

The last official figures date from 2001: a €650 million wage bill for teachers whose number has swelled in the interim to more than 25 thousand, but only half are permanent

## Religious dogma in the classroom:

### RE classes are worth a billion

Spain is reviewing its agreements with the Church, whereas in Italy it's not even talked about

By Curzio Maltese | Translated by Graeme A Hunter

The latest wave of bullying in schools has convinced the government to instigate a compulsory two hours of civic education from next year, to be called *Cittadinanza e Diritti Umani* (Citizenship and Human Rights), at every stage from Nursery to Secondary. The very strong protest from the Bishops spoke of it being a “socialist catechism” and invited teachers’ and Catholic parents’ associations to march in protest and use their right to conscientious objection. The Prime Minister went on television to reply that, with all due respect to the Catholic majority in Italy, the secular nature of the Italian State is a fundamental principle of our democracy and civic education is not and can never be in competition with optional RE classes (for Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Protestants alike) already in the system. The PM added that he would confirm the funding cuts to private schools (Catholic and non-Catholic alike), which he described as “a return to constitutional legality”, in reference to the previous right-wing government. Now, at this point readers might be asking themselves “where was I when all this was happening?”. The answer is: in Italy, while the real events were, naturally, happening elsewhere. This was eight months ago, in the Spain of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. The big clash between the secular State and the Bishops went ahead and today the Spanish government is reviewing the Concordat of 1979 [with the Vatican]. A reality, but a distant one.

In Italian schools, more afflicted by bullying than Spanish ones, civic education classes had been abolished at Primary level and are almost unknown in Secondary schools. To compensate, the State tried hard to encourage RE classes, but only in Catholicism. State funding of Catholic private schools is, in theory, prohibited by Article 33 of the Italian Constitution which states: “Persons and institutions shall have the right to set up schools and institutes of education, without burden to the State”, but Education Minister Fioroni of the current Centre-Left government is currently trying to beat the record for generosity set by Letizia Moratti during the previous Berlusconi government.

Optional RE classes cost Italian taxpayers around a billion euros per year. It is the second such scheme of direct funding which the Catholic denomination receives, and only a few million less than the *otto per mille* (the “voluntary” income tax contribution scheme). This situation, however, risks being reversed. The most recent government figures show an outlay of €650 million on RE teachers’ salaries, but these date from 2001 when there were

22 000 of them, all on temporary contracts. Today they have swelled to 25 679, of whom 14 670 have moved to permanent roles, thanks to a quick and slightly ridiculous series of public competitions set up by the Berlusconi government and continued by the present one.

The gift of a permanent job to RE teachers is at the centre of an interminable legal dispute, for at least two sets of reasons. The first objection is one of principle. RE classes are optional instruction and, as such, should not require permanent teaching staff. In addition, RE teachers are chosen by the Bishops and not by the State. However, if the diocese withdraws its accreditation, which can happen for a myriad of reasons (e.g. being separated), the State is then saddled with the ex-RE teacher until retirement.

The other source of controversy is the disparity in remuneration between “normal” teachers and RE teachers. For the same amount of work, RE teachers are actually paid more than their colleagues teaching compulsory subjects. They were already the highest paid *temporary* teaching staff in Italy. In 1996 and in 2000, two Centre-Left government circulars announced the decision to make the biennial 2.5% pay and length-of-service review apply only to RE teachers, in contrast to the provisions of two laws enacted in 1961 and 1980 which applied it to *all* temporary teaching staff. The RE staff’s advantage was thus confirmed and then consolidated by moving them to permanent positions, once again differentiating them from all their other colleagues.

This inexplicable privilege initially pushed many temporary teachers, but now also hundreds of permanent teachers from other subjects, to seek legal redress. In the likelihood that these cases reach an industrial tribunal, the State would have to shell out a sum valued at between 2.5 and 3 billion euros. Apart from the legal and economic concerns, if you can remember what RE class was like in your day and today spent a morning at your child’s school, you couldn’t but ask yourself a question: is it worth spending a billion euros a year, in a time of ferocious cuts in education, to maintain these RE classes? They are a strange mix of social context and vague ethical concepts which are destined to remain in a student’s head for the rest of the morning at most. There are few mentions of the Bible, which is hardly ever read out, and brief, reticent summaries of religious history.

