

MUSLIM MINORS: FREEDOM OF RELIGION, EDUCATION AND
POLICIES FOR SOCIAL INTEGRATION*

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SUMMARY: 1. - The role of religion in post-modern society; 2. - The child's self-determination and parents' educational choices; 3. - The Islamic family; 4. - The school as a place of education for interreligious coexistence; 5. - Multiple identities and integration processes; 6. - Intercultural education as a tool for social inclusion.

1. – The role of religion in post-modern society

An analysis of the policies of social integration can be tackled in many different ways, but all of them must first include a serious reflection on the role that religion and its various features play in today's multicultural society. In contemporary society, religion is more diversified and has a much more important role than it had only in the recent past. The most important difference is found in the increased public visibility of religious variability which has emerged with overwhelming intrusiveness into the post-modern society from the private and personal sphere in which it had been confined in the modern age.

Today religion not only influences but often determines what collective actions are taken. It conditions the political options of both national and international institutions which are called upon to manage issues of transnational importance such as peace between peoples and the protection of human rights including justice, health and education, to give just a few examples. Those who had decreed "the death of God" by predicting the irreversible social irrelevance of religion¹ have found themselves on the wrong side of history. With the crumbling

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of national borders and in the face of the consequent and progressive loss of identity, we are witnessing a renewed need for religiosity and the advent of what has been called the revenge of the God².

In the West, the geography of religion has profoundly changed. Today's confessional pluralism is the outcome of two different factors, which are the now systemic migratory flows and the freedom of the individual to seek a personal spiritual dimension, to which modern laws provide robust protection. In this epoch of globalization which seems to be the precursor of a transnational community which aspires to be world-wide, we see the emergence of the paradoxical inability to harmonize the symbolic values of different peoples with their immense heritages of specific traditions and religious cultural principals which have been preserved and handed down over time³. The existence of different confessional affiliations - certainly one of the most significant aspects of a pluralistic society - combined with widespread religious illiteracy⁴, have exacerbated and brought to the fore fanaticism, fundamentalism and integralism, or in other words, pathological forms of religious militancy that have awoken the interest and concern of not only scholars but also educators and teachers, who are aware that what is at stake is the social sustainability of religious pluralism which has been growing spontaneously on untilled ground.

Today there is much talk of ensuring equality in schools, of cultivating participation in the political and cultural life of society and of creating a feeling of shared citizenship. These issues are the real challenges in the formation of a multi-

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¹ For some exemplary works, see: S. Acquaviva., *L'eclissi del sacro nella società industriale*, Edizioni di Comunità, Milano, 1961; J. T. Altizer, W. Hamilton, *Radical theology and the death of God*, The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc, Indianapolis, 1966; A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, SCM Press, London, 1963.

² Well described, amongst many, by G. Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1993 and by S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2011.

³ F. Pajer, *Scuola e istruzione religiosa nell'Europa multireligiosa: problemi e sfide*, 5, in www.cestim.it/argomenti/06scuola/06scuola_scuola-istruzione-religiosa.pdf.

⁴ A. Melloni (ed.), *Rapporto sull'analfabetismo religioso in Italia*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2014. The work is a useful tool to contextualize the theme of the absence of the religious in educational processes and offers an organic reflection on what is ignored by the school system and on the historical-theological, as well as historical-political reasons for these omissions and gaps.

ethnic and multicultural society⁵. But there can be no real inclusion or true integration of community life without the key prerequisite of religious literacy within society. Religious literacy fosters knowledge of the other from within oneself and therefore alleviates the anxiety that is inevitably generated when one does not recognize oneself in the other.

Even from this brief premise we can see how the policies aiming for the social inclusion of children of Islamic faith must be closely linked to the idea of religious freedom, in an intertwining of cultural and educational choice. The values of the religious cultures which are expressed in multiple confessional affiliations have become the new heritage of a global society and their transmission, especially to the younger generations, is a task which the secular and democratic state cannot leave to chance if it wants a peaceful and fruitful process of integration in places where multi-ethnic and multicultural coexistence is facultative, and this means especially in schools.

