different liberal models, referring to deliberative and procedural conceptions of the democratic process, and between liberalism and communitarianism.

Anyway, political liberalism, with its pillars of religious freedom on the one hand and the neutrality of the government on the other, is assumed to be the basic condition for inter-worldview dialogue, taking on the role of an almost invisible backdrop for dialogue, able to create a kind of neutral and thus safe space in which dialogue is made possible. Those assumptions, however, are problematic. After all, liberalism is also a worldview or ideology, with a specific concept of the human being and a specific concept of religion. In fact, the “neutral” space in which dialogue should develop is already “filled” with specific values that will lead their own lives if they are not included as a dimension in the space of encounter. More emphatically, if the liberal values are not critically examined, the call for strong tolerance runs the risk of serving intolerant discourses and practices, which silence cultural and religious minorities that differ from the liberal norm (Moyaert, 2018).

The basic question is, in fact, how, in a political culture based on specific cultural premises, it is possible to integrate cultural groups, whose values diverge from these premises.

Focusing on religion, the problem emerges in a very evident way, considering the fact that religion and belief continue to play a central role in defining the social, cultural and political structures, even in “secularized” societies.

But how can we face the cohabitation of different necessities of the groups, in order to create a homogeneous system, and at the same time guarantee the rights and survival of every religious identity?

2. The secularization paradigm

We can start from the problematics, and in a way “inadequacy”, of the secularization paradigm, as it has been conceived before, to explain the complex condition of religious diversity and religious pluralism that characterize contemporary societies, in which pluralism and heterogeneity are evident and irrefutable features.

It is necessary in fact to move from a policy that was rooted in the paradigm of secularization to a policy that, in addition to secularization, also took the *pluralization* of society seriously, and also the public role that religions still play in the public sphere, influencing social and political changes.

In this way, the liberal-democratic model has to move from its normative setting of values, and face in a concrete way the matters of coexistence that characterize the social order of European societies.

Religion is in fact not simply disappearing but transforming: in this sense Casanova highlights the question when, starting from here, he states that rigid separatism, secularism or, to use an American terminology, the *wall of separation* between religion and politics are not inextricably linked to modernity or even to the democratic order of a state (Casanova, 2006).

After all, it is clear that the question of post-secularity cannot, but concern the multicultural debate, since, as Tariq Modood states, one cannot imagine a multiculturalism that does not consider religion, also because, except for language, the contents of cultures are largely made with religious material (Modood, 2007).

As a consequence, religion constitutes a sensitive point in the matters of coexistence, especially now, in a moment in which the tensions inside the social order in European societies are stronger, linked to the political framework, that worsen in this sense the general perception of people of religious and in general cultural otherness.

In particular, the question of religious education is linked with the politics of *inclusion* and the matter of *citizenship*, because educating to religious and cultural pluralism, starting from children, necessarily implicates the question of inclusion also at a political and legal level, that concerns for instance immigrants and so ethnic or religious minorities.

If the liberal-democratic model, in fact, bases its theoretical premises on an idea of openness to plurality as constituting its own structure, this starting point clashes with the concrete reality, when it is called to deliberate on the particular issues that pluralism brings with it.

The complexity is evident from the different models elaborated by the different European states, and from the difficulty of resolving the controversies connected to the management of tensions linked to, for instance, the construction of places of worship, the question of the veil, multicultural policies in the workplaces and at school.

Moreover, the situation is made more complex, because of an evident factor, present in the European actual background, according to which stereotypes, incorrect presentations, prejudices, misunderstandings and lack of understanding are an indisputable reality and are taking on more problematic forms.

This is evident for instance in the problematic relationship between the use of the *media* as Internet and Hate Speech, that is strongly connected to religious issues and religious belonging.

3. Practical resolutions

In view of this situation emerges the need to give shape to a society that is characterized by these kinds of complexities: how can European policies safeguard the plural expression of different groups, with particular attention on minorities, in a moment in which the matter of discrimination is still current, due to political issues, as well?

Starting from this, in fact, many attempts have been made in the past years in order to regulate and control the issue of freedom of belief and expression with regard to the state order. In particular, policies have been made to support a plural approach to religion in schools, with the conviction that starting from schools and new generations can be a fundamental and fruitful key to create a plural and equal society. These attempts generated significant debates about the place and purpose of religious and non-religious views in public life generally.

Even if national solutions remain greatly heterogeneous, it appears that multi-religious education is a crucial area of public learning by European national and international institutions. It is clear, in fact, and this is a very important and complex theoretical problem, that the state has to deal with these kinds of differences: if freedom of belief is one of the pillars of the liberal-democratic state's principles, the effort from a normative point of view is to guarantee this expression at a universal level, valid for everybody.

According to this, the connection between *pluralism*, *post-secular society* and *religious education* has been seen as the key to try to solve matters linked to coexistence problems, using in this way religious education as a cultural source for building a more equal society.

Considering this, the first organization that has, since the turn of the century, looked at the importance of religious education, is the OSCE, with the publication in 2007 of the *Principles of Toledo*.

