

RiMe

Rivista dell'Istituto
di Storia dell'Europa Mediterranea

ISBN 9788897317470

ISSN 2035-794X

numero 5/I n. s., dicembre 2019

**Fighting Religious Illiteracy with Knowledge.
Presentation of *PARS*, Portale di formazione
e informazione per il contrasto
dell'analfabetismo religioso**

Francesca Cadeddu

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7410/1388>

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Special Issue

Religious culture and education in 20th and 21st century Europe

Maria Giuseppina Meloni and Anna Maria Oliva (eds.)

RiMe 5/I n.s. (December 2019)

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**Fighting Religious Illiteracy with Knowledge
Presentation of *PARS*, Portale di formazione e informazione
per il contrasto dell'analfabetismo religioso**

Francesca Cadeddu

(Fondazione per le Scienze Religiose "Giovanni XXIII")

Date of receipt: 12th September 2019

Date of acceptance: 28th October 2019

Abstract

The paper presents the research which brought to the development of *Portale di formazione e informazione per il contrasto dell'analfabetismo religioso* (*PARS* – www.pars-edu.it). *PARS* is the outcome of a synergy which arose between the Education Department of UNIMORE and fscire.it (Bologna). It is a platform that allows the collection, use and sharing of already-existing, scientific materials related to religious issues. Its intention is to provide the public with a set of high-quality digital resources and tools for self-understanding on religious matters.

Keywords

Religious Literacy; Platform; Education; Learning Kit.

Riassunto

L'articolo presenta la ricerca che ha condotto alla creazione del *Portale di formazione e informazione per il contrasto dell'analfabetismo religioso* (*PARS* – www.pars-edu.it). *PARS* è il frutto di un lavoro sinergico realizzato dal Dipartimento di Educazione di UNIMORE e da fscire.it (Bologna). È una piattaforma di raccolta, fruizione e condivisione di materiali specifici sul tema delle religioni e intende mettere a disposizione del pubblico un insieme di strumenti e di risorse digitali di alta qualità scientifica che favoriscano l'auto-comprensione e formazione sul tema delle religioni.

Parole chiave

Analfabetismo religioso; piattaforma; educazione; kit formativo.

1. *Bibliography*. - 2. *Curriculum vitae*.

In the last twenty years, the issue of religious illiteracy in western countries has garnered the attention of scholars and policy-makers. Most of the literature regarding this topic lays out the attempt to understand the lack of critical awareness of histories, laws, theologies, doctrines, creeds and cultures that make up the religious and spiritual landscape of what we call "The West" (Melloni - Cadeddu, 2018).

Studies on these issues have produced works and policies from which two tendencies emerge: one focuses on Religious Education as a subject of study, research and teaching, and the other stresses on religious literacy and the production of knowledge, meaning the acquisition of knowledge about religions and systems of belief as an inter- and transdisciplinary issue.

The most recent project that marked the initial step in the first tendency is *REDCo* (Religion in Education: A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European Countries), which has produced to date a 36-volume series that enlists among the authors the most renowned scholars in Religious Education. It covers a variety of issues and case studies from philosophy, geography, to pedagogy and anthropology, analysing literature, current trends and designing a frontier for the future.

On the contrary, if we turn to literature pertaining religious literacy, publications aim at contextualizing it in the time and space of specific nations. On a European and North Atlantic scale, however, we have recently witnessed a growing necessity to work on a complete, global reading on these topics.

Within this second group of publications, I mention here *Rapporto sull'analfabetismo religioso in Italia* (Melloni, 2014), which was a first approach to the issue of religious illiteracy in Italy. Other publications within the same group are *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice* (Dinham - Francis, 2015), which came out one year after the Report on Italy and is mainly focused on the English context; *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn't* (Prothero, 2007) and *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy* (Moore, 2007), both of which concerned the American context.