In the process of making new citizens, the school has a highly prominent role and the interweaving dynamics therein are witness to the extreme complexity and the particularly delicate nature of the religious affiliations each with their own set of rules and regulations to observe in the classroom as in life. Of course, the educational establishment has to cooperate with the family in the education of their children and the best way would be by establishing a special relationship, a synergy between the parents and the school aimed at guaranteeing an education for their children which respects the family's religious affiliation or spiritual leanings, while at the same time also guaranteeing the religious freedom of the child respecting their right to choose.

2. – Children's self-determination and parents' educational choices

The life of a child is one of constant evolution and profound change leading to a path in life with a permanent adult identity. It is not easy to define the level and scope of those freedoms in the sphere of existential choice which the

⁵ See the interesting reflections of M. Santerini, *Da stranieri a cittadini. Educazione interculturale e mondo globale*, Mondadori Università, Milano, 2017.

law can recognize in questions such as whether a child enjoys the fundamental freedom not only of religion but also, for example, of conscience, thought, expression and association. These questions were given a positive answer in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989⁶.

The necessary alignment of domestic laws with supranational and international sources allows that, though children are persons in need of protection and special care and attention, they are active holders of the rights of individual personality and fundamental freedoms. Therefore, being a child does not mean enjoying reduced rights but means rather having full recognition of the dignity which belongs to every human, at every stage of their life. Obviously, such rights must also be guaranteed to the child in the context of their family social set-up, where the notion of a legal relationship can be characterized as an abstractly non-conflictual relationship as it is structurally aimed at connection and collaboration between the various subjective legal situations that make it up⁷. Clearly, the family unit is the primary social formation in which the child forges and expresses their personality.

The assertion of parental responsibility⁸ is therefore based on the goal that children grow and mature in an environment which is attentive to their needs without the parents subjecting them to pressure or coercion in the choices to be made. The family, conceived as an open social formation where communication

⁶ For the protection of the fundamental freedoms of children in educational communities see T. Hammarberg, *A school for children with rights. The significance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child for modern education policy*, Innocenti Lectures no. 2, Unicef International Child Development Center, Florence, 1998.

⁷ About "the parental role and the limits of state intervention, and/or their abstention concerning the exercise of constitutional rights on behalf of children", see L. Papadopoulou, *Children and religious freedom. An Enquiry into Children's Capability of Being Holders of Rights and the Nature of Religious Freedom in the Western World*, in P. Lødrup and E. Modvar (ed), *Family life and human rights*. Papers presented at the 11th World Conference of the International Society of Family Law, Gyldendal Akademisk, Oslo, 2004, 536.

⁸ As is well known, the notion of "parental responsibility", used in the UK "Children Act" of 1989 was introduced by international conventions (by the "New York Convention of 1989 on the rights of the child" and by the "Strasbourg Convention of 1996 on the exercise of children's rights", as well as by EC regulation no. 2201/2003) and, subsequently, adopted by the national civil codes of the EU countries, in accordance with the fundamental principle by virtue of which the powers and duties of which parents are invested in respect of children are attributed to them by law exclusively for the purpose of pursuing the best interests of the minor.

For an examination of the legal situation relating to "parental responsibility" in European countries, see G. De Cristofaro, *Dalla potestà alla responsabilità genitoriale: profili problematici di una innovazione discutibile*, in *Le nuove leggi civili commentate*, Anno XXXVII, n. 4/2014, 786ss.

must be fostered and where each member can offer his own critical and responsible contribution, thus becomes an ideal space for freedom and autonomy.

The instrument to be applied in order to achieve the sometimes necessary harmonization of the parents' educative discretion and the child's requirements for self-determination is the pre-eminent interest of the child itself in a healthy and balanced growth⁹.

Regarding the exercise of the rights to a harmonious development of personality, the regulation of the child's activity cannot be separated from the child's level of discernment in making choices, following what can be called a 'modular model', in that it is made up of many distinct abilities and it directly relates to the specific area in which it arises.