Their elaboration started from the awareness that "recent events across the world, migratory processes and persistent misconceptions about religions and cultures have underscored the importance of issues related to tolerance and non-discrimination

and freedom of religion or belief”, importance derived from the consequent “misunderstandings, negative stereotypes, and provocative images used to depict others” that “are leading to heightened antagonism and sometimes even violence” (*Foreword of the Principles*, p.9).

As it is expressed in the *Aim and Purpose of the Principles*, they have been prepared in order to contribute to an improved understanding of the world’s increasing religious diversity and the growing presence of religion in the public sphere.

Their rationale is based on two core principles: first, that there is positive value in teaching that emphasizes respect for everyone’s right to freedom of religion and belief, and second, that teaching about religions and beliefs can reduce harmful misunderstandings and stereotypes.

The Principles focus solely on the educational approach, that seeks to provide teaching about different religions and beliefs as distinguished from instruction in a specific religion or belief, as would be the case when a particular religious or belief tradition is taught by members of that tradition and/or under the supervision of institutions representing it.

They “address the root causes of intolerance and discrimination by encouraging the development of comprehensive domestic education policies and strategies” and awareness-raising measures that “promote a greater understanding of and respect for different cultures, ethnicities, religions or beliefs” (p. 86) and that aim “to prevent intolerance and discrimination, including against Christians, Jews, Muslims and members of other religions” (p. 9).

It is important, in fact, according to the Principles, for young people to acquire a better understanding of the role that religions play in today’s pluralistic world. The need for such education will continue to grow as different cultures and identities interact with each other through travel, commerce, media or migration. Although a deeper understanding of religions will not automatically lead to greater tolerance and respect, ignorance increases the likelihood of misunderstanding, stereotyping, and conflict (*Forward of the Principles*).

According to Alberts (2010 p. 284), in order to make religious education effective, “there is no ‘middle way’ between a secular and a religious approach to RE. If RE is to be integrative and obligatory, the aim of the subject cannot be to provide children with faith or spirituality, as this would necessarily promote particular religious traditions, prioritizing them over other religious or secular views. The framework for integrative RE needs to be secular, keeping in mind the difference between a secular (non-religious) and a secularist (antireligious) approach.”

Since a secular approach is needed, the difficulty emerges when it must be assumed an adherence to this way of conceiving religion and its role in the state and in public space (and this obviously applies, within European countries, even for the religion that is culturally the majority that is the Christian one). This inevitably calls into question the concept of secularity, intended as the french *laïcité*, and the balance between different

way of thinking, in European nations, about the relationship between state and Church in a background in which, as we have seen, the borders are not so defined.

Following this path, other steps have been made by European policies in order to strengthen the role of education in solving conflicts: the Council of Europe, in particular, initiated a series of activities addressed at the valorization of religion as a dimension of intercultural education, leading to the *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* (Council of Europe, 2008).

A crucial step of the Council's work is also the *Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education* (adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 10 December 2008 at the 1044th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies).

In 2010, moreover, the *Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (EDC/HRE): and its Implementation* was published.

Following the theoretical line developed by these documents, in conceptual terms, religious beliefs represent a "source of identity" like others, such as ethnicity or cultural background, and it is thus possible to consider them a phenomenon which transcends doctrinal opposition. In didactic terms, the curricula should respect different displays of religious plurality existing in the territory schools, providing the pluralistic and non-confessional delivery of notions regarding all religions and their diverse cultural origins through non-conventional methods aimed at facilitating the comprehension of diversity. (Fabretti, 2013).

I would like now to focus on another document, very different from the others, but connected to them and very contemporary, because it was prepared in February 2019, when the United States and the United Arab Emirates convened *The First Regional Conference of the 2018 Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom on Interfaith Tolerance Education to Combat Extremism*. The conference brought together experts, senior government officials, and civil society organizations and religious leaders from different cultures and religions around the world to share their experiences, challenges and provide practical recommendations.

What is interesting about the conference is, however, the elaboration of the *Abu Dhabi Guidelines on Teaching Interfaith Tolerance Education*, developed to reflect the discussions at the conference and provide recommendations for governments and civil society organizations in order to strengthen religious education and teaching of interfaith tolerance between young generations.

It is clear that *The Principles of Toledo* and *The Abu Dhabi Guidelines* are different, because the former were drawn up by a European organization, the latter derive from a representative political act between two countries, but nevertheless they both stress in fact the same concept: the role of education in solving religious conflicts.

The fact that the Guidelines were conceived in a non-European context indicates that this issue is still central, at least at an ideal level, in the world policies of these years, but also demonstrates, at the same time, how much it is still a point that it is necessary

to strengthen and on which it is necessary to insist because, even at European level, it has not been fully implemented, as it can be seen from the fact that European countries still have very different policies in this regard.

