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IRENE
Innovative Religious Education Network:
educating to the religious diversity
KA2 - Agreement Number: 2020-1-RO01-KA204-080071

IO 1 – COMPARATIVE STUDY

REPORT ON IRENE PROJECT INTERVIEWS/QUESTIONNAIRES: ITALY

Index

1. The Interviews/Questionnaires: methodology
2. The Interviews/Questionnaires in Context
3. Educating about Religious Diversity: Limits and Potentials
 - 3.1 General Criteria
 - 3.2 Group A: Trainers of Teachers
 - 3.3 Group B: Teachers and Educators
4. Conclusions

1. The Interviews/Questionnaires: methodology

The Italian research group submitted a total number of 90 interviews/questionnaires to two different groups of individuals:

- a) 18 professors at Theological academic departments (hereinafter referred to as Group A).
- b) 72 individuals among Catholic religion school teachers and/or Catholic educators, i.e. parish catechists, Scout leaders and others (hereinafter referred to as Group B).

These groups are not representative national samples; however, they reflect the country-specific socio-cultural and socio-religious characteristics of Italy, a country experiencing a long-lasting significant influence of Catholicism along its history, as well as the supremacy of Catholicism in its socio-political scenario too due to the central role of the ‘Democrazia Cristiana’ political party (Christian Democracy) from 1945 to 1992, whose leaders have for long been recruited from among mass Catholic associations.

Also, other religious groups other than Catholics have been present within the Italian society. These groups – i.e. the Waldensian Church and the other historic Reformed Churches, the Jewish communities and the remnant of the Greek Orthodox Church – were and have been active minorities up to recent times (1970s-1980s) – considered as such by the domestic legislation too – and have been gradually recognised by the Italian State through specific agreements called ‘intese’. This framework denotes a substantial religious pluralism, which however has not been so significant in terms of demography and social representations. The echo of this historical pluralism has then been broadened by the impact of the migratory movements, which within a generation turned Italy from an emigration country – like it was from 1870 to the 1950s – into an immigration country like other Southern European States (Furseth, Pace, Pettersson, Vilaça, 2014).

The groups of interviewees were identified so as to reflect the religious composition of the Italian society; therefore, professors at the Waldensian faculty as well as professors at Orthodox theological institutes were encompassed in the survey too.





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2

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The interviews/questionnaires were submitted online by Lorenza Ferrari (Mrs.), Stefania Ceci (Mrs.) and Paola Magnani (Mrs.) between March and April 2021 as appointed by the project managers. The feedbacks were collected through both phone/online interviews and the Google Forms app. The interviewers cooperated on a voluntary basis as students attending the Master in Interfaith Dialogue held by ISE (Institute of Ecumenical Studies), and so did Maria Elena Cembali (Mrs.) taking care of the translation of the questionnaire and of the present report, while the survey was coordinated and supervised by professors Lorenzo Raniero (Mr.) and Zeno Marco Dal Corso (Mr.).

The main data of Group A and Group B interviewees were reported in two separate Excel sheets and divided into two sections according to the questionnaire structure: part I and part II were common to Group A and Group B. The following data in particular were reported in the Excel sheets:

- The interviewees' personal and social data: age; educational background; professional position held; years of experience in teaching or in similar activities and related information such as curricular course, programme, classes, students' age groups; socio-cultural and socio-religious composition of the environments where the interviewees work; students' religious knowledge and motivation (part I of the questionnaire).
- The interviewees' teaching profiles: subject taught or educational activity held; course of study; whether the course is held in a State or in a private institution (or both); purposes, approaches, methods (including the use of IT instruments), main topics addressed (part II of the questionnaire).

Open-ended questions and multiple-choice questions were interpreted by grouping them in topic-related macro-areas. The main ones are the following:



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3

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Awareness and acknowledgement / Evaluation and impact on theological,
philosophical and teaching approaches

- 1/ Religious diversity as a social fact

Experiences, methods, teaching needs related to the teaching activity

- 2/ Religious diversity as a teaching topic



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2. The Interviews/Questionnaires in Context

An accurate interpretation of the interview results requires some clarifications about the specific Italian context.

In 40 years, Italy has become a society characterised by a significant religious diversity thanks to the arrival of numerous men and women from the main migratory routes along the South-North axis, especially by road along the so-called Balkan route and by sea from Africa (Allievi, Guizzardi, Prandi, 2001; Naso & Salvarani, 2009, 2015; Pace, 2013; Ambrosini & Naso, 2019).

To rephrase a well-known saying that the Swiss writer and architect Max Frisch coined in 1965 looking at how Italian immigrants were treated in his land, ‘we wanted arms, there came men’, to which we can add ‘we gradually discovered that these people have souls, even different souls’. Metaphors aside, to these men and women belong beliefs and religious affiliations other than what is considered the *home religion* by most Italian people: Catholicism. For a long time in the Italian national history, in fact, Catholicism has been *The religion*, i.e. the horizon of meaning given for granted from generation to generation both in everyday life and in the social representation of national identity. Still in 2017 75.2% of the Italian people declared themselves ‘Catholic’ when questioned about their religious self-definition according to a survey conducted on a national sample of 3,238 individuals (Garelli, 2020: p. 29-30). Ten years earlier this percentage was slightly over 80% (Cartocci, 2011) while in 1994 it reached 89% (Cesareo et al., 1995). The reference to the religion of birth, Catholicism, is a cultural datum that has started declining only over the past two decades. In the meantime, attitudes and behaviour toward the religion of birth have turned to secular more rapidly than the representation of Italy as a *culturally* Catholic country. This process of secularisation had started earlier, in the 1960s-1970s, affecting people’s concepts of believing and affiliating to the Catholic religion in many ways. From this point of view, the different belief and affiliation concepts may be represented graphically by three concentric circles, with the largest one identifying those who declare themselves culturally Catholic, a second smaller one representing those who attend Mass every Sunday – a still valid religious practice indicator to measure the sense of belonging to the Catholic Church – and a third much smaller circle representing those who participate actively in the church’s life through associations, parishes and charity activities along with or instead of the priests.

The following diagram reports the data from the latest national survey in 2017 (Garelli, 2020).