As it regards the Italian context, the work conducted for the publication of the Italian Report and the feedback we received during the book presentations, convinced the research group at the Foundation for Religious Studies in Bologna of two needs. The first was to broaden the perspective on a European scale, moving beyond the case studies and paving the way for a research that reflects on history, legal structures, systems of thought and the challenges of European religious pluralism as such. We wanted the work to take place within a Europe conceived of as a cultural space anchored to the countries of the European Union, but which at times also extends into the outlying areas of the Mediterranean, the Balkans, the Middle East, Asia and North America.

Four main questions guided our reflection. We asked ourselves what the historical origins of religious literacy might be and if they may be connected to the institutional systems of modern Europe. Wherever possible – and indeed, it was – to identify common causes, we then investigated when and why different definitions of this phenomenon emerged and whether we should, in fact, consider more than one religious alphabet. In the last ten years, a wide variety

of “religious codes” have emerged from the literature (e.g. schools, social work, business, privileged majorities and creative minorities) and from the debate set in motion by study groups (including informal ones) on religious literacy.

This analysis has led us to believe in the need for greater contextualization for individual state scenarios and specific social and educational systems. Consequently, the question arises as to whether the religious and institutional diversity that marks Europe today is a bearer of different forms of religious literacy and is therefore in need of different educational, instructional and institutional approaches. For this reason, we sought contributions that could frame the role of Religious Education on a historical-juridical level in the context of the guaranteed rights and freedoms in Europe. The goal was to understand to what degree the recognition of religious rights is passed on through the understanding – acknowledged, taught or produced – for religious people and for the religiously literate.

The issue has been, and remains, controversial. This is not only due to the problems it raises in countries where secularism has become a standard-bearer or in countries characterized by a religious culture that predominates. The question of Religious Education also poses an epistemological problem inasmuch as there is competition among forms of knowledge that are termed ‘neutral’ (and are they?), forms presented as ‘validated’ (and they are) and forms that derive their solidity from disciplinary statutes.

The use of one approach or another in the fight against religious illiteracy has brought scholars and policy-makers to (a) underestimate the responsibilities that other fields of knowledge have in the construction of religious literacy in Europe; (b) pay little attention to the biases that each of these fields has produced in public discourse and (c) neglect an inter-sectorial or inter-hermeneutic approach: religious literacy cannot be passed on solely through the school, social workers, the media or any other sector, if only done exclusively.

The outcome of these reflections is concentrated in the book *Religious Literacy, Law and History. Perspectives on European Pluralist Societies* (Melloni - Cadeddu, 2018). The volume is an attempt to stimulate politicians, teachers and other interested parties to grasp the true value of knowledge as the only tool for facing the complexity of what we define as ‘religion in the public space’ and to answer the questions that naturally arise when discussing such issues, like ‘Are religions violent?’ or ‘Why do we have to teach them at school?’

We all know how current events regularly remind us of the disconnect between a reality that is increasingly religiously diversified and ‘another reality’, made of the tools, notions and methods that could have supported the understanding of such a diversified society: every Christmas, every act of fundamentalism and every woman with a veil generates hours of discussion

concerning the role that religion should have in public spaces, and this is without counting the regular media stereotypes and counter-stereotypes, clichés and counter-clichés. The great limit of these debates is that they fail to create any honest reflection on the significances and real consequences of the choices that policy-makers, educators (both formal and informal) and scholars make whenever they dwell in that same area of disconnect.

To this end, it is crucial to look at the presence of religions in school and in the formation of language passed on through mass media: formal educators (teachers) and non-formal ones (such as media actors) are responsible in the process of conveying knowledge about religions (their theologies, their internal and external diversities and their newfound proximity in public spaces). Publishers of school texts are here somehow in the middle, as they produce a medium which is used by students and teachers in the individual and mutual learning process.

Thus, if on the one side, we sought a broader contextualisation, on the other side we wanted to be operative. The Italian Report basically taught us that among the many instruments that teachers and educators have at their own disposal to teach about religion at school, most of them was prescriptive, many of them were biased and none of them was meant to be adapted to different disciplines from the one of Religious education.