The subject of religious education in European state schools is the centre of a lively and mature debate, far above the old clerical/secular brawls. In the most secular State in the world, France, the filmmaker Regis Debray, friend of Che Guevara and advisor to François Mitterrand, has in his time broken the monolithic secular façade by maintaining the benefits of putting the study of religious history into the school curriculum. In Great Britain the theory of famous biologist Roger Dawkins [sic] (*The God Delusion*), reprised by Nicholas Humprey [sic] says that “the teaching of unobjective and unprovable facts in schools, like for example that ‘God created the world in six days’, is a violation of the rights of children and amounts to abuse”, has sparked a rich pedagogical debate. “It is a fact, however”, says Dawkins, “that we don’t hesitate to define a child as Christian or Muslim, when it is too

young to understand such things, whilst we would never say that a child is Marxist or Keynesian. Where religion is concerned, we make an exception”.

In Germany, Spain, and even the ultra-Catholic Poland of Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II), the debate has not been confined to newspapers but has produced legislative and curricular changes such as the addition of other religions (Islam and Judaism, for example) to the possible choices for study or the transformation of RE class into one of comparative religious studies, both now general trends across European education systems. In Italy, any tentative attempts at discussion are nipped in the bud by a strict censorship. Catholic RE class is dogma. The merest suggestion of adding other religions alongside Catholic RE class, which happens across Europe with the possible exceptions of Ireland and Orthodox Cyprus, is immediately labelled extremism, visceral anticlericalism, the Jewish lobby or even sympathy for Al Qaeda. As for completely abolishing it, as in France, the thought doesn't even cross *secular* minds.

As is usually the case, the only ones to have had the courage to propose it were Catholic intellectuals. The writer Vittorio Messori, for example: “If it were up to me, I would cancel this old relic of the Concordat which is the current RE class. From a Catholic perspective, religious education can only be via a “catechesis” [an education in the faith by summary of doctrine] and in State schools, which are paid for by everyone, the catechism cannot and should not be taught. The parishes should do it, paid for by the parishioners. For this we take back the RE teachers from the State schools and employ them within the parish by taxing believers”.

Messori doesn't hesitate to get rid of State aid to Catholic schools, which was denied them for half a century by the Christian Democrats only to be inaugurated by Education Minister Luigi Berlinguer of the Centre-Left D'Alema government with Law N<sup>o</sup> 62 of 10 March 2000. This was increased during the Berlusconi period (using the gimmick of a “bonus” to students to get round the Constitution) and maintained by the current Minister Fioroni with a solemn oath before a Catholic rally in Rimini: “Let the State content itself with the recognition that each new private school means a saving of public money and therefore accords them a tax rebate. Nothing more.”

Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, as Archbishop of Milan, had declared that RE classes in Italian schools should be considered pointless or even “offensive” and recommended a redoubling of efforts to make it worthwhile or scrap it completely. The CEI (Italian Episcopal Conference) has always maintained that RE classes are a success, with 92% attendance and visible proof of the deeply rooted nature of Catholicism in Italy. If the CEI has so much faith in its parishioners, then why does it need to request that RE classes are always mid-morning, and never at the beginning or end of lessons, as would seem normal for an optional lesson. Why request that “alternative lessons” not be allowed? (Both requests are habitually granted by the State) In many Nursery and Infants' schools in Rome, parents are informed

that children of 5 or 6 years old who are not signed up for RE classes “may remain in the corridor”; a horrifying prospect for any mother or father.

Meanwhile, the popularity of RE as trumpeted by the Bishops is contradicted by the alarm raised in the CEI’s April report on the numbers who opt for RE classes, with an average fall of 5.4% for Primary schools growing to 15.4% for High schools (with peaks of 50% non only in Left-voting regions like Tuscany or Emilia-Romagna but also in Lombardy and in the big cities), which diminish little by little as the students grow older and learn to decide for themselves. In the end, none of the official arguments can dispel the doubt. Are RE classes, as they are, really about teaching the catechism (“which in any case can be taken home by anyone with only a few lira”, as famous priest and champion of the poor Lorenzo Milani used to recall) or rather just another billion in State offerings to Saint Peter?

(with the collaboration of Carlo Pontesilli and Maurizio Turco)

25 October 2007