ΑΡΙΣΤΟΤΕΛΕΙΟ
ΠΑΝΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΙΟ
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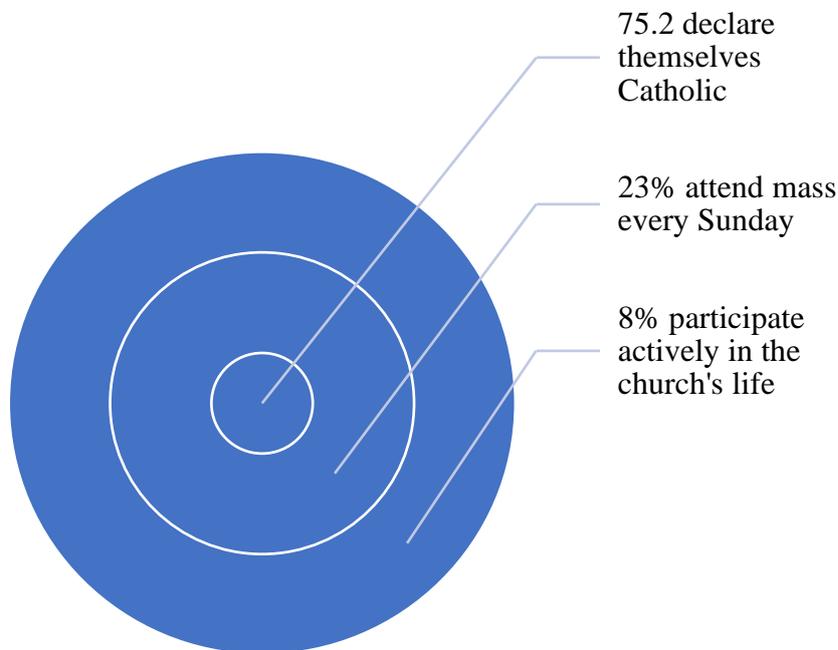
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Diagram 1 Variable-Geometry Catholicism in Italy



The change in the socio-religious reality – with specific regard to Catholicism, i.e. the context religion that is part of the background of the people interviewed for the IRENE project – is visible at a glance. In brief, such change was evidenced by:

- A differentiation *within* Italian Catholicism: different belief and affiliation ways; the emerging of a figure that is culturally Catholic but has an independent belief, tends to build a customised religion and expresses ethical and political ideas that stray from the doctrine of the Catholic Church, with the Catholic Church hierarchy subsequently losing its authority.
- The increasing visibility of other religions or spiritual traditions that are not related to the historic religions and that foster the social perception of religious diversity and of a reduced supremacy of Catholicism within the Italian society.
- The increase of forms of not-belief, individual belief and distancing from historic churches among the new generations – which for Catholicism, for instance, means a significant decline in religious practices among young people between 15 and 29 years (17% decline according to Garelli, 2016; Cipriani, 2020) with no relevant gender differences.
- The actual declericalisation of Catholicism due to two combined factors: the decreasing number of vocations and of ordinations in particular and the simultaneous progressive ageing of the clergy (in 2019 a third of the clergy members were over 70, a fifth were over 80 and only 10% were 40 years old). As a consequence, many educational activities that were carried



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out mainly by priests and by religious men and women up to thirty years ago, are carried out today by lay men and women (especially women).

- e) The rearrangement of one of the peculiar features of the Catholic parish civilisation: the lack of clergy has reduced the capability of assuring the widespread *care of souls* activity that was common in the past. In 2019 25,610 parishes were still active within a total amount of 224 dioceses; however, parish priests were 16,905, thus meaning that one single priest was in charge in more than one parish at a time in some cases. In 1990 the priests destined to parish management and care were little more than 38,000. Basic Catholic socialising activities such as catechesis, religion classes, youth associations and groups are by now managed by lay men and women committing themselves to the education of the new generations.

Therefore, understanding how and where teachers and professors in a society that is becoming differently religious have received their training is of utmost importance.

The answers collected through the interviews conducted with two groups (A and B) of individuals that differ from each other for their institutional positions – Group A composed of trainers of adult teachers aged above 25 years, and Group B composed of teachers of children and teenagers under 25 years – reflect the socio-religious trends that have characterised Italy over the past thirty years. By the way, both groups are aware to be living the change of an era and to have to accept the challenge of a religiously changing society where advantageous positions and institutional guarantees are not as firm anymore as they were in the past. In both clusters of interviewees, the idea is perceived that addressing to the new generations with words and stories that do not seem to make sense for them – not because they are not interested in religious themes but because the theological, philosophical and spiritual language that should convey religious culture and religious diversity education sounds somehow *out of tune* – is off-key with respect to the feelings and languages that pertain to the daily life of young people. Neither having an advantageous position deriving from long-lasting theological and philosophical wisdom rooting back to centuries of knowledge nor being the member of an important ecclesiastical institution in the social panorama does necessarily guarantee authority to the teachers of the future citizens of a multireligious society.

At the same time, the peculiar system of guarantees that the Italian State secured to the educational action of the Catholic Church in State schools is not a certainty anymore. This system is based on the great historical compromise that brought an end to the ideological and political dispute in Italy between the newly born Italian State founded in 1861 and the Church-Vatican State. In fact, the Vatican State had not been recognising the political legitimacy of the Italian State for about fifty years, thus inviting the faithful to abstain from voting for protest. In 1929 an agreement called ‘The Concordat’ was signed between the Catholic Church and the Italian Fascist Regime. The two main principles at the time were the acknowledgement of the Catholic religion as the religion of the Italian nation and the subordination of the other religious minorities to the procedure of the admitted cults. The Concordat was revised in 1984 prompted by a centre-left government guided by the Socialist Party. With this revision the first principle was removed, but the second principle remained valid, thus providing that non-Catholic religious minorities may be recognised by the Italian State through the negotiation of a specific agreement (*intesa*) that formally ensures them an equal treatment as that of the Catholic Church. The reference is to ‘agreements’ (*intese*) and not anymore to ‘admitted cults’;



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however, it is the State that has the last word and can decide whether to sign the agreements or not. For instance, the congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses – a religious organisation with a quite long history that has been present in Italy since the beginning of the 20th century and is widespread throughout the Italian national territory with 3,041 Kingdom Halls and more than 250,000 members – has not received the final Parliament approval although a first draft agreement had been reached twenty years ago, while a more recently established organisation like the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (briefly called the Mormon Church) signed the '*intesa*' agreement in a short time in 2012 despite its lower number of members (22,000) and a not so widespread presence on the territory.

The *Intese* agreement scheme has been extended to other religious confessions over the past thirty years, ranging from *historic* confessions like the Jewish communities, the Waldensian Table and the main Reformed Churches up to recently established confessions like some Pentecostal and Adventist churches as well as new groups like the Buddhist Union, the new Buddhist Soka Gakkai and the Hindu Union. Some major groups do not fall within this scheme however, like the Orthodox Churches – which count more than 450 parishes throughout the country and are a nationwide reference for an estimated number of 1.5 million people with a history of immigration – the Sikh communities with their 41 gurdwaras and 50,000 faithful and the Muslim communities with an estimated number of 1.8 million faithful and more than 800 prayer centres including 6 actual mosques.

