

## **Schools and religions: experience, symbols and practices**

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*Abstract:* The essay deals with the compatibility of different religious practices, signs and symbols in multicultural education, based on the results of interviews with some headmasters, teachers and cultural mediators in schools of two Italian towns characterized by a large number of immigrants, carried out in 2008.

This issue is very important today and has received very different responses in Europe, e.g. the French “law of veil” or the confirmation of the continued presence crucifix in the Italian classrooms, even after the recent judgement from the European Court of Human Rights that requires the removal of religious signs from state schools.

As the number of students from different countries and with different religious beliefs is quickly increasing, the issue of inter-religious contact and dialogue is now unavoidable. In Italian education there are many religious practices concerning food, clothes, festivities and traditions that sometimes lead to “critical incidents”; nevertheless, the religious issue is not explicitly faced and thematized, even if religion can be an important aspect of identity.

*Key words:* multicultural society, religious symbols, education inter-religious dialogue

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## Background

For many years the sociological debate on religion and its social relevance has revolved around the concept of “secularization”<sup>2</sup>, while in the light of emerging factors this approach has been recently questioned (Norris, Inglehart, 2007). From back in the late nineteen seventies the assumption of a «return of God» began to be cast into doubt (Kepel, 1991), i.e. the return of or the rebirth of the sense of the holy with renewed interest in religion in diverse social contexts (Aldridge, 2005). It is however quite clear that religion now, despite its ‘return’ or ‘rebirth’, has certain characteristics that sets it aside from the phenomenon in the past, both as regards the so-called national religions (Catholicism in Italy for example) and as regards the presence of ever greater numbers of people with different cultural and religious identities (Mentasti, Ottaviano, 2009, pp. 227-230). As suggested by G.Giovannini<sup>3</sup>, “we have been considerably stirred up by groups of immigrants with a much stronger substantial and collective religious identity than that we have been used to seeing in our country. [...] The most provocative of these have been the Islamic groups whose forms of religious expression are strong and public rather than intimate or individualistic in nature. It is this idea that religion is not a private matter and interior matter but is a sign of belonging to a community [...] that has forced us to reflect anew on religion as a form of public and not just private expression”.

It becomes important in such a scenario to reflect on the forms that this public aspect takes, such as the signs and symbols that are collectively displayed, how they are perceived and how all this fits in with the notion of the secular nature of the State. In this regard, the school is a public place that has decisive importance, being perhaps the most important location of

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<sup>2</sup> The greater part of the major nineteenth century scholars – including Durkheim, Weber, Marx and Freud – argued that the arrival of modern society would gradually result in the loss of significance of religious experience in the western world and, insofar as it would continue to have any importance, would be in any case confined to the private sphere. This «occultation of the holy that [also] had been expected by the generation of sociologists of the post-war period and in the sixties and seventies, on the basis of a string of empirical observations» (Pace, 2008, p. 7): with churches losing their congregations, a crisis in recruitment to the priesthood, the gradual move away from adherence to the pronouncements, especially in the field of morality, of the ecclesiastical upper hierarchy and so forth.

<sup>3</sup> Interview given during the study published in Mentasti, Ottaviano, 2008.

all. It is a place where multireligious situations are played out and where the greatest possibilities of contact, awareness, exchange and cultural and religious dialogue are to be encountered.