With respect to the characteristics and complexity of the particular existential situation to be faced, the judicial system will have to determine in each case the actual fitness of the child to participate directly in the identification of their best interest, as the level of discernment reached is inversely proportional to the effect of the power of care managed by the parents. A child is in constant evolution but remains a child until, for legal simplicity's sake, their eighteenth birthday. There must be a concrete assessment of the child's critical capacity and ability to make sound decisions, which allows the child to be aware of and responsible for their own existential choices in harmony (or sometimes in disharmony) with the parents' rights and duties to support and guide their child and in some cases to make the choice themselves.

We have thus come to the delicate issue of the potential conflict between the educative discretion of parents and the exercise of the acknowledged freedoms of a child endowed with discernment and decision making ability. In actual fact it is difficult to find any domestic legislation on self-determination and its existential aspects that allows the effective protection of the freedoms and fundamental rights of children when confronted by the choices or impositions of parents. The functional dimension of the right and duty of parents to educate and

⁹ That the interest of the minor must be considered paramount is established by art. 3 of the "New York Convention of 1989 on the rights of the child", the "European Convention of 25 January 1996 on the exercise of children's rights" and in art. 24 of the "Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union".

be responsible for the upbringing of their offspring can produce particularly problematic forms if placed in a dialectical relationship with the constitutional protection of the fundamental freedom of thought, conscience and religion of the children. When important ideological choices are involved there are always difficulties in identifying a fair balance between the right of self-determination of children and the right of parents to raise them by giving them an education anchored to the shared ethical, religious and spiritual principles at the root of the family unit.

Today the educational challenge is more complex than in the past when the process focused on bringing up a child to become a member of a basically monocultural and monoreligious society. Nowadays the goal must be set of forging fellow citizens who are not only aware of the values of coexistence between diverse people but who are also open to these values.

Any discussion on the religious freedom of children within the parental relationship in a multicultural society is also made more complex by the plurality of family models. What is recognized by national laws as a right to freedom is often seen, from the point of view of religious confessions, as a specific duty that parents are required to fulfil, as is the case of the Muslim family.

3. – The Islamic family

When we speak of the Islamic family, of the Muslim universe, we do not mean a monolithic cultural and religious block, but an immense dynamic real-life situation. Muslim immigrants are not an undifferentiated mass coming from a single social and cultural fabric¹⁰. However, it can be said that in general terms the roles of the mother and father are different in the conception of the traditional Islamic family. The mother has the biological bond with the child and introduces the child into the cultural sphere through a variety of means including deeds and

¹⁰ For an examination of family dynamics in the light of Islamic ethical-juridical norms, in particular in Great Britain but with extensive references to European countries, see R. Grillo, *Muslim Families, Politics and the Law. A Legal Industry in Multicultural Britain*, Routledge, Londra, 2017. See also R. Aluffi Beck-Pecoz, *Relazioni familiari nella società islamica*, in *Il matrimonio tra cattolici ed islamici*, LEV, Città del Vaticano, 2002, 159ss.

customs, prohibitions and taboos, popular traditions and stories, until the moment when what is allowed and what is forbidden are specified.

The father exercises wide-ranging parental authority over the offspring, a prerogative that entails the duty of maintenance, education, conduct, decency, control of their assets and marriage choice, both males and females. The admission of the child to the religious sphere takes place also through the father and the child's upbringing has as its goal precisely that of transferring the child from the universe of the mother to that of the father, so becoming "socially" Muslim.

In general, Muslim immigrant communities who come originally from a traditional rural environment are subject to a twofold process of acculturation. Firstly they encounter modernity, to be understood as an anthropological, sociological and cultural journey within their own context, and secondly, and even more difficult, is their 'transplantation' into a migratory situation which is more often than not completely different. Muslim children especially find themselves having to face a series of crucial moments in their cultural journey during their adaptation to the new environment, including above all taking part in a different model of education in a language system that they have yet to learn. There are further difficulties for those who have been reunited with one or both of the previously emigrated parents when emotional ties have to be repaired after having been destabilized by the separation. Instead, for those children arriving as babies or born in the West the major difficulty is with traditional identity, them having to understand the codes and norms of their original reality which they sporadically come up against even though they partly live this reality through their upbringing in the rules and ideas imparted by their parents.