Within this context the professional profile of teachers or educators changes depending on their work environment, i.e. the professors at theological university departments or at institutes of religious studies controlled by a Church institution – mainly the Catholic Church in this case – are trainers of teachers, while the teachers and educators that work in schools or are involved in catechetical or social activities mainly have to do either with how religious culture learning is organised in State schools – considering that confessional teaching shall not be allowed in State schools according to the Italian Constitution principles – or with the transmission of religious beliefs within a religious organisation (which is the case of catechesis).

In order to read and interpret the data resulting from the second questionnaire submitted mainly to Catholic religion teachers in State schools we shall not forget the peculiar features of this teaching figure. Future teachers are trained at institutes of religious sciences established within the Catholic dioceses and then recruited by competition by the Italian State. Some of them are recruited as regular teachers, while others get a fixed-term contract; in both cases, however, they get paid by the State. Italy is not the only European country that applies this system. Belgium, for instance, applies the same system but with a significant difference: in fact, Belgium provides for as many hours of religion teaching as the number of religions recognised under the Constitution and all such religions are treated as equals.

What has been explained so far allows for a better understanding of the different assessments and attitudes expressed by the interviewees of Group A about the nature of their teaching, training and/or educational activities with respect to the interviewees of Group B. Professors and trainers of teachers at theological university departments or institutes of religious sciences, who train future religion teachers or church operators, are less aware of the new and widespread religious diversity in society with respect to the teachers that everyday enter school classes and get in contact with pupils having



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a plurality of ways of believing, not believing, practicing and observing religious dictates. The English word *embedded* is used when talking about journalists sent to war fronts who must be subject to the rules of the military commands of one of the parties in conflict in order to be allowed to carry out their work. They have a certain space for manoeuvre that is however limited and subject to limitations and learn to act carefully since they might get in danger. Metaphors aside, the interviewees have a pre-understanding of the religious fact deriving from their commitment to communicating a religious message as appointed by the church they belong to; furthermore, they have an institutional role, i.e. they are teachers paid by their reference institution or by the State. Therefore, one cannot expect that the interviewees make teaching choices or have theological and philosophical approaches that deviate from the vocational goals pursued by their reference religious institution, however big or small. Professors at theological university departments, for instance, may find it relatively easier to take an *open* approach to the comparative knowledge of religions in their courses considering that the future priests or pastors will live (or have already been working) in multireligious social environments. On the contrary, such approach may result more difficult to Catholic religion teachers, who should at the same time mark the importance of Christianity and Catholicism in the Italian culture on one side and, on the other, introduce notions about other religions actually present in the society, which sometimes are even represented by some pupils in their school classes.

To this extent, it is worth noting as a final remark that Catholic religion classes still remain the only teaching occasions within the Italian State schools to somehow *make religious culture* and educate about religious diversity, also thanks to many teachers that – although *embedded* – unleash their goodwill and teaching creativity (90% of these teachers are now lay people). There are no alternatives to these classes despite the recurring discussions within and outside the Catholic Church about promoting courses of religious culture or of history of religions (Canta, 1999; Giorda & Pajer, 2010; Pajer, 2017). Catholic religion school classes are optional, which means that families (in the case of children) or pupils themselves (if aged over 18) may apply for exemption from attending such classes. As there are no real alternatives to these classes – except for the option of going to the school library or make homework at school for the following day – the number of pupils that remain in class during the religion classes has remained averagely high since 1984. For instance, the latest statistical survey carried out by the Italian National Office for the teaching of the Catholic religion in schools (IRC in Italian) shows the following framework:

Table 1 Pupils Attending Catholic Religion Classes in 2019-20 (in %) by School Grades

	Total	Nursery School	Primary School	Secondary School (I grade)	Secondary School (II grade)	
Italy (full country)	85.8	89.2	89.5	87.4	79.6	
North	81.7	84.8	85.9	83.7	74.9	
Centre	84.7	89.3	90.4	86.7	75.4	
South	97.1	97.5	97.6	97.1	96.5	

(Source: IRC - Italian National Office for the teaching of the Catholic religion in schools)



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In order to meet this learning demand – which has remained high over time – a total number of 25,694 teachers were employed in 2008-09, 89.8% of them being lay people. Ten years later, despite a slight decrease in the number of teachers (24,155) due to some early retirements, the clergy/lay people ratio remained unchanged. For a diachronic comparison it is worth noting that in 1993-94 36.8% of the religion teachers belonged to the clergy.

3. Educating about Religious Diversity: Limits and Potentials

3.1 General Criteria

The reading and interpreting process of the data collected from the interviewees of Group A and B through the questionnaires focused on the possible logical-social correlations (instead of the statistical-mathematical ones) between dependent and independent variables. To the latter group belong age, education, institutional role, type of course held, while among the dependent variables the following ones have been especially considered:

- a) The individual's representation of the socio-religious complexity of the environment he/she lives and works in and interacts with (especially if this is a class of pupils or a group of children and/or teenagers).
- b) The consciousness of needing both new information, innovative teaching methods and greater competence in order to approach the issues related to the general topic of religious diversity education.
- c) The awareness of the level of religious knowledge and cognitive motivations of the students, whether they are future teachers or pupils in either grade and type of school (State school or private school).

3.2 Group A: Trainers of Teachers

The answers given by Group A allow defining the matrix of words that the phrase 'educating about religious diversity' awakes in the interviewees when they can present their arguments through open-ended questions. Since the survey sample is not representative, a qualitative analysis reporting which words actually circulate more or less cannot be carried out; however, the way some key words recur is an indication of the level of cultural and open-minded attitude toward the topic of religious diversity education.

Group A (18 interviewees) is quite homogeneous: it is mainly composed by males – 16 men and 2 women – in their middle age – the average age is 57 years, with only 2 interviewees between 40 and 49 years – with a quite long teaching experience – only one person has been teaching for less than 10 years, 8 people have been teaching for 20 to 30 years, other 8 people for less than 20 years, while a person (the oldest one in the group) has been a professor for almost 50 years. All of them reached the highest education level (PhD in Theology) and 16 of them attended additional courses too in either Philosophy, History, Economics, Eastern Languages, Religious Sciences or Physics.





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10

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Almost all of them teach at theological university departments or higher institutes of religious sciences, which means that they all teach in private institutions (only one interviewee teaches half time in a State university too). Most group members are lay people (13) who live and work in a town, while 5 of them in a big city. Group A interviewees represent the socio-cultural and socio-religious context they live in as characterised by a majority religion – Catholicism – *on the foreground* and a certain amount of people belonging to other cultures and beliefs *on the background*. Only 4 interviewees out of 18 represent the society they live in as multiethnic and multireligious. The filter between *the foreground* and *the background* is the teaching context most of the interviewees work within, i.e. classes of young students over 25 years that chose to attend courses at theological university departments or at higher institutes of religious sciences (liturgical, biblical and/or ecumenical courses), who have a Christian origin (mainly Catholic and, to a lesser extent, Evangelical and Orthodox) and that – according to the interviewees – seem to be averagely well-motivated and with a good religious knowledge (13 cases out of 18).