#### **“Laicity”<sup>4</sup> and religions in the European Union**

The primary importance of the school as a place in which citizenship based on mutual recognition may develop is emphasised at the heart of the Community. For example, the Panel of Wisdom, which was set up by the EU Commission in 2005 to work out proposals to help to build a society of peoples and cultures in the Mediterranean region put forward the aim, among others, of “making the education system the central vehicle for spreading the word on diversity and an understanding of others” (Pedrali, 2005, p. 9). It is at school that children can learn to look at and to respect both themselves and others and while there must be a logic of preparation for future working life there must also be a civic logic that prepares them culturally, teaching them to be citizens in a community. For this to be achieved, according to this report, it is essential for suitable importance to be given to the teaching of subjects that “contribute to the building of a conscious cultural identity and sense of citizenship: including comparative history, comparative religion, literature, the figurative and visual arts and languages” (op. cit. p. 10). An education that fosters awareness of diversity and also an awareness of the similarities and interdependencies of human beings, as suggested also by the International Commission on education for the twenty-first century (Delors et al., 1996, p. 86), must be a guiding principle for the multicultural school. Such European directions aim, among other things, at the development of awareness of different religions as one of the factors that can help to bring peoples and cultures together.

In the Preamble to the Lisbon Treaty<sup>5</sup> the member states declare that they are guided by the principle of “the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom,

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<sup>4</sup> I use the literal translation of the Italian word “laicità”; I am aware that other translations and/or interpretations are possible (see e.g. Pajer, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Signed on 27th December 2007 by the heads of government of 27 member countries of the EU and become effective on 1st December 2009.

democracy, equality and the rule of law” (from art. 1, par. 1). These are values upon which the EU is founded because it deems them to be generally applicable and common to numerous social realities. The search for a common denominator is also a way of keeping the lid on the “Pandora’s box of national claims and quibbles that could lead to institutional compromises that denature the community” (Serra, 2003). The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (European Commission, 2004) similarly recognises certain fundamental rights such as the freedom of thought, of conscience and of religion. Moreover, the Treaty commits the Union to “combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation” (art. 2F, par. 18), putting religion together with the rights recognised as belonging to the person and not among the values that are to be fostered or pursued. The EU thus puts the different religious or non religious organisations on the same footing, such that when the Treaty considers the status of the churches and philosophical and non denominational organisations, it establishes that “1. The Union respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of churches and religious associations and communities in the Member States; 2. The Union equally respects the status under national law of philosophical and non confessional organisations; 3. Recognising their identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organisations” (art. 2 F, par. 30).

The cultural profile of the new Europe is thus characterised by “laicity”, multiculturalism and complexity, in the light also of the fact that, according to Rusconi (1999, p. 57), it has no common political ethos or authentic position in terms of its identity. This multiculturalism could therefore be deemed synonymous with “laicity”, where by “laicity” is intended a wide-ranging cultural design: “the principle of “laicity” does not in fact consist just in neutralising the claims of different cultures and religions to improperly or monopolistically occupy the public field; it is not limited to simply affirming the principle of benevolent tolerance, but rather positively requires a reciprocal commitment upon which a political community can be built that acts jointly insofar as it stands for rules and institutions that are independent of particular culture roots that cannot be generalised to the community at large” (op. cit. p. 74).

The EU position cited here is however not easy to put into effect in the individual countries, particularly where the national identity and the religious identity in question are rigidly counterpoised (as is the case for

example in France as the law applies to the Islamic veil) or are forcedly identified (as in Italy's case with certain stances with regard to the display of the crucifix in public places, first and foremost of which in the schools).

### **National identity and religious symbols: the “affaire du voile” and the crucifix of Ofena**

Since autumn 1989 when the French press debated the expulsion of three 14-year-old Muslim pupils at the Lycee de Creil in the department of Oise who turned up at school wearing a foulard, the issue of the Islamic veil has periodically come to the fore in France as a matter of bitter contention. It's continued place in the arena of discussion was assured by a further episode in October of 2003 which saw two female pupils expelled from the Lycee of Aubervilliers. After the report in 2003 of the so-called “Stasi commission”<sup>6</sup> set up by President Chirac to make proposals for the affirmation of the principle of “laicity” in state schools, law number 228 was finally passed in March of the following year on implementing secularity in schools.

