

School visit to the Islamic Cultural Center in Susegana: intercultural educational activities, secularism, and child protection.

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What happened on April 30 during the trip to the “Emanet” Islamic cultural center in Susegana, organized by the Santa Maria delle Vittorie nursery school in Ponte della Priula (Treviso), sparked a tense political and cultural debate.

What attracted particular attention was an incident involving the children on the trip (aged between three and five), following the introduction by the center's president, Imam Avnija, on the basic principles of Islam, including ritual prayer. As the latter explained to the newspapers (see, for example, [trevisotoday.it/attualita/susegana-moschea-lettera-imam-6-maggio-2025.html](https://www.trevisotoday.it/attualita/susegana-moschea-lettera-imam-6-maggio-2025.html)), when he demonstrated the relevant gestures, some pupils of the Islamic faith spontaneously imitated him, followed by all the other pupils. In this regard, the parish priest, Don Andrea Sech, legal representative of the school, the headmistress S. Bazzo, and the teacher S. Pillon felt the need to clarify first of all that the parents, duly informed of the initiative, had given their consent to it; secondly, that the imam had been “*welcoming and precise in pointing out the similarities and differences between his role and that of the parish priest himself*,” and notably that the children “*did not pray but followed the gestures of their schoolmates*”. (see, for example, www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/bimbi-dell-asilo-cattolico-inginocchiati-in-moschea-e-polemica). The headmistress, in particular, emphasized the “*shared peace initiative*” nature of the visit, which was part of “*the school's educational project*”- shared with families as required by Law No. 62 of 2000 and which follows national guidelines, taking “*into account the presence of many cultures, nationalities, and religions among the children of the school itself*”. (see, for example, orizzontescuola.it/scuola-dellinfanzia-e-la-gita-in-moschea-polemiche-e-chiarimenti-nessun-indottrinamento-solo-dialogo/). With the comment provided, the thesis embraced is that “*in order to accompany children on their path of growth, it is important that*” they “*know all the realities that surround them.*” (see, for example, <https://www.tecnicaldellascuola.it/bambini-in-moschea-la-dirigente-spegne-le-polemiche-ma-quale-preghiera-iniziativa-di-pace-condivisa-famiglie-daccordo>).

However, the published photo of the children praying has sparked harsh criticism, in some cases going as far as accusations of “*ideological submission*”; at the same time, there have also been messages of understanding. A middle ground position was taken by regional councilor Roberto Bet, who pointed out that the problem was not “*the visit, which was intended to promote mutual understanding, but the children kneeling and the photo published by the school*,” which he described as “*at least one thing too many.*” (see, for example, [https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/bimbi-dell-asilo-cattolico-inginocchiati-in-moschea-e-polemica](http://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/bimbi-dell-asilo-cattolico-inginocchiati-in-moschea-e-polemica)).

The issue was brought to the attention of the European Parliament, where MEP Anna Maria Cisint spoke of “*fundamentalism*”, calling for checks on the mosque and asking whether parents had really been informed about the procedures and activities planned within the Cultural Center (see, for example, <https://www.orizzontescuola.it/bimbi-in-moschea-per-una-lezione-di-islam-la-gita-scolastica-che-divide-genitori-e-insegnanti-polemiche-sui-social-indottrinamento-dialogo-interculturale/>).

The Regional School Office for Veneto has launched an investigation to verify the initiative's compliance with school equality regulations. The same Office states in a press release that “*this institution, like all state and state-recognized schools, is subject to the rules of school autonomy, which require it to have its own specific, autonomous educational project that is shared with families. Teachers and the school coordinator must adhere to this educational project, as required by Law No. 62/2000 on educational equality, for all types of project activities*” (see, for example, <https://askanews.it/2025/05/04/alunni-veneti-in-preghiera-in-moschea-il-ministero-affida-verifiche/>).