Muslim migrant children can find themselves at the centre of dissonant expectations such as the need to integrate into the host society while at the same time preserving the values and cultural references of their origin, especially in a family that fears losing its roots. To avoid the risk of suffering from the stress of 'transculturation', a good relationship is necessary with both the culture of origin and the religion to which one belongs, as these relationships are a decisive factor

in the process of developing one's own identity so as to not feel like 'foreigners' both in the country of residence and the country of origin¹¹.

In the dense intertwining of educative rights and duties, Muslim parents, the father in particular, have the prerogative of transmitting to their offspring a spiritual education based on their own heritage of culture, traditions and customs, together with their personal faith. However, in bringing up a child the interest of the child is pre-eminent in its various and complex forms. Therefore, while religious education is a value that national legal systems protect it must be reconciled with other values¹². To mention a significant example, authoritarian and coercive systems are banned because the health and psycho-physical integrity of children are pre-eminent when compared to the religious freedom of their parents. Clearly, bringing a child up within a faith will have a greater impact in early childhood when the child has not yet developed the mental faculties to consciously question its ideas. It is different when the father and mother find themselves in front of an adolescent with self-determination and they have a duty to respect the choices, whether positive or negative, in the religious or spiritual field.

With this in mind, the exercise of the right to religious freedom is a specific aspect of the prevailing interest of the child, who can engage in conduct which expresses their spiritual orientation even before the age of eighteen.

It is when the options of the children are expressed in harmony with the religious ideas given by the parents that the highest degree of cohesion of the family structure is generated. The opposite is also true in that when there is incompatibility between the religious positions held by parents and their underage children a complex situation arises, because the entire existence of the person is shaped and permeated by religious sentiment with its eschatological aspects and the irrepressible vocation to provide answers to the ultimate questions of man, relating to earthly life and the afterlife.

¹¹ See M. Nabeel Musharraf, F. BushraNabeel, *Schooling options for Muslim children living In Muslim-minority countries. A Thematic Literature Review*, in *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, vol. 3, 2015, 29ss.

¹² See, in particular, the "Declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief" (issued by the UN General Assembly on 25 November 1981), details in art. 5 par. 5.

In a monist society, “religious values are one of the major parts of national identity and of social cohesion. In a pluralist society, however, religious values... come to be a factor of fragmentation, division, conflict”¹³ as they are often the only element of identity, the only surviving sense of belonging, of the immigrant community in the foreign land. Religious values are then defended at all costs, even if they are in open conflict with human dignity and with the fundamental principles of the host state¹⁴. It can therefore become difficult to guarantee the freedom of thought, conscience and religion of the young child or adolescent within families which moreover do not normally allow equal rights and duties to their members but, on the contrary, consider minors, and often women, to be subjects completely subordinate to the authority of the father-husband¹⁵.

In the cases described, the best interests of the child coincide with the protection of the child's conscious freedom to differentiate him or herself from the teachings imparted by the family and, in the cases where the conscious will of the child is lacking, they are found in the protection that must be guaranteed to the child when part of an educational programme not in line with the rules derived from the democratic, pluralistic, egalitarian and individual-based principles on which the European legal systems are founded¹⁶.

4. – The school as a place of education for interreligious coexistence

¹³ G. Dalla Torre, *Valori e principi non negoziabili*, in *Studi cattolici*, febbraio 2013, 1.

¹⁴ See S. Ferrari, *Comportamenti «eterodossi» e libertà religiosa. I movimenti religiosi marginali nell'esperienza giuridica più recente*, in *Foro Italiano*, 1991, I, cc. 271-285; A. Fuccillo, *Giustizia e Religione*, Volume II. *Matrimonio, famiglia e minori tra identità religiosa e rilevanza civile*, Giappichelli, Torino, 2011, 170ss.