From an analysis of the “affaire du voile” debate a number of different positions both for and against the prohibition of the wearing of the hijab in state schools. The question of the “laicity” of the state has been repeatedly brought up, as well as that of political control over women and the question of female freedoms. The Jesuit Islamic scholar Samir Kahil, of Egyptian origin, argues that the Stasi Commission “came to its conclusions with the aim of effectively dealing with the widespread public opinion that feels this way of living an Islamic life conflicts with French laity that the French consider their consolidated and inalienable heritage. The veil is the top of the iceberg of a radical agenda that rejects integration and, in the face of European secularity and also the Christian tradition, launches Islam once again as a global religious and political alternative” (Paolucci, 2004).

The “laicity” of the state has also been considered by the protestant sociologist Jean Baubérot, who came to quite different conclusions that led him to being the only member of the Stasi Commission to abstain from voting on the part of the report that proposed a prohibition on religious signs in state schools. It was his view that such a resolution could cause the

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<sup>6</sup> The Commission drew up its “Report on the application of the principle of secularity”.

opposite of its intended effect. “I believe that the secular state exceeds its function by obligating young women to remove the veil when they choose to wear it. Such rejection risks their desecularization. I find it a serious matter not to permit these girls to have an education: it is the best way of delivering them into the hands of the extremists: it is a nonsense in relation to the very aims that the law sets out to achieve” (Courstens, 2004). He goes on to reflect on an element that is part of the identity of young children of immigrants who, in his opinion even more than their parents, wish to affirm their belonging to the French social context as well as their own different and specific identity.

For her part the Iranian writer in France, Chahla Chafiq, defends Law 228 by stressing the association of the veil with a patriarchal system that seeks to impose it as a sign of the “supremacy of men over women and the inferiority of women justified in law” (Merlo, 2004). She also wishes to point out that “not all of the so-called Muslim world is in favour of the veil, indeed many are against and many do not wear the veil, while others are non believers. In the West the Islamic world is always imagined as being very homogeneous and Islam is perceived as an identifying factor. [...] Only a minority wear the veil, and if only for this reason we have to tread carefully. If the idea is accepted that the veil is a question that regards the Muslim woman, then the majority become marginalised and accused of rejecting their own culture” (ibidem).

These thoughts express the worry that there is an oversimplification in the West of the image of Islam and its people, whether men or women, while they in fact come from realities crossed by processes of change and characterised by internal diversity that may be very great.<sup>7</sup> The author draws our attention above all to the need to avoid forming the equation “veil equals sign of Muslim cultural identity”, which would serve only to strengthen the position of those who would rely on such an assumption to force women to wear it.<sup>8</sup>

The identity aspect is also brought to the fore by Etienne Balibar who bitterly criticises the “law of the veil”. In this case, however, it is the secular identity of the state that is the subject of reflection: the French philosopher argues that if the national identity of modern states has traditionally been built by devaluing religious identity, the processes of

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<sup>7</sup>See also Bruno, 2008.

<sup>8</sup>For an examination of the meaning of the veil in western culture see Prezzo, 2008.

'trans-nationalisation' in course today mean that it is not possible to affirm a concept of "laicity" as simple exclusion of the religious from public spaces. This because "the relationship between religion and politics is not resolved once and for all, the age of religious identity has not ended, while the crisis of national identity has already begun" (Dominijanni, 2004).

The identity theme, be that secular or religious, western or Muslim, is widely addressed in the media debate on religious symbols. If in France the debate often unfolds as secular state against 'membership' of Islam, in Italy it focuses almost entirely on the issue of whether or not the crucifix should be displayed in public places and, most especially, in schools. The question appeared significantly in the Italian media in October of 2003, when the court of L'Aquila found in favour of a petition by a Muslim parent to have the crucifix removed from his son's classroom in a school of Ofena. Following this episode the media have reported on numerous claims for the mandatory use of the crucifix as symbol that goes beyond its religious significance, where it stands for common values and not least as a symbol of national identity. Thus, for example, the then education minister Letizia Moratti could declare that "the crucifix is an inalienable symbol that is bound to our history, to our traditions and to our national identity" (Rossi Barilli, 2003).

