



TOPIC 2: Intercultural Dialogue

Teaching and learning materials

Italy

Islamic schools in Italy

by: *Rita Cicala*

Integration or Separation?

The case of the Islamic school in Via Quaranta in Milan once again brings up the question of integration. What kind of education should immigrant children and young people receive?

It is justifiable that they should not forget their origins, but equally justifiable is the requirement that they should become integrated in the country they live in, without forming ghettos that inevitably cause tensions and divisions in the host country.

This problem arises above all in the fundamentalist Islamic culture, which preaches difference and superiority and refuses dialogue with other cultures.

Immigrants have the right to learn their language and their religion, but they also have a duty to respect the rules and laws of the host country while doing so: in suitable buildings, with state-qualified teachers, with officially recognized curricula and under state control. When this is not the case (cf. Tf 230/1 Collection of materials), they cannot demand that the state should make exceptions for them.

School: A place of integration

It would be best for immigrant children not to be taught in separate classes or schools (cf. Collection of materials), because personality development also requires an ability to integrate, to question oneself, an ability for discussion and debate and critical judgement.

Experience in some European countries where Turkish and Arab children have been taught in separate schools has shown that they had hardly any knowledge either of the language or of the culture of the host country after finishing school. In many cases they felt great tension because of the differences between the culture of their fathers' country and the country they lived in. Lack of integration often resulted in an identity crisis and a lack of roots. They were unable to understand the society they lived in and unable to live in the society they understood.

How much tolerance is tolerable?

A further question is this: How tolerant can a state be towards immigrants?

Here, too, the case of the school in Via Quaranta is exemplary: this school "*has been operating without any legal foundation for ten years, without licence either from the Italian or the Egyptian state*" (cf. Tf 230/1-3). The Italian authorities have only now intervened, giving as a reason that the building was not suitable for a school.

Teaching on the street certainly was a disturbance to public order, but the police did not intervene. The danger of being accused of intolerance is for ever present, and it is easier for politicians "to turn a blind eye". But is that the right way to behave for peaceful co-existence? How are citizens going to react when they see that "the law does **not** apply to everybody"?

Possible tasks for pupils

- 1) Are you for or against separate classes or schools for immigrant children? Give your reasons.
- 2) Do you think it is right to remove a crucifix from a classroom where there are Islamic pupils? Would you accept the symbol of a different religion in your classroom?
- 3) Interviews with immigrant children at your school: What do you find good or bad in our school system? Do you feel accepted at school here? Do you want to be accepted?
- 4) How ought the Italian state to have reacted to the Islamic families' protest?
- 5) Send an e-mail to your COMCULT partners and ask them what they think about this topic.

Translated from the original German by: *Gillian Johnson*