The school, represented by its headmistress, issued a statement to La Repubblica, in which it stated the following: “*We believe in an education that promotes respect and coexistence,*” reiterating that no child was forced to pray: “*Muslim children participate in our traditions, just as Christians have experienced a moment in the lives of others*”. The school administrators immediately clarified: “*Our children, Christians and those of other religions, consciously attend a Catholic school, rich in typically Christian symbols and practices. The simplest and most everyday sign is the sign of the cross before meals (Christians do it, others see them doing it), but there is also the nativity scene in collaboration with families, the proposal of a parish Mass for Advent, the celebration at the beginning of Lent, and so on*”. “*There was a need,*” specified the school administration, “*to experience real reciprocity, to understand and value diversity: if it is already quite clear what it means to be Christian because you see it every day in school, and if there had been some opportunity to talk about Ramadan, there was a lack of hands-on experience of other religions, such as Islam. Hands-on experience: a preschool child needs to see, touch, feel, experience, and meet people. This is how the visit to the Cultural Center came about, and this is how the children experienced it.*” (see, for example, <https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/bimbi-dell-asilo-cattolico-inginocchiati-in-moschea-e-polemica>).

The institute prepared a detailed report for the School Office, demonstrating that the activity was transparent and inclusive. Following the checks requested by the Minister of Education and Merit Giuseppe Valditara, the latter stated the following: “*We carried out checks with the kindergarten. The matter has been resolved peacefully. And that's fine.*” Speaking is Marco Buseti, director general of the Veneto School Office. The parish school has, in fact, clarified that its action never went beyond the scope of the educational project, which was also supported by the children's parents. “*We have watched with regret the controversy and exploitation that completely misrepresent the meaning of the initiative,*” the families wrote in a letter. They also specified: “*It is necessary to clarify: the visit to the mosque was an educational moment within a process of learning, dialogue, and respect for the different cultures and religions that are present in our country. We believe that our children should grow up with the ability to learn about and engage with what is different, without prejudice or fear. Let us*

not be drawn into sterile controversy and political exploitation at the expense of our sons and daughters, but let us look at the true meaning of initiatives such as this: building bridges, not walls.” (see, for example, <https://www.open.online/2025/05/09/treviso-bambini-gita-moschea-indagine-ufficio-scolastico/>).

From a legal point of view - the episode raises - several important issues, both in terms of respect for the principle of secularism and with regard to the limits of school autonomy. In this latter regard, it should be noted that educational trips and visits are an integral and complementary part of the school's educational and teaching activities and constitute an integral and qualifying part of the educational offer. Furthermore, educational trips and visits are a privileged opportunity for learning, communication, and socialization, as well as for broadening cultural horizons, and a valuable opportunity to review and deepen what has been covered in the study activities. On this point, it seems appropriate to cite Ministerial Note No. 2209 of April 11, 2012, which, referring to Presidential Decree No. 275 of 1999, emphasized that, as of September 1, 2000, schools have been granted complete autonomy, including in the organization of educational trips. This means that Italian schools have complete autonomy with regard to the organization of educational outings, school trips, guided tours, and educational trips, both in Italy and abroad.

It should also be remembered that schools, being equivalent and recognized under Law 62/2000, have a duty to ensure an education that promotes values of respect and coexistence between cultures and religions, and activities must respect the principles of neutrality and pluralism that characterize the school system. The involvement of children in religious or similar practices, even if mechanically imitated, could be interpreted as a form of direct involvement that must be carefully evaluated in order to avoid behaviors that violate the principle of secularism. The school stated that the activity had been approved by the families, but it remains to be verified whether all the necessary information about the nature of the experience, its simulated or religious involvement character, and whether the consent procedures were respected, especially in the case of minors. The school's statement that the children *“only mimicked the gestures”*. (see, for example, <https://www.orizzontescuola.it/scuola-dellinfanzia-e-la-gita-in-moschea-polemiche-e-chiarimenti-nessun-indottrinamento-solo-dialogo/>) may not be sufficient to rule out a possible perception of religious involvement, especially if the activities are perceived as belonging to an actual religious practice.

According to current legislation, particularly in the field of extracurricular activities or intercultural education, it is essential that parents are duly informed and have given their free and informed consent. Specifically, the aim of intercultural dialogue risks being perceived as indirect religious promotion, especially in relation to the presence of an imam who attends the simulation of religious rites. Italian and European case law emphasizes the importance of respecting the principle of neutrality of educational institutions and protecting minors from activities that could be construed as forms of indoctrination or privileging one religion over others.

The launch of investigations by the Regional Education Office for Veneto - a necessary step in light of the controversy raised by various social and political