4. Principles of Toledo and Abu Dhabi Guidelines: a comparison

This following and final part of the text is intended to be a little comparison of some expressions of the two documents, in order to show some similarities; some expressions of the Guidelines, in fact, seem to have been quoted from the Principles (not by chance, in the final part of the Guidelines the OSCE is cited as an important organization that can *empower* the implementation of religious education).

As the first thing, it may be noted that both refer to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, particularly to the Article 26(2): *Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.*

We can see below some points of the Principles and of the Guidelines, that focus on the same topics, using similar terms; as the first and central thing, we can notice the stress on the concept of *knowledge*: “Knowledge about religions and beliefs can reinforce appreciation of the importance of respect for everyone’s right to freedom of religion or belief, foster democratic citizenship, promote understanding of societal diversity and, at the same time, enhance social cohesion.” (Principles p. 13).

In the same way the Abu Dhabi Guidelines affirm: “Knowledge about religion, belief, and nonbelief systems found around the world and in a student’s home country can positively reinforce appreciation of the intrinsic human dignity of all persons, combat extremism and negative stereotyping, and decrease the likelihood of violence towards “the other.”

Following again the Principles: “Knowledge about religions and beliefs is an essential part of a quality education. It is required to understand much of history, literature, and art, and can be helpful in broadening one’s cultural horizons and in deepening one’s insight into the complexities of past and present.” (p. 14)

So the Abu Dhabi Guidelines: “Students who achieve a greater multicultural awareness will more likely appreciate a country’s diverse past and protect civic space for diversity of beliefs and practices. Interfaith and tolerance education can also help people of all ages better understand their own local social, cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity.”

Both emphasize the connection between religious education and human rights:

“Reasonable adaptations of policies in response to distinctive religious needs may be required to avoid violation of rights to freedom of religion or belief. Even when not strictly required as a matter of law, such adaptations and flexibility contribute to the building of a climate of tolerance and mutual respect.” (Principles p. 14)

“Teaching students about human rights and freedom of religion or belief can promote stronger social cohesion by ensuring students understand that all individuals carry these rights as equals.” (Abu Dhabi Guidelines)

This connection aims to create a more peaceful and inclusive society: “Knowledge about religions and beliefs has the valuable potential of reducing conflicts that are based on lack of understanding for others’ beliefs and of encouraging respect for their rights.” (Principles p. 14)

“Through interfaith and tolerance education, young people can develop the skills and attitudes they need to engage in constructive dialogue, face disagreement without threat of or threatening violence, and learn peaceful approaches to change and diversity.” (Abu Dhabi Guidelines)

At the end, we can see the focus on the importance of creating school curricula that can strengthen the teaching about religions and beliefs, from the religious education point of view:

“Evaluate existing curricula being used in public schools that touch upon teaching about religions and beliefs with a view to determining whether they promote respect for freedom-of-religion rights and whether they are impartial, balanced, inclusive, age appropriate, free of bias and meet professional standards.” (Principles p. 15)

“Establishing national textbook and curricula standards that actively promote tolerance towards all persons, as well as creating appropriate review and enforcement mechanisms to ensure the meeting of such standards, can improve learning outcomes about interfaith tolerance.” (Abu Dhabi Guidelines)

5. Conclusion

After an initial theoretical part, in which I tried to examine, at a theoretical level, what a multicultural society means, and what the implications of this definition are, I have in this last paragraph extracted some parts of the documents, in order to show some significant affinities in the contents, while being aware that both texts are extremely different from each other.

In particular, the Abu Dhabi Guidelines turns out to be interesting as a clue and a look at current events, and at how theoretical elaborations, such as the Principles of Toledo, the White Paper, the Council of Europe Charter, are then received and somehow translated into political languages and programs, albeit they could be only intentional.

Of course the analysis needs to be continued, given the continuous evolution that societies are experiencing and the multiple demands that pluralism brings with it within them, especially because the situations are very different depending on the European democracies, and therefore multiculturalism policies are also constantly being challenged.

What must be kept in mind, in particular, is this continuous balance between principles and theoretical-normative programs, theoretical in fact, and the need for application at a contingent level, in the socio-political reality; this is, of course, a political issue, concerning the governance of diversity in an increasingly contaminated

community, but it is also, without doubt, a philosophical issue, on which it is necessary to continue to reason, and which proves to be extremely connected to the concrete reality that wants (and must) be analyzed.

Precisely in view of this balance, in fact, it is important to focus on the elaboration of theoretical principles, which are intended to serve as a guide for the concrete political level; in this case, religious education at school proves to be all the more central, since it is fundamental for the construction, on a cultural level, of a different vision of religious pluralism which is too often treated in a confessional manner.

The idea of a religious education, which is secular, as an important part of education at all levels, in fact, would make it clear also at the political and social level how religious diversity can and must be approached.

To assume the importance of religious education, therefore, means to legitimize, on a concrete level, the existence of different religious horizons that, in fact, have weight in the social space, and therefore in the political choices that concern them; but to achieve this idea, it is necessary first to start from the recognition of the importance of education as a pillar for the construction of a democratic social and political body.

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