¹⁵ Parents who, instead of proposing them, impose fideistic principles and the dogmatic patrimony of the irreligious affiliation to children who, on the basis of their self-determination, have developed a sensitivity different from that of the family nucleus, often obtain nothing but 'coerced assent' which, in the outward and not intimately shared observance of religious precepts, harms the existential dimension and the fundamental rights of the adolescent.

¹⁶ In this regard, it is very significant that the protection of this particular declaration of the child's best interests was fully accepted in the proposal of the very recent draft law on religious freedom, presented by the Astrid study group. (See R. Mazzola, *La proposta di legge in materia di libertà religiosa nei lavori del gruppo di studio Astrid. Le scelte operate nel campo della libertà religiosa individuale*, in *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, 20/2017, 4ss.). The full recognition of the dignity of minors, of their existential dimension and of conscience arrives in the draft law as a "self-determining precept" forming the personality of children, also in the light of their "religious and philosophical convictions" (art. 6, paragraph 2) and the choices that, starting from the age of fourteen, they can make in matters of "religion or belief" (art. 6, paragraph 3). In this regard, see A. Zaccaria, S. Domianello, A. Ferrari, P. Floris, R. Mazzola (ed.), *La legge che non c'è. Proposta per una legge sulla libertà religiosa in Italia*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2019, 123ss.

The school as a public institution not only cannot be disconnected from the important changes that have come about with the advent of the multicultural society but it has in fact become a yardstick for public authorities in ensuring an effective assertion of constitutional principles, above all those of pluralism and the protection of fundamental freedoms. Respect for these values requires that state and non-state schools be free from conditioning and bias and that children with an immigrant background are allowed to assert their personality at every stage of their education and autonomously express their own inner dimensions. This important undertaking, this educational challenge, takes place entirely within the binomial of religious pluralism and public space in that the school imports the religious datum as an element that makes up the identity of each person, and the correct perception of religious pluralism allows an idea of religiosity to be instilled, in the younger generations especially, as a virtue for social cohesion, so overcoming the fear of the other and so allowing the building of a space in which to meet and re-acknowledge each other.

In particular, it is necessary in educational contexts to develop specific skills essential for the understanding of cultures, to recognize and contrast folkloristic and stereotypical approaches and to find points of contact that make a peaceful coexistence possible in inclusive educational environments, so allowing the growth of both mutual trust and an awareness of a common responsibility for the future.

The first task that the school is required to take on is that which is "strictly cognitive aimed at providing an accumulation of knowledge not only of its nation's own history and culture and its religious traditions but also that of other religious cultures, especially those recently arrived into the actual social context"¹⁷. This objective is far from obvious. A pluralistic society cannot define itself as democratic and secular by freedom to believe alone, it must also guarantee the right of the people to be informed.

¹⁷ So V. Turchi, *Educazione alla convivenza e pluralismo religioso. Modelli a confronto. Spunti metodologici*, in E. Camassa (ed.), *Democrazia e religioni. Libertà religiosa diversità e convivenza nell'Europa del XXI secolo*, Atti del Convegno Nazionale ADEC, Trento, 22-23 ottobre 2015, Editoriale Scientifica, Napoli, 2016, 372.

In this regard, I would like to recall the four key principles on which to base the educational systems as identified by the *UNESCO Report of the International Commission on Education for the 21st century*¹⁸ which are: 1) learning to know; 2) learning to do; 3) learning to be; 4) learning to live together.

More precisely, the issues concerning religion at school testify to the complexity of the issues at stake and confirm, above all, the need for religions to be part of the educational curriculum of young people. The European educational communities must make the effort to provide a foundation to the history of religions, as a fundamental tool of education for global citizenship and as an antidote to fear, to discrimination and to fundamentalist and integralist tendencies.