A little more than two years after the Ofena case, two different divisions of the Italian Council of State rejected the appeal by a lady of Finnish origin who had demanded the removal of a crucifix from the school her children were attending, with a similar decision being made in the uaar case (Atheists and Rationalist Agnostics Union), confirming the trend to attribute to the cross a significance that goes beyond that of the Christian creed to bestow it with an explicitly secular valence. The ratio for the judgement states that it is a "symbol expressing fundamental civic values [...] that delineate the current secular nature of state".<sup>9</sup>

In the period subsequent to the Ofena episode, there has moreover been a proliferation of cases of political forces and institutional spokespersons who demand, or who directly carry out, actions resulting in the increased presence of the crucifix in schools, as well as in other public places. In Parliament, the heads of the "House of Freedoms" party have asked the government to ensure that the crucifix, defined as 'the most ancient and powerful symbol of freedom of all as well as of the "laicity" of the state',

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<sup>9</sup> Judgement of the Council of State - section VI - n. 556/2006.

be put on the wall of every classroom. The then chairman of the Culture Commission of the Chamber of Deputies, Ferdinando Adornato, suggested a campaign for the crucifix in schools on the grounds that Christianity “is not a religion like the others because it is founded in freedom and, unlike Islam, does not demand before all else total adherence to its own precepts”<sup>10</sup>. The Northern League presented a motion in the Lombardy region for all public buildings in that territory (namely schools, hospitals, institutional headquarters and various offices) to hang crucifixes on their walls to “defend the founding principle of Christianity and to safeguard our identity against the violence that threatens it”<sup>11</sup>. Such positions, which lead to proposals such as these, are periodically renewed and continue to feature in the arenas of political and media debate<sup>12</sup>.

### What “laicity” at school?

All of the above however conflicts with the principle set forth in the first part of the Italian constitution. The question of the ways in which the secular nature of public institutions is guaranteed, and also those for the safeguarding of the right to religious expression in our country, cannot ignore the statement in the Constitution that: “all citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, of race, of language, of religion, of political opinion or of personal and social conditions” (art. 3); or that “the state and the Catholic church are, each in its own order, independent and sovereign” (art. 7) and, further, “all religious denominations are equally free before the law” (art. 8). In the current Italian context, which is most certainly now multicultural and multireligious, (Naso, Salvarani, 2009), such constitutional principles are ever more significant and relevant and demand particular care in their concrete implementation in everyday life and still more in those places in which citizenship is developed, namely in the educational establishments.

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<sup>10</sup> The quotes are from the daily newspaper *il manifesto* of 29th October 2003, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> The quotes are from the local pages of the daily newspaper *la Repubblica* of 23rd September 2005, p. VII.

<sup>12</sup> In particular, this debate is renewed after the recent judgement from the European Court of Human Rights that requires the removal of religious signs from state schools.

The religion-school relationship debate is not just a recent one. Flavio Pajer (2006) reported on the intervention of a number of academics, jurists, philosophers and educationalists from different ideological backgrounds and of different religious beliefs who came together with the common intent of moving the debate on religion in state schools forwards. Back in 1978 the catholic jurist Arturo Carlo Jemolo wrote: “in schools religious instruction must be not indoctrination, not seek to provide certainties, but must explain that in human experience there features this element known as religion, that there have been periods in which culture and art have been manifestly religious and that almost all peoples have their foundation in a religion. [...] I must repeat, it is a matter of instruction and not indoctrination; there is no freedom to choose if the pack of cards is shown in such a way as only one card that can be seen” (Pajer, 2006, p. 6). Pajer also cites, among others, the educationalist Raffaele Laporta, a non believer, who maintains that the school must necessarily aim to approach the question of the search for meaning in life and, to do so, must “introduce forms of teaching that taking into account all of the answers put forward, whether religious or not, to the question of the meaning of life” (ibidem, p. 10), in homage to ultimate value of “secularity, or the active freedom of conscience” (ibidem). “Secularity” is seen here as the “projection of individual freedom into the social environment” (Laporta, 2002, p. 32) and must be clearly distinguished from secularism which “has taken on various forms of anti-clericism, particularly in relation to the church” (ibidem).