Since they are professors of theological sciences with a long and proven teaching experience, it is interesting to note how the above-mentioned distinction between *foreground* and *background* makes some of them take a specific study approach in their courses that educates about interfaith dialogue. Two indicators of this methodological approach can be considered: on one side, the name of the course that they hold; on the other side, the not strictly doctrinaire or theological topics that each professor would like to study or discuss in class to promote religious diversity education. 7 courses out of the 18 held by the interviewees denote an approach to dialogue in their names, while other 4 courses – regardless of their names – deal with ecumenical or interfaith topics. Here are the names of all these courses in detail, divided by names and declared contents (the names and explicit training purposes are in **bold**).

Table 2 Courses and Training Purposes

Name of the Course	Training Purposes	Name of the Course	Training Purposes
Ecumenical Theology	Ecumenical dialogue	Dogmatic Theology	Educating about a plural and discerning perspective
Theology of Religions	Study of the relations between Catholicism and other religions	Fundamental Theology	Comparison between Christianity and other universal religions
Methodology of Interfaith Dialogue	Interfaith dialogue	Mission and Dialogue	Theology of interfaith dialogue
Jewish-Christian Dialogue	Knowledge of Judaism in order to know Christianity	Orthodox Theology and Ecumenism	Comparison with the other Christian confessions
Theology and Ethics of Interfaith Dialogue	Interfaith dialogue		



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11

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Ecumenical Dialogue	Theology of Dialogue according to Vatican II		
Interfaith Dialogue	Knowledge of universal religions		

It is worth noting that even those subjects that do not explicitly refer to the topic of interfaith dialogue have training purposes aiming at an *open* education, oriented to the cognitive training of students toward dialogue and the comparison both within Christianity and between Christianity and other religions. A proof of this common approach among the 18 interviewed professors at theological university departments and similar higher institutes is the following map of the topics that they deem important or very important to deal with in class, listed in decreasing order:

Table 3 Importance Given to the Topics Dealt With in the Courses (absolute values in multiple-choice answers)

Topics	Important / Very important
Ecumenical and Interfaith Dialogue	17
Nations and Cultures	16
Human Rights	13
Refugees and Migrations	11
Environment and Climate	10
Gender Minorities	9
Social Crisis	8
Ethical Issues	6
Other Topics: History, Geopolitics, Languages, Relational Psychology	1



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The following diagram shows the topics grouped into five macro-areas:

Diagram 2 Map of the Topics



The need to broaden the perspective from theology to these macro-topics is to be interpreted in two ways. On one side, these topics reveal the educators’ moral and cultural sensitivity; on the other side, they indicate the educational and teaching concern of those theology trainers that are committed to showing a semantic connection between the theological discourse and everyday life, between specialised, systematic knowledge and those issues that divide people’s consciences and public opinion but that at the same time have become a common ground for religious understanding between people having different cultures and beliefs. All the above explains why most of the interviewees of Group A agree on the following points: a) that educating about religious diversity has become an almost necessary choice and b) that this is the only way to reduce religious illiteracy, which is the basis for stereotypes, distrust and conflicts.

This view, by the way, was already clear to Régis Debray, who in 2002 (Debray 2002) presented a report to Jack Lang (the French Minister of Education at the time) in which he highlighted the need to introduce religious culture – or the culture of the *religious fact* – into the lay French school system. It is also worth recalling briefly that Debray is an intellectual with a Marxist background who fought with Che Guevara, has Jewish origins and is sensitive to the topic of dialogue between the three historic monotheistic religions. The main argument of the report is simple to state: in a society characterised by high religious diversity it becomes necessary to *introduce religion at school*, even





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13

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in a State that proclaims itself lay; the lack of knowledge of the *religious fact* would result in new generations and future citizens that are ignorant and indifferent to the actual and visible social differences connected with the different belief affiliations. Despite the differences in context between France and Italy – Italy is not France, its lay State model is different from the French one, if only because the entire subject of the relations between religion and politics is governed by Constitution through the Concordat with the Catholic Church and through the *intese* system with the other religious confessions – this topic has been debated in Italy too for almost twenty years now (Salvarani, 2003, 2006; Dal Corso, Damini, 2011; Melloni, 2014; Dal Corso, Salvarani, 2016).

The answers collected through the questionnaires also allow assessing if and how the good intentions declared so far by the theological science trainers with respect to religious diversity education actually result in teaching and cultural good practices. Cultural good practices refer to information needs that may integrate further fields of knowledge – as clothes that can be worn when dealing with the topics briefly depicted in the above diagram – to theological knowledge – which can be seen as their professional suit. Teaching good practices refer to new strategies that can be used while teaching in order for students to experience diversity and learn ways to turn it into an incremental cognitive value. It is quite clear that the classes where these trainers teach are composed by students with a quite homogeneous cultural level and religious affiliation – most of them have a Christian origin (Catholic, Evangelical or Orthodox) and live in social environments where the concept and experiences of ecumenical dialogue are quite familiar – so the trainers basically use a traditional teaching scheme that mixes discussion and information almost in equal percentage, i.e. they give information about the other religions and/or compare Christianity with other beliefs using mainly a traditional communication scheme as well – lectures – that more than half of them alternate with group work activities, frequent feedbacks and the use of multimedia instruments (not social media, however). An important aspect revealed through the trainers' answers concerns the experience of attending refresher courses or specific courses with theological subjects related to dialogue and religious pluralism as well as their common satisfaction with these recurring training experiences. In the end, it is worth reflecting on the answers given to the question about the conceptual distinction between religious diversity - i.e. the factual evidence of a changing reality – and religious pluralism – i.e. the policies to manage diversity and the underlying ideologies. Our group of interviewees is split in two: 9 of them think that such distinction makes sense, while other 9 think it does not (to be precise, 2 of them cannot give an answer).