Despite the multiculturalism of today's schools there is an almost universal distinct lack of a branch of knowledge that deals with religions. The result of this omission is that one of the problems most felt in schools is not knowing how to exercise religious freedom and where the limits of its expression are. This knowledge gap must be bridged in a society with such a complicated spiritual dissymmetry.

In theory, the law satisfactorily guarantees the personal and collective freedom of religion to children of Islamic faith. However in practice, civil society, namely through the educational institutions, makes scarce provision for the tools necessary to satisfy *the best interests of the children* to learn both secular and scientific religious facts which would foster peaceful coexistence and common citizenship.

There are manifold examples in support of this statement but just a quick read-through of many of the school textbooks used today in Europe is enough to get an emblematic picture of the repetition of stereotypes, distortions and plainly wrong information that has been offered to students for entire generations and still continues to be so. At this point it comes naturally to ask what is the image of Islam and Muslims that western schools impart through the various textbooks?

Discussions on this issue have been on-going in recent years both in the Muslim world and in Europe and America though with different approaches and

¹⁸ See in this regard J. Delors, *Learning: the treasure within Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on education for the twenty-first century*, UNESCO, 1996.

with no completely consistent conclusions. Already ten years ago in 2011, the German institute Georg Eckert For International Textbook Research¹⁹ conducted a survey on behalf of the German Foreign Ministry on the school textbooks used in Austria, France, Germany, Great Britain and Spain, concluding that they reveal a "cultural racism" towards Islam as they tend to transmit and reinforce stereotypes and prejudices towards Muslim religion and culture. The outcome of the survey was that in general Islam is proposed as a monolithic, backward, unchanging, anti-feminist religious system with no discourse on its pluralism in different planes whether they are historical, juridical, ideological, political, national or cultural as well as religious, and that there was also no mention of any processes of modernisation.

Furthermore, not infrequently within the textbooks there are distorted analyses of the Islamic creed fuelled by stereotypes that encourage an Islamophobic populism, or there are mediocre pseudo-intercultural solutions that apparently aim at respecting sensitivities and promoting processes of inclusion²⁰.

A possible solution would include overcoming the essentially synchronous method used in most textbooks that does not take into account the historical evolution that has taken place since the founding of Islam with little mention of any development towards modernization, with the result that the representation of the Muslim world is placed on the same archaeological plane as that of the ancient Greeks and Romans and therefore devoid of any evolution to the modern day²¹.

Alongside the critical issues described, the fact that the teachings of some subjects such as history, philosophy and sciences, among others, include contents that can cast doubt on dogmas of faith or cultural heritage arouses a logical concern among the Muslim faithful (and also other religious confessions). In the same way, the religious freedom of Muslim children is hindered by the obligation to practise physical education wearing clothing that is not in keeping with the dictates of the confession to which they belong, or by the educational institution

¹⁹ *No Chance of Belonging? Islam and Modern Europe Remain Segregated in European Text books*, in <http://www.gei.de/en/press/press-releases/press-releas-details/news/detail/News/no-chance-of-belonging-islam-and-modern-europe-remain-segregated-in-european-textbooks.html> (short version).

²⁰ See Amnesty International, *Choice and prejudice: discrimination against Muslim in Europe*, London, Amnesty International, 2012.

²¹ See G. Vercellin, *Istituzioni del mondo musulmano*, Einaudi, Torino, 2002.

not providing for the use of a gym by girls alone, in violation of the precept of the Islamic faith of the separation between the sexes²².

Another important issue is that relating to the running of school dining halls and the close relationship between food and religious pluralism. This particular aspect of the exercise of freedom of religion translates, in this case, to the right of every student of Islamic faith to eat at school together with their schoolmates, sharing the moment of conviviality²³, but in compliance with food restrictions²⁴.

Another aspect is the wearing of the clothing which shows adherence to a certain belief. For example the wearing of the veil involves Muslim girls who are in some cases required by their parents to use it upon reaching puberty, and in other cases it is a free choice of faith (which must therefore be protected).

