

For free, secular public schools without religious fences

FdCA statement on the proposed introduction of Islamic instruction in schools

Federazione dei Comunisti Anarchici

28 October 2009

Certain right-wing politicians have surprisingly launched the idea of introducing a weekly hour of Muslim religious instruction into the country's public schools, giving rise to a debate based on nothing, given the enormous range and complexity of the changes that would be necessary in order to accord Islam with the same status currently enjoyed by Roman Catholicism.

So if these changes are so many and so complex (agreement between the State and Islam, the drawing up of a schools curriculum, the training of teachers, parliamentary legislation, and so on), then what exactly is the real aim of this move, presented as an apparent "liberalisation" of the weekly hour of religion in schools?

In reality it is a move which is designed to strengthen the already-solid presence of the Roman Catholic church in the country's schools, as they gradually lose their status as institutions to become mere public services while at the same time turn them from places where free, secular minds are created into places where identities are created, identities based on religious, ethnic, territorial and other grounds.

So with public schools going in this direction, the presence and the role of the Roman Catholic religion as guardian becomes a decisive element in creating identities, eliminating all traces of secularism and all spirit of criticism.

€136 million in State donations to private schools (mostly run by Catholic religious orders) is no longer enough. They need to strengthen the role and presence of the Roman Catholic religion in public schools, and as far as the Minister and the Vatican authorities are concerned, that means two things: amending the status of teachers of the Roman Catholic religion on the one hand, and the status of the teaching of the Roman Catholic religion (IRC) on the other.

In order to guarantee teachers of religion the same conditions as other teachers (basically the right to vote during exams and grading), it would be necessary to modify the agreement of 23 June 1990 between the Italian State and the Vatican, in particular where it says that the votes of teachers of the Roman Catholic religion may be taken into account in assigning a student's final marks at the end of the school year¹, and also to change Art. 309 of Legislative Order No.297/1994

¹ The Italian schools system requires teachers to assign a final mark out of 10 to every student at the end of the school year. The average mark is then used to decide whether the student can proceed to the following year or

which allows the State freedom to choose how marks for IRC are assigned. This of course would not be impossible, and would bring IRC into parity with other school subjects; this would provoke a series of constitutional challenges and of course would harm the rights of those students who do not take IRC, as they would be in disparity. Needless to say, the alternative activities provided for students exempted from IRC do not receive the funding required to pay teachers.

The other necessary step would be to equate IRC with other subjects on a cultural and scientific level. It may seem paradoxical, given that – unlike the other subjects, which enjoy freedom of status and teaching methods – IRC is dictated by religious authorities, who control both the syllabus and the training and orthodoxy of teacher; and yet in a letter to the Bishops' Conferences of 5th May last², the Congregation for Catholic Education claimed that the teaching of Roman Catholicism was of a scientific, even secular, nature while at the same time it took care to warn the bishops that it was up to them to monitor IRC and up to the Episcopal Conference to issue general regulations on the subject.

So we must be careful not to fall into the trap offered to the media by the provision of a weekly hour of Islamic teaching. Instead we need to prepare ourselves to face what will probably be the decisive move by fundamentalist Roman Catholicism against the public school system, ready to demolish the last bulwarks of secularism and freedom of teaching facing the return of clerical authorities into the fields of science and culture. An hour of Islamic religion, should it ever be introduced, will be the least of our worries.

All secular, libertarian and anti-clericalist forces, every opponent of fundamentalism and religious fences, anyone who stands against divisions in society, be they of a religious or ethnic nature, by blood or by land, are called once again to mobilize in defence of secularism. It will be a cultural, political and social mobilization involving schools, education workers, grassroots associations and labour associations, in a campaign to safeguard the basic principle of a public school for all, and for initiatives and proposals promoting an inter-cultural society and school system without religious authorities and without dogma, based on mutual solidarity and the recognition that women and men must be free to choose, free to struggle.

must repeat the year. Currently, IRC teachers can only give an assessment in words and this mark is thus excluded from the student's final mark. This government plans to permit IRC teachers to assign a numerical mark, enabling the student's mark in Roman Catholic Religion to be included in the final average mark alongside the other subjects.

² The Congregation for Catholic Education is part of the Roman Curia. The letter in question can be read at www.vatican.va

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