In order to understand this outcome, a brief sketch of the Italian historical context of the analysis could be helpful. Italy has a significant problem in understanding how to improve its religious literacy because, among other reasons, there has always been a process of memory construction which is the memory of a Catholic, Italian-born majority. Moreover, the process of secularization in Italy – from the point of view of the study of religions – has been characterised by a sort of late process of forced confessionalization; the exclusion of theology from the public schools (1873); the “scientification” of religion, which meant that a) theology, as it was a subject of study in pontifical universities, never acquired a full status of discipline and b) religious education at school, since it was not taught by scholars or professionals, but by teachers nominated by the ecclesiastical authority, was not based necessarily on the “scientific” teaching of religion.

The Concordat between the Italian Republic and the Holy See, originally signed by Benito Mussolini and Pietro Cardinal Gasparri in 1929 was reviewed in 1984, and in article 9 which regards the role of religious education, it establishes that religious education is optional, not mandatory (thus students should opt-in and not opt-out) and is guaranteed also to all the faith communities that sign an agreement with the state (which was not possible before).

The result of this changes is basically that the egalitarian approach extended privileges, but did not change the outcome: “the hour” of Catholic Education maintained a symbolic value, but not a real educational value. Nonetheless, changing the characteristics of such “hour” means to change an international treaty. Therefore, when we first approached the topic our main aim was to understand why religious illiteracy is so widespread in the country notwithstanding “the hour” and looking at how to find solutions not discussing the existence of that “hour”.

What could be done in such an educational framework? As scholars studying religion, we are not afraid to talk about sensitive topics, even if we realise that religion *is* a very sensitive topic for teachers as well as for public servants and they are afraid to address it because they are afraid to be misinterpreted or to offend others.

We addressed such fear by offering two-day workshops with school teachers and to think about their needs. We presented general topics such as nature, rights and liberties or religions in the Mediterranean with very specific papers which could help teachers in facing the issue. At that point we realized that there was a significant distance between scholars (very much committed to the need to find a new identity for “the hour”) and teachers (very confused as about the ways they could teach *about* religion), and that religious education had to be changed bottom-up, reversing a common approach according to which when some aspects of the educational process do not work, we believe it is necessary to change the school from the first grade on.

At that point we realized that researchers and scholars could be a new pillar supporting the old “Trinity” school, family, faith community. This could be possible first, allowing those who graduate in religious sciences to have access to school teaching just like their colleagues who studied liberal arts. Secondly, it could be done through the reinforcement of the status of religious studies in Italy by contributing to the cooperation among the many fields involved in the study of religion, teaching about religion to the university students even if they are not enrolled in a religious studies course of study, and creating doctoral schools in Islamic and Jewish studies. Lastly, it would be important to support existing doctoral schools that want to offer posts to students interested in studying religions.

Among the many actions that could be taken in the same direction, whose implementation’s main obstacle is usually funds and political commitment, we thought of the opportunity to realise a web portal. The research group coordinated by Alberto Melloni from the Department of Education and Human Sciences at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, together with the Foundation for religious sciences in Bologna participated to the national project

“The Educating City: teaching and learning processes in cross-media ecosystem” (PON 2007-2013). Within such project, we have created Portale di formazione e informazione per il contrasto dell’analfabetismo religioso (Education and Information Portal to Contrast Religious Illiteracy, *PARS* – www.pars-edu.it)¹.

PARS is an unprecedented tool on the Italian landscape². It is a platform that has been created for the collection, use, and sharing of materials related to religious issues. According to the findings above-mentioned, it adopts a bottom-up approach to religious literacy: its intention is to provide the public with a set of digital resources and tools for self-understanding on religious matters. We take teachers and learners very seriously: we believe that if we are able to offer them good tools and sources, they can find out a way to approach religious diversity in their programs and within the school classes.

When we started in 2013, while 93% of young Italians used the Internet daily and 92.1% of students (circa. 9 million) used a computer, only 16% made use of digital resources and content at school³. In the context of school and of lifelong learning, novel practices of access to and management of knowledge and teaching represented for us a unique opportunity to stimulate education and learning on matters such as religious pluralism in a more dynamic and interactive way through the enhancement of easy-to-use and established technologies (social networks, apps, the web).