5. – Multiple identities and integration processes

With regards to the European position on integration policies, taking into account the necessary distinctions from country to country, there has been an overall change in the international political climate towards the migratory phenomenon. Forms of mixophobia (fear of mingling) and defensive closing-up have re-emerged from various quarters so again putting forward assimilation as the only form of social inclusion. As assimilation literally means to be made similar (recognized as similar, we accept what we recognize), this is to be understood as a reductive version of integration, it being centred on the need of the indigenous society for maintenance of the social order and to feel safe, rather

²² V. Fronzoni *The School Education of Muslim Children in Europe: A review of Comparative Perspectives*, in *Al-'Ulūm Journal of Islamic Studies (AUJIS)*, 2020.

²³ It is also necessary to keep in mind the needs of students of the Islamic faith who, from puberty on, are required to fast completely from dawn to dusk, during the Ramadan period. See L. Musselli, C. B. Ceffa, *Libertà religiosa, obiezione di coscienza e giurisprudenza costituzionale*, Giappichelli, Torino, 2014.

²⁴ The Foundation “Benvenuti in Italia” conducted research in the schools of some large European cities to verify what the level of organization was to meet the dietary needs of children and young people belonging to different religious communities in the area. This research was conducted in Italy in the cities of Turin, Milan and Rome. The results of this experimentation can be found on the website of “Benvenuti in Italia”.

than on the expectations of equal inclusion of minorities and on the enhancement of different cultural identities.

In reality, the variables in structure, in individuals, in relational aspects and in context, influence the integration processes that map out very different starting conditions, trajectories and outcomes.

Although the migratory story and those factors relating to the family *background* such as socio-economic status, the educational level of the parents and the inter-relational dynamics heavily influence educational outcomes and the processes of integration, other significant factors are also in play, especially those that relate to the experience of moving and settling into new housing and into a new school where what is important is the social and ethnic make-up of the school and what opportunities are on offer within the local environment where the children live, with particular attention focussed on the sociality and inter-ethnic relational climate both at school and beyond the classroom.

The dominant condition today of Muslim children and adolescents is having been born in Europe, or having arrived at a very young age, or having been partially schooled in the country of origin but who do permanently reside in European countries with their families, so investing their own existential and educational projects in the European continent. This actuality means letting go of the widely held belief of being in an emergency situation, as if migration were still a surprising and temporary phenomenon, and to start carrying out a policy of structural intervention that can bring an effective integration apparatus and practice to the system within a project of interculturality²⁵.

This implies a primary investment of resources in tools aimed at developing the services, knowledge and professional skills necessary for the building of intercultural schooling. These interventions do not concern only Muslim children but the school organization as a whole, including teachers and educational practices, families and other institutional actors in the area who are responsible for care and education.

²⁵ For more information on intercultural education, see A. Cucinello, S. Pasta (ed.), *Studenti musulmani a scuola. Pluralismo, religioni e intercultura*, Carocci Editore, Roma, 2021.

6. – Intercultural education as a tool for social inclusion

In conclusion, the intercultural education project, which finds its first experimentation in the reality of school, does not represent an option to choose or a concession or, even worse, capitulation. It is the paradigm, whether in a political, ethical, juridical or educational sense, which is most appropriate to the changes imposed on European countries by world events.

School is brought into play because it is the training ground for civil coexistence, the laboratory of citizenship, the workshop of legality, and it is also, after the family, the most important environment for both relational and emotional literacy.

In other words, educational communities are called upon to enrich, from early childhood, through a "pedagogy of consensus", the contents of the right to religious freedom of the child and their family, in acknowledgement of the non-negotiability of human dignity and of the beneficial transformation of the multicultural and multi-religious society into an intercultural and inter-religious society²⁶, an essential transformation for the building of an inclusive society.

The approach to interculture is thus open to diversity but rooted in identity and aimed at individuals with equal rights but with different customs, habits, traditions and religion. The main feature of intercultural education is to foster mutual change. One does not assimilate the other by forcing a denial of their origins, just as one does not accept the other when they defend customs that harm human integrity.