The principle of secularity or “laicity” as intended above is not against religion but is in favour of a society in which there is a covenant between different beliefs and a rejection of any ethical and cultural “absolute”, were there reigns a “plurality of grounds and arguments and a openness to the ideas of others” (Preterossi, 2005b, p. 3). This amounts to “an extra-value guarantee or a meta-value, a container that permits, more than any other, the most diverse viewpoints to be freely manifested within a framework of rules. This provides a universal guarantee that is open to spiritual quest and the experience of what is holy” (ibidem, p. 13).

An understanding of “laicity” based on the above would safeguard the pluralism within a system ruled by the principles of citizenship. It is thus an inclusive “laicity” in which non believers and those with different religious faiths could meet together to find common values and structures for living together harmoniously.

As has already been said, the school has a special role to play for the development of a sense of respect and of living together in harmony, both indispensable for the formation of new citizens. In the school, as the Panel of the Wise at European concurred, the presentation of religion is essential to an understanding of the history and culture of peoples and contributes to reflection on the meaning of life. Moreover, a good knowledge and understanding of the rituals that pertain to the social groups of provenance of classmates is the best starting point for combating racism and rejection or fear of those that are different. Schools must be capable of educating their pupils to recognise and understand their differences but also to find those common aspects that unite people in their humanity and that common experience of share values and points of reference.

### **The experience of schools in two areas of Lombardy in northern Italy**

With the desire to explore real trends in this area, a study was published in 2008 focussing on the co-existence in multicultural schools of practices, signs and symbols of different religions (Mentasti, Ottaviano, 2008). After some exploration of the European situation in general, a specific Italian survey was carried out by semi-structured interviews in eight leading primary and secondary schools in two cities in Lombardy that had high concentrations of foreign pupils (Bergamo and Brescia). The research approached the subject starting from the different points of view of those involved, namely the educational managers, teachers and mediators, such as to explore on the one hand the different ways these groups dealt with the multireligious presence, as most concretely manifested, and on the other hand, to gain insight through the filter of these groups of the attitudes and behaviour of the boys and girls in their multifaceted ethnic, cultural and religious context.

With regard to the presence of different religions in the classrooms, together with their respective different traditions, customs, practices and external displays, the first thing that emerged was that generally speaking religious differences did not emerge, did not form the subject matter of interpersonal relationships between young people of the same age and above all never resulted in conflict or alienation at school. On the rare occasions that they broached the subject, the content of the discussions almost invariably regarded the external aspects such as clothing, eating

customs and holidays and so forth. In many cases these were moreover children who had already attended nursery or elementary school and were already used to living in the Italian environment with its different culture and traditions, including religious traditions. For these reasons the ways of wearing their hair, their clothes or particular symbols no longer aroused any reactions, frequently simply taken for granted and at times even going unnoticed.

The attitudes of teachers and the general educational climate in the schools naturally play a very important role in all of this. If that which surprises or arouses curiosity is explained and put into context, the children adapt very easily and find no difficulty in living with any diversity they encounter, proffering mutual respect one to the other. The curiosity to explore the differences is most marked among the primary school children, including religious differences, where they are all too ready to proudly recount their own traditions if asked. Such queries are never expressed polemically or problematically but are always characterised by interest and curiosity.

The religious diversity is not experienced as an area of conflict between the children but as an opportunity for dialogue and sharing. Many teachers and managers agree in stressing that religion, and the different holidays and related festivals, are useful means and occasions for acquisition of reciprocal knowledge by boys and girls of different ethnicities and origins and for the acceptance of diversity.