Then, a final consideration about the answers given to open-ended questions, which we considered as short texts useful to extract recurring phrases or words. We gathered them and tried to create a metatext, whose purpose is not to form a basic, shared vocabulary about religious diversity and dialogue education – since the answers are often minimal – but to create a list of words that indicates a possible convergence or divergence in the interviewees' approaches to the topic of dialogue and its related subjects. The main *positive* matrices of what seems to be the most common lexicon are the following:



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Table 4 Lexicon Matrices

Knowledge	Social Relations	Narration	Empathy	Dialogue	Other
Alterity, Understanding, Mutual Understanding, Remembrance	Listening, Discussion, Social Cohesion, Trust, Meeting, Integration, Conflict Prevention and Resolution	Openness, Decentring, Humility	Counselling, Affectivity, Love, Attentiveness, Care, Willingness, Brotherhood, Hospitality, Sympathy	Diversity as an Enrichment, Diversity as an Opportunity, Pluralism, Common Home, Common Belonging	Funniness Keeping it slow Silence Humour

The five main lemmas reveal the common feeling and belief that the first step to take in order to dialogue and educate – others and oneself – about recognising and respecting religious diversity is knowing people and their beliefs with an attitude toward reciprocity, trust and willingness to listen. This attitude can foster mutual understanding and subsequent social peace, provided that no one expects himself/herself to be the focus of the social and religious scene – as the word ‘decentring’ seems to reveal, along with the words ‘humility’ and maybe ‘silence’ too, including a certain amount of ‘funniness’ and ‘humour’ mentioned by one of the interviewees – with the will to defend his/her own ethnic-cultural-social identity. These cognitive aspects correspond to feelings and emotions that many interviewees sum up in the word ‘empathy’, which in turn leads to a cluster of more or less intense words like love, affectivity, brotherhood, hospitality, counselling, willingness, etc. Not many interviewees – to be precise, only 5 out of 18 – consider dialogue between people having different beliefs a beneficial process to maintain social cohesion and, in general, to understand dialogue as not merely a form of discussion between different religious perspectives but also as a good civic practice based on *factual* cooperation and not simply on thinking-together habits. This is however a significant belief, as it is based on the idea that the practice of interfaith and ecumenical dialogue is limited to the narrow circle of theology experts.

At the same time, the discourse about dialogue is accompanied by other lemmas that have an opposite meaning to that of the above-mentioned ones. The most recurring ones are the following:

division among Christians – toil to dialogue as a church – religious illiteracy – laicism – political manipulation of religion – supremacist glorification of one’s ethnic-cultural-religious identity – syncretism – racism – integrism – colonialism – self-centredness – authoritarianism – psycho-centrism – stereotypes – talking in slogans – shouted, aggressive words – exaggerated attitude toward conflict – clash of civilisations.





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13

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Innovative Religious Education NETwork:
educating to the religious diversity

KA2 - Agreement Number: 2020-1-RO01-KA204-080071

The trainer of teachers' profile described above will be taken up in the conclusions and will be compared to the profile emerging from the analysis of the questionnaires submitted to Group B.

3.3 Group B: Teachers and Educators

Group B – made up of 72 interviewees, with only one person who did not return the questionnaire – is composed by a major homogeneous batch of Catholic religion teachers (working mostly in State schools) and a minor batch of children and teenager educators who cooperate on a voluntary basis in the educational activities promoted by parishes or Catholic associations like the Scouts. To be precise, 70% of the interviewees belong to the first batch.

With respect to Group A, the male/female ratio is different, in fact 74.6% are men and 25.4% are women. The age too is significantly lower: 6 interviewees are between 21 and 30 years, 9 are between 31 and 40 years, 26 are between 41 and 50 years and only 7 are over 50-60 years. 7 out of 10 interviewees have a university degree and the others have a secondary education certificate. Most of them (50 out of the total) graduated in Social Sciences, 13 of them in Theology and only 7 attended scientific courses. They generally have a quite long learning experience as educators, in fact 54 interviewees have more than 20-years experience in the activity (the remaining ones are under this threshold). The percentage of lay people among the interviewees is considerably high – only 2.8% of the interviewees belong to the clergy – and this reflects the Italian national scenario. 6 out of 10 work in State schools, especially in towns (72%); only a few of them work in big cities and only 3 out of 10 work in a small town or in a village. Even those of them who are educators and not school teachers interact mostly with class groups whose members are under 25 years – unlike Group A interviewees, who mostly interact with people over 25 years –. Moreover, the individuals in Group B work in and interact with contexts that are still quite homogeneous in terms of culture (mainly native people) and socio-religious features (mainly young people born in a Catholic context), although more than one third of the interviewees experience – and perceive it every day – that new generations belonging to other ethnic groups and other religions are present (mainly Christian-Orthodox and Muslim religions).

For a better understanding of the latest data it is worth noting that the estimates of the new religious confessions established in Italy after the arrival of men and women with a history of immigration – more than 5 million people corresponding to 8.7% of the total Italian population – are the following:

- The absolute majority of foreign nationals resident in Italy is Christian, i.e. 54.1% corresponding to 2.9 million faithful, mainly Orthodox, then Catholic and Evangelical-Pentecostal (the latter ones come from Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America).
- Muslims are estimated to be around 1.6 million (29.2%).
- The followers of Buddha Dharma are 174,000 (3.2%)
- The affiliates to the Way of the Disciples (Sikh Panth) are 51,000 (1%)
- Hindus are 96,000 (1.8%)
- 44,000 people (0.8%) practice other religions (Pace, 2021; Valtolina, Menonna, 2020).

These estimates evidence a changing socio-religious reality. The interviewees, especially those who teach in nursery schools or primary schools, mostly interact with classes where the coexistence





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16

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Innovative Religious Education Network:
educating to the religious diversity

KA2 - Agreement Number: 2020-1-RO01-KA204-080071

of people with cultures and religions other than *the majority Catholic religion of the natives* is becoming more visible (maybe small percentages of people within a class).

Religion teachers, unlike educators that cooperate in parishes and Catholic associations, can get an overview during their everyday activity about whether or not and how much the social religious differentiation is reflected in the class groups. The outcome from the answers given to question 14 ‘What has been your learners’ relation to religion during the past 5 years?’ is a realistic picture of pupils’ attitude toward religion, meaning both their religion *of birth* and the *new* beliefs in the Italian socio-religious geography. This picture is meaningful in two ways: on one side, it depicts a variable-geometry religiosity; on the other side, it underlines that the historically dominant religion – Catholicism – still represents the horizon of meaning given for granted in the attitude toward religion in general, even among a wide section of young people. Nevertheless, 90% of native young people up to 14-15 years are socialised in Catholic environments (parish catechesis and participation in the activities of parishes or Catholic associations, widespread attendance of Catholic religion classes up to secondary school), although a high number of them (more than 35%) live with parents who do not go to Mass nor have their individual way of believing. Although the relationship of young people with their religion of birth tends to change to some extent as they turn 14-15 years – they drift away from their belief of birth or their relation with the Catholic environments becomes weaker – the actual religious *refusal* or the *decommitment* happen later, especially after completion of school education or when entering university or the job market (Garelli, 2016). Keeping the context in mind, the interviewees that work in schools get the idea that most of their pupils refer to a predominant religion – i.e. Catholicism, as the interviewees confirmed when explicitly questioned – but at the same time comprehend that the ways of believing and practicing within Catholicism are numerous (42.3% of them agree with this latter idea and 40.8% with the first one). As a matter of fact, the percentage of interviewees that represent the religious micro-universe they live in as populated by half of the people having a religious belief and half of the people having it not, is not small (almost 1 teacher out of 10). Also, there is a small percentage of teachers (4.2%) that are convinced that most pupils do not believe in nor practice any religion. Such an image probably matches the results of some recent surveys on religiosity among new generations. In fact, for an increasing segment of young people – with no significant gender differences – the *words* themselves that pertain to the familiar religious lexicon or to the traditional Catholic socialisation do not make sense anymore. Maybe they do not consider themselves to be *religious* anymore, but they are interested in the new forms of spirituality (Castegnaro, 2010; Giordan, Sbalchiero, 2020; Palmisano, Pannofino, 2021) that the market of symbolic goods offers online and offline.