The intercultural approach seems to offer a valid response in the perspective of effective social inclusion at a global level, since the subject of

²⁶ By and from the search for convergences on important points of the ethos and on common and shared projects. See Pajer, *Scuola e istruzione religiosa nell'Europa multireligiosa: problemi e sfide* cit.

On intercultural dialogue, see, in particular, R. Grillo, *Interculturalism and the Politics of Dialogue*, B and RG Books of Lewes, Lewes, 2018. On interculture as an educational response, see L. Bekemans, *Educational challenges and perspective in multiculturalism vs interculturalism: citizenship education for intercultural realities*, in M. Barret (ed.), *Interculturalism and multiculturalism. Similarities and differences*, Council of Europe Publishing, 2013, 169ss.

interculture is the "cultural community", which can be defined as an integrated social system, transnational by nature²⁷, as in the case of the Muslim community.

Intercultural strategies avoid separating individuals into autonomous and impermeable cultural worlds. Instead, they foster debate, dialogue and mutual transformation, to make coexistence possible and to deal with the resulting conflicts.

In the global world, the teaching of interculturality, understood as the ability to understand and appreciate differences, as a process of common growth in which the wealth of the other is acknowledged, in which each gives up something in the name of affirming shared values, is not only important but it is an essential instrument of social cohesion, inspired by a truly participatory and inclusive vision of citizenship.

Abstract. - Qualunque analisi delle politiche di integrazione sociale non può prescindere da una riflessione preliminare sulla odierna società multiculturale e sul ruolo che la religione svolge al suo interno. In particolare, l'indagine sulle politiche di inclusione sociale dei minori musulmani è strettamente legata al tema della libertà religiosa, intessuta in una trama di scelte culturali ed educative. Pertanto, nel processo educativo dei protagonisti del futuro, la scuola ricopre un ruolo di primo piano. Tra genitori e scuola è o dovrebbe instaurarsi una speciale sinergia al fine di assicurare ai minori un'istruzione e una formazione rispettosa della confessione di appartenenza o dell'orientamento spirituale delle loro famiglie, in grado, al contempo, di garantire l'autodeterminazione dei minori nella prospettiva del loro superiore interesse, come stabilito dalla Convenzione sui diritti dell'infanzia firmata a New York nel 1989. Il contributo si propone di dimostrare che le scuole medesime devono offrire un riconoscimento concreto e una tutela effettiva del diritto alla libertà religiosa dei minori, nel senso di porre al primo posto l'interesse prevalente del minore, e che questo può essere perseguito

²⁷ A. Perotti, *L'Europe et la diversité. Enseigner la diversité culturelle*, in *Revue Internationale d'Éducation*, 1998, 43.

efficacemente attraverso un progetto di educazione interculturale. Nel mondo globale, l'educazione interculturale, intesa come percorso da percorrere insieme, come processo di crescita comune in cui tutti rinunciano a qualcosa in nome dell'affermazione di valori condivisi, è uno strumento importante e, anzi, imprescindibile per l'attuazione delle politiche di inclusione.

Abstract. - Any analysis of social integration policies cannot ignore a preliminary reflection on today's multicultural society and on the role that religion plays within it. In particular, the investigation of the social inclusion policies of Muslim minors is closely linked to the theme of religious freedom, within a web of cultural and educational choices. Therefore, in the educational process of the protagonists of the future, school covers a leading role. Between parents and schools, a special synergy is or should be established in order to ensure that minors receive education and training that respect the confession to which they belong or the spiritual orientation of their families, at the same time able to guarantee the self-determination of minors from the perspective of their best interests, as established by the Convention on the Rights of the Child signed in New York in 1989. The paper sets out to demonstrate that schools themselves must offer concrete recognition and effective protection of the right to religious freedom of minors, in the sense of putting the best interests of the child first, and that this can be effectively pursued through an intercultural education project. In the global world, intercultural education, understood as a path to be taken together, as a process of common growth in which everyone gives up something in the name of affirming shared values, is an important and, indeed, essential tool for the implementation of inclusion policies.