*The children ask how one religion differs from another, what religious customs characterise one as compared with another. They speak about these things, and the teachers rightly give them the space to do so, more as a way of finding out about each other and comparing each other's traditions than as a means of distinguishing or distancing. The fact is presented that each of us is entitled to express ourselves differently, because the family of each believes in different things and that it is right that they should do. It is a kind of knowledge and acceptance of the reality of diversity (Headmaster in BG).*

Going into the specifics of the argument, the research examined individual issues such as the presence of crucifixes on classroom walls, a matter that for the schools in the study did give rise to any conflict or criticism and in general was not even particularly the subject of any but the

most isolated cases of discussion. This leads us to think, according to one of the Brescia educational managers, that the question of religious signs and symbols is not a central issue, being relevant more in terms of the how people behave around them, where their presence or absence may or may not provide a focus for dialogue and intercultural comparison.

*The symbol may be there but if it is not respected ... what is important is to ensure the children have a true experience of its presence. What is this symbol? It is a mere useless ornament if it is not transformed into experience. Many preach and then squeeze the lifeblood out of the issue... politicians for example.... Religious symbols create bitter debate, .... the veil for example. What about our own grandmothers in the valleys who never leave home without a veil? The veil, like other rules of conduct, are moments in the cultural history of a people, and may be surpassed with time, rather than being dictated by religious rules. We have sent many to be burnt at the stake in our history... (Headmaster in BS).*

Undoubtedly, and predictably, the art. of clothing that is most often brought up in discussions of particular garments and religious faith is the Islamic veil. Even with regard to this, however, those interviewed described a very peaceful situation in which the use of the foulard – in any case not especially frequent in the age range considered in the study and almost entirely absent among pupils in the primary schools – does not produce negative reactions but rather the curiosity of classmates. Some teachers (as stated above by the educational manager in Brescia) take the opportunity provided by questions asked by pupils to have the class discuss the similarity with different traditions in relation to such headgear, reminding them that it was a widespread custom in parts of Italy for women to cover their heads and this is still the case in a few regions of the country. The use of the veil seems in any case to be somewhat “flexible”, sometimes being worn just for a few days as if to signal to classmates and the teacher the person’s distinctive identity, only for it to be removed once the aim has been achieved and there has been an opportunity to tell others of their traditions. In other cases pupils alternate between periods when it is worn and others when it is not, while at yet other times the head is covered in certain situations and not in certain limited and familiar situations such as the person’s own classroom.

It must be made clear that difficulties may however arise in schools in relation to foreign families, which such difficulties are not so much due to the use of the veil per se as to a style of clothing, particular found among Muslim females, that it makes their participation in various school activities a problem, especially with regard to physical education and, where the school provides it, swimming.

As has been observed by a Pakistan mediator, it should be recalled that what is thought of as a religious attitude is often the outcome of a complex interweaving of religious and cultural traditions that sometimes mean it is no easy task to clearly define the true nature of a particular dress code. It is sometimes therefore requested of girls, from very young to older girls, to observe the rules of clothing that is peculiar to the cultural and religious heritage of their countries of origin, where the body of a woman can be described as being in a sense a kind of “portable temple”, “place of excellence” in for the collective identity (Diasio, 2000). While, however, this may be quite uniformly followed in the adult population, this is much less the case for the younger generations, especially the second generation<sup>13</sup> whose members have grown up in Italy and have always lived in a social environment that suggests different clothing styles. The result is what some teachers refer to as a “mixing” of the customs of the country of origin of the family and that of the one in which these young people live.