It is not easy for teachers to communicate with the new generation segment over 14-15 years of age. Such difficulty degree can be measured by combining how the teachers assess their pupils’ level of religious knowledge with the attitudes toward religion as interpreted within the scope of open-ended question no. 17. As far as the first point is concerned, the teachers observe a fairly good level of knowledge (almost 4 out of 10 think so, considering 32.4% of them answering ‘rather good’ and 7% answering ‘very good’). A negative assessment however prevails, since most teachers (almost half of them) deem the level of knowledge ‘rather deficient’ (42.3%) or ‘very deficient’ (5.6%). If we add to the above figures the percentage of interviewees who answered that the level of knowledge is ‘difficult

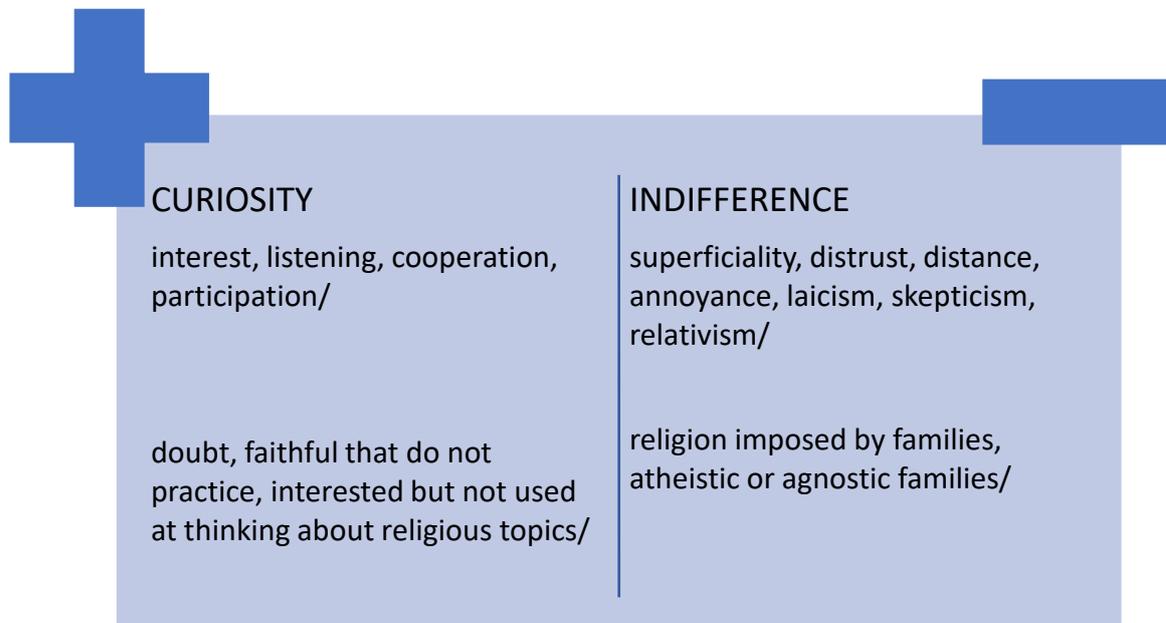


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to say’ (12%), we can read the overall data as an indicator of widespread religious illiteracy – return illiteracy actually, considering the quite long socialisation in religious environments that the new generations have experienced since their childhood – which although does not turn into a firm refusal of the institutional religious teaching offered by the State education system. As a matter of fact, the map of the pupils’ attitudes toward religious topics and religion itself that derives from the teachers’ perspectives seems to confirm the existence of a sort of *middle-earth* between believing and not believing, between reference to the religion of birth and spiritual search outside the confines of Catholicism. The resulting map is expressly split into two micro-hemispheres: one reports the feelings of teachers – even educators – who interact daily with children in nursery schools and primary schools, while the other one corresponds to teachers that teach at or take part in activities for teenagers in secondary schools. Two key words can be considered decisive among the 72 interviewees within these micro-hemispheres. Other terms related to the two key words by a similar cognitive and emotional meaning are then grouped around them in clusters.

Table 5 The Symbolic Opposing Axis of the Key Words



Besides the youngest children, who are the most open age group to the religious message transmitted by faith educators, the situation described by educators and teachers of pupils aged over 12 is much more complex. In fact, in this second case it seems that the interviewees use less but anyway effective words to describe the two main aspects that make their education activity more difficult, i.e. the role of families on one side, and the peculiar features of contemporary youth culture on the other. On one side then, it sounds like there is a sort of hidden actor – namely, families with a low level of religious practice and belief, who somehow delegate to the Catholic Church the duty of





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18

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educating to the religious diversity

KA2 - Agreement Number: 2020-1-RO01-KA204-080071

transmitting a care package (i.e., religion) to the new generations, since they (i.e., the families) do not feel capable of doing it anymore.

On the other side, there seem to be young pupils who express interest for certain topics only when such topics enter their life experiences or turn into ways to think about their lives, i.e. when they seem to be sources of response to personal existential issues or to issues related to teenage transition rather than being the expression of a religious tradition or doctrine. To give a factual idea of the teachers' difficulties on this point – the issue concerns educators of young children to a lesser extent – it can be useful to report the words that some interviewees reported in the open-ended questions while thinking about their diversified experiences with pupils of different ages. So, almost half of the interviewees report that the boys and girls they interact with are divided into those who express interest and pay attention to what is said in class and those who clearly show indifference or the attitude toward superficial judgment.

Then, in a series of answers some of the interviewees (11 of them, to be precise) tried to argument their points of view – despite the limited space available in the questionnaire – thereby suggesting some solutions to other educators that feel to be the sensitive terminal of the socio-cultural and socio-religious change under way and that therefore do not feel they can count with advantageous positions – i.e. the advantageous positions of those who think that Catholicism is still and undoubtedly a significant cultural heritage despite the uncertain ways of believing and the possibility that it is broken up and impoverished while being transmitted to new generations –.