PARS aims to facilitate the understanding of the fabric of contemporary religion and religious illiteracy. It proposes core notions – historical, theological, doctrinal, scriptural, ritual, social, and experiential – that make up different religious and spiritual traditions. These notions are useful for the understanding of the complexity of religious identity and the intersections among religion, history and culture. On the home page, users can find self-learning kits, news and the glossary – which are the sections that we propose as major tools – but we also offer an encyclopedia, infographics, library, videos and maps.

¹ There are two disclaimers about the portal: the first is that it is in Italian, because it is mainly directed to Italians (mostly teachers, but also media actors, policy makers and the public opinion in general) even if we uploaded many sources in other languages as well – mainly in English. The second disclaimer is that this is a beta version and it will need to be constantly updated.

² There has been a European project, IERS – Intercultural Education through Religious Studies) which offers digital modules to teachers, but we find the way it is constructed too prescriptive. IERS is now developing its mission and objectives with SORAPS - Study of Religions Against Prejudices and Stereotypes.

³ Ministero dello Sviluppo Economico, Agenda Digitale Italiana 2014-2020.

Where do we take this material from and how do we select them? *PARS* is made of a selection of contents already available online, and adds *scientific* publications which are open access or whose rights have been conceded to us. We started building self-learning kits by 10-stops tours through different topics of study, which include introductory and more in-depth readings, documentary videos, video-lessons and maps. Some of the kits present basic notions, some others are for advanced learners. Thanks to these starting sparks, we were able to begin nourishing all other sections. As we are mostly historians, the portal reflects our approach and we believe this is a strength.

Browsing the topics and items, the user finds a first definition of the topic, then you have lessons, texts, suggested readings. When possible, each reading is presented with a readable and downloadable file (otherwise we only offer abstracts and the exact reference), and when needed the text is accompanied by a short presentation. Within that presentation we highlight keywords or add tags, which add upon the glossary. The glossary definition is taken from the online dictionary and encyclopedia entries published by the Institute for the Italian Encyclopedia, and we offer additional suggestions about how to deepen the meaning. Not all the glossary entries correspond to the *PARS* encyclopedia entries, which are instead only made of the cross-references and tags of the contents that we propose. This is meant to avoid prescription and to encourage curiosity in the reader.

Last, but not least, we added two options: register and send materials. With the registration, you have access to the file browser, where you can upload materials and make use of some of those that we upload, while with the chance to send materials we aim at collecting teaching modules descriptions or other teaching materials which have already been used by teachers and therefore exploit as much as possible all materials that have been already proposed in classes.

We are testing the portal with teachers. There is a lot of enthusiasm, but we see at least two problems. The main problem is the methodology: teachers are not used to ask for what they need and just take what they find. That makes much complicated to understand if what we are offering corresponds to their needs or not. The second problem is the language. Many good contents are written in English, but not all the teachers are able to at least read it easily. That reduces the chances that we have to build high-quality self-learning kits.

Surprisingly or not, the main point of strength is the use of many materials on history: Italian school programs are made of histories: history of events, history of literature and languages, history of mathematics and physics, history of biology, etc. Therefore, by offering contents with a strong historical perspective, we found a way to communicate with the different disciplines. In

the future, our aim is to make this source available on a European scale, but we are still reviewing what is already on the ground and reasoning on the opportunity to use the same method or not.

Religious illiteracy is a phenomenon that needs more than one strategy to be reverted. Scholars can take a large part in such a process, as they can offer sources which could be adapted to different methods and contexts. The quality of what scholars, and historians in our case, do is critical for the construction of a common chain of memory where diversities are included, and differences accepted. The use of integrated internet tools such as this portal can be a valuable source to make our work better and find an effective way to approach society at large and present religious history not as a static, boring, threatening subject, but as a tool to successfully help European society in the years to come.

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2. *Curriculum vitae*

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