Another bodily ornamentation that clearly signals the wearer belongs to a particular religious group is the turban, initially white, within which Sikh males gather their uncut hair.<sup>14</sup>

This story of the hair arouses the curiosity of classmates and can sometimes lead to their being made fun of. If this occurs it is essential for the teacher to intervene to turn what could be a critical moment that leads to the discomfort or isolation of the pupil into an opportunity to learn something of this custom and generally of the Sikh religious tradition. In

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<sup>13</sup> For a commentary on the use of this expression see, for example, Demarie, Molina, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> The physical signs of faith for Sikhs are “the five Ks”, i.e. *kesh* (long hair gathered in a turban, which is a duty for men and sometimes used by women), *kangha* (the comb, as sign of neatly gathered hair as distinct from the “loose” and disordered hair of the ascetic Hindus), *kara* (an iron bracelet representing moral control over action and constant reminder of God), *kacha* (long underwear as symbol of self-control and chastity) and the *kirpan* (cerimonial sword, which today is a religious symbol of the strength and the fight against injustice, and not a weapon)” (Introvigne, Zoccatelli, 2006, p. 682).

any case any initial derision is quickly abandoned and the presence of children of this religious group even in infants' school helps to overcome any erroneous assumptions. Some teachers point out a further physical ornament that is traditional in some countries, i.e. the decoration of girls' hands with henna;<sup>15</sup> while it is also interesting to note that some Chinese children of Buddhist families wear small Buddha figurines on pendants or attached to their cell phones; in this case, as also with the henna decoration, it may be plausibly supposed that the custom is not purely or exclusively religious but rather the result of a mixing of holy and profane symbolism.

### **Concluding remarks**

An examination of these and other subjects looked at in the course of the research<sup>16</sup> indicates how religious diversity, while being to some extent overlooked by the teachers as an explicit subject of study, becomes an important occasion for learning and for dialogue, thanks to the curiosity and the questions of pupils and the responses and stories of those with different traditions. The school staff thus also become aware that the multireligious nature of the class can be a useful educational resource, and hence a direct and concrete opportunity for comparative study of different symbols and values in different traditions. This opportunity rarely however translates into educational projects, either in terms of study plans or at the initiative of individual teachers. In most cases the chance to address the subjects of diversity and of comparative religion is provided, as seen above, by the questions raised by pupils or by such occasions as those of Sikh religious festivals or the Ramadan of Islam.

There is a range of possible reasons for this apparent contradiction between recognition of the multireligious nature of the class as resource and the absence of its appearance as a subject of programmed study. Certainly, on the one hand, there are more pressing multiethnic issues to be dealt with (first and foremost the language issue) and, on the other hand, there is a lack of any governmental policy directives or any school syllabus space dedicated to diverse historical and cultural manifestation of the

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<sup>15</sup> Henna is used for temporary tatoos on the hands and feet, especially in North Africa and India and brings good fortune and protects against calamities.

<sup>16</sup> For further details see Mentasti, Ottaviano, 2008, pp. 141-221.

'question of religion'. There is also a perception, particularly on the part of teachers, that they lack sufficient knowledge of the characteristics and the meaning religious customs and symbols. In addition to this it would be interesting find out, through other studies, directly from children and families of both Catholic families and those of other religions how much weight and power is exercised by the majority religion of our own country. This in terms of its traditions, its customs and its legislative, cultural and organisational influences that could hardly fail to have their effect on the school context and those within it, both by taking certain aspects for granted (when organising the school calendar and school 'holidays') and making it more complicated or difficult for other cultural or religious demands to be met, such as having time off school for important religious holidays or festivals.

The fact is that in any case, teachers involved in the research on field have on more than one occasion demonstrated their willingness to enter the argument and independently, even if incompletely, acquire for themselves the skills to act as mediators for the children, as well as for the families, whenever "incidents" occur that are related to customs associated with religious traditions. This must be recognised as a further resource available to the multicultural and multireligious school which is thus able to draw on consolidated experience and good practice to turn these to good effect into shared knowledge and reproducible action.

Despite the above, there can be no doubt that the questions posed regard situations and problems that are genuinely complex and difficult and that bring into play different lifestyles, different religious convictions and above all the relationship between the process of immigration and that of identity, where the religious dimension plays a decisive role in anchoring people their origins or distancing them from them, or may result in an ambivalent mix between the two options.

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