As far as the above-mentioned suggested solutions are concerned, the actual discourse is about the teaching methods that the teachers are experimenting or referring to in order to face both the issues summed up with the key words above and the religious diversity that characterises society and now also school classes.

The answers given about the purposes and the position of the subjects taught are not particularly significant. Teachers in State schools usually follow the guidelines set by the Italian Ministry for Education and take into account the purposes set by the Catholic Church that trained them professionally. Educators, on the contrary, have a higher degree of freedom in defining the purposes and structure of their programmes. In parallel, the answers to the question about the philosophical-religious approaches taken mainly focus on the purpose of introducing the Christian and Catholic religion by comparing them with other religions, provided that the time to do that is enough considering the low number of class hours per week and per class group. The interviewees who added some further information reported that they try to use the Bible or the narrative method for the purpose of introducing students to those elements that refer to Catholicism in the Italian culture. As they are not required to carry out catechesis teaching, Catholic religion teachers employ – or report to employ – an overall approach typical of a basically optional course of religious culture rooted in the history of a country with a Catholic tradition. We do not know if this approach is always effective – nevertheless the survey did not aim at investigating this point –; however, the above-mentioned answers seem to reveal that the results are not in line with the approaches that most teachers learnt during their training courses at the institutes of religious sciences established since a long time within the dioceses of the Catholic Church.



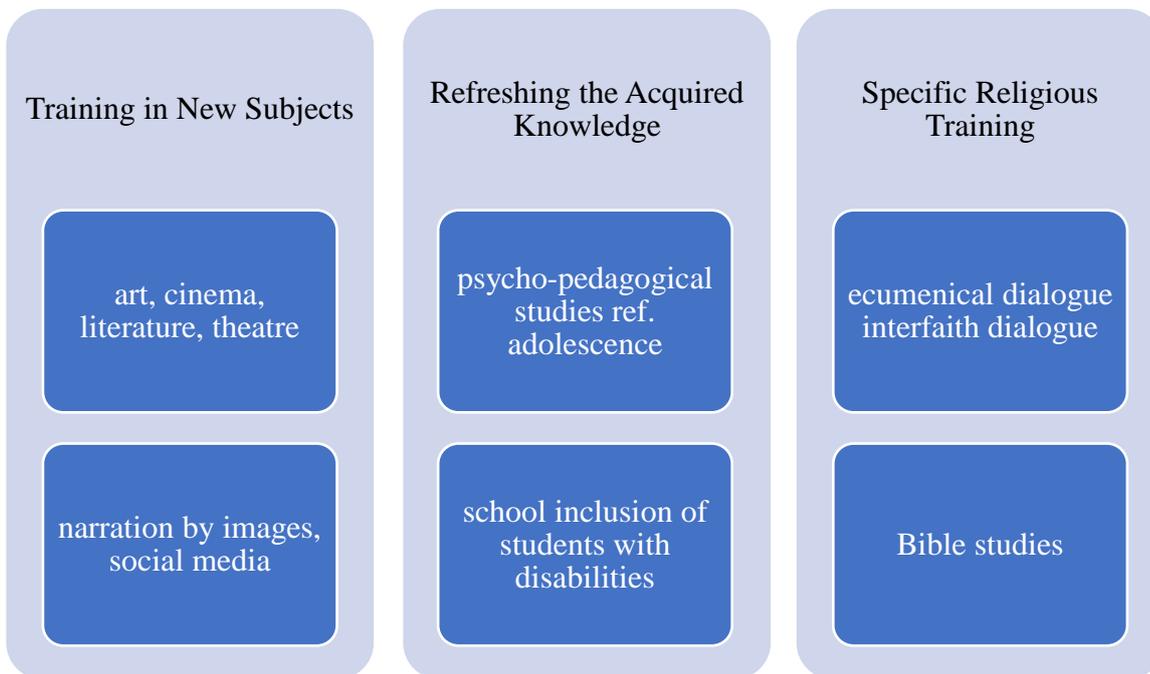
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As far as the teaching instruments and methods used are concerned, the answers reveal that they are diverse and multiple, thus reflecting a higher creativity freedom. Lectures are in most cases alternated with role plays, group work activities, text analysis, the use of multimedia instruments and also strategies for a more direct engagement of pupils in the class like cooperative learning, flipped classroom and similar. The analysis of the answers dedicated to the training needs results in a map with three clusters of needs that educators (on one side) and teachers (on the other) report:

Table 6 Training Needs Reported



A small number of interviewees – basically only educators that participate in catechesis activities in parishes – report a more frequent calendar of prayer gatherings and spiritual retreats as their main need, since ‘we have no competences in what we do, but only faith’ as one of the interviewees reported.





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educating to the religious diversity

KA2 - Agreement Number: 2020-1-RO01-KA204-080071

Beyond this specific subgroup of Group B, however, most interviewees (72%) are actually interested in attending refresher courses – which they have already attended in the past with different degrees of satisfaction – especially in the education and teaching fields, but also in Theology and Social Sciences. Such inclinations are also reflected in the interviewees' favour toward learning and experimenting group work methods and methodologies that encourage the active engagement of pupils in the learning activities. The answers given to the open-ended questions about the degree of satisfaction with the existing teaching aids and materials (Q32), the innovative methods used (Q33) including innovative digital solutions (Q34) reported the following:

- General satisfaction with the teaching aids and materials, except by those teachers who take care of children between 3 and 6 years, who complain about the lack of adequate reading material and teaching aids suitable for that age group.
- Books are still the most used supports, although a high number of interviewees (45% at least) report to practice a variety of other teaching supports in class (multimedia, cooperative learning, Bible drama, interactive experiential learning laboratories, freedom writers' groups, flipped classroom, IBW (Interactive Whiteboard), role playing). At the same time, a significant percentage of the interviewees (just over half of them) report to feel a certain unease with being unable to offer pupils innovative teaching approaches due to the lack of training courses, money or organisation in schools, or the Catholic religion classes being considered a low-level teaching in State schools, or also the lack of a network among teachers – which they would deem useful in order to exchange ideas and learning experiences with other colleagues – and, lastly, the experience of feeling alone in their work activities with no occasion to exchange opinions with teachers of other subjects.
- Half of the interviewees usually use digital instruments in their teaching activities, while 22 of them would like to learn how to use them. As far as the remaining interviewees are concerned, some of them do not use digital instruments because they deem them not necessary for their teaching activities, while the others do not appreciate the potential of such instruments.
- In the end, the high majority of teachers regularly collect feedbacks from their students throughout the school year, especially through solid or online questionnaires, with exception of the educators of children between 3 and 6 years.



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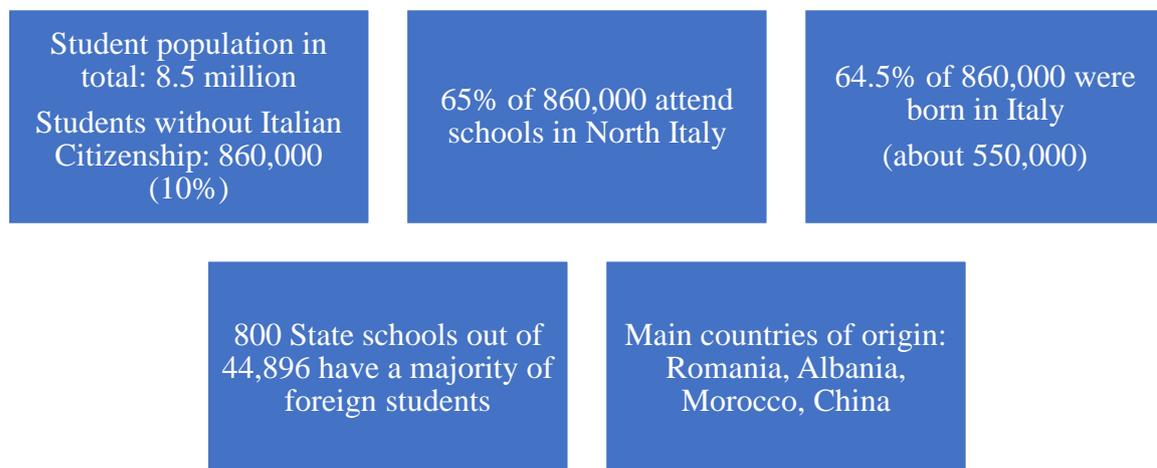
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KA2 - Agreement Number: 2020-1-RO01-KA204-080071

Conclusions

The increase in the number of immigrants' children in Italian State and private schools is a firm point. In fact, according to the latest report issued by the Italian Ministry for Education (2020) the complex socio-cultural situation in the Italian schools in school year 2019-20 can be pictured as follows:

Table 7 Student Population - Students with Foreign Citizenship, Italy 2019-20
(Source: Ministry for Education, Annual Report on Foreign Students)



This brief snapshot is not exhaustive. The following should also be noted:

- Only 18% of schools do not have students with foreign origins.
- Plus, almost 6 schools out of 10 have a percentage of students with foreign origins slightly lower than 15%, and in 16.4% of schools the percentage ranges between 15% and 20%.
- The four main countries of origin (Romania, Albania, Morocco and China) cover two thirds of the 860,000 students with foreign citizenship (the first Country is Romania, an EU Country, with 150,000 people). However, it is worth remembering that immigrants come to Italy from 194 different countries worldwide: 46 European countries (EU and extra-EU), 54 African countries, 48 Asian countries, 35 American countries and 11 Oceanian countries.
- The new and old religions that populate the world are mainly represented and settled in the Italian territory (maybe in very small percentages) and can be detected in those 800 schools (located mainly in North Italy) where the cultural, linguistic and religious diversity is high.



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KA2 - Agreement Number: 2020-1-RO01-KA204-080071

Today a typical school class could theoretically be a little world populated by citizens having other nationalities and many different beliefs. Such plurality, which involves the students and their families too, has an actual impact on school programmes, teaching approaches and teachers' training – all teachers of course, not only those who teach religion (Zanfrini, 2020; Colombo, Lodigiani, Santagati, 2021; Cuciniello, Pasta, 2021).

In a society that is undergoing socio-religious changes and is becoming more pluralistic than in the recent past – when the collective memory's social frameworks were defined by Catholicism – the survey on the two Groups A and B evidenced the limits and potentials of the provision of religious diversity education. Although the two groups are not representative samples – as declared at the beginning of the report – they return a glimpse of a reality (the Italian one) that cannot ignore the plurality of affiliations to religions that up to 20-30 years ago were new and unknown. In order to turn this situation into an opportunity of educational improvement and teaching innovation, most interviewees report to be aware of the current change and to give attention to the presence of religious pluralism in society and at school.

At the same time, the interviewees are also aware of the institutional constraints that circumscribe and direct their teaching, communication and educational action. If the teachers are Theology professors (of either Catholic, Evangelical or Orthodox Theology), their main teaching purposes are presented by their reference institution, as evidenced by the data collected in Group A. If the teachers are (Catholic) religion teachers at school (Group B), they may count with a higher degree of freedom, but at the same time their double belonging – i.e. being trained at institutes controlled by the bishops and being employed by the State – restricts the scope of their training action since its contents have been learnt in a Catholic environment but its purposes are defined by State programmes. Through the comparison of the two groups we understand that the interviewees widely require training to live up to a religiously changed society which is not mainly Catholic anymore but is layered into different new and old religious expressions.

Group A reveals such requirement through the high number of professors that focus their training activity on ecumenical and interfaith dialogue topics. Teachers of Group B mainly stay faithful to the institutional rules of engagement with both the Catholic Church and the Italian State, but are also firmly convinced that the widespread religious illiteracy among pupils – maybe balanced by genuine curiosity especially among young pupils in primary schools – is connected with the Catholic socialisation model on one side (which proves to be still partly effective with young people till 14-15 years of age) and the difficulty to put in praxis in class the teaching innovative ideas and projects for religious diversity education on the other.

In the wake of the recurring discussions about the validity of the established model of Catholic religion school teaching in both the lay and the religious environments, there are and have been sporadic experiments throughout Italy over the past few years. In most Italian schools the only specific occasion dedicated to religious culture education is often occupied by the non-*catechetical* teaching of the Catholic religion. The law provides that whether there are students that choose to not attend such classes – and they are a few – schools should offer alternative school lessons. The initiatives taken to fill such educational and teaching void are a few, actually. Where possible, the teaching of other religions has been added, but this is not certainly sufficient to imagine *learning from*



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KA2 - Agreement Number: 2020-1-RO01-KA204-080071

religion school courses. The most interesting teaching experiments – although they are only a few – are those in which Catholic religion teachers worked together with teachers of other subjects in order to develop a multidisciplinary educational project open to both those who attend and those who do not attend Catholic religion classes and which therefore does not coincide with the institutional perimeter of the religion school class.

So in conclusion, the survey showed good willingness by both professors of Group A and teachers of Group B to introduce the topic of religious diversity in their courses. Also, a widespread common belief that dealing with such topic is necessary emerged too. For professors of Group A (potential trainers of teachers) this means investing intellectual and spiritual energies to give theological-practical substance to ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. For teachers of Group B, instead, this need is expressed through a variety of teaching initiatives aiming at both teaching the fundamentals of a religion and its impact on the culture of a nation and at giving pupils the ground rules in order to know the differences and similarities among the numerous religions represented in society and in the social little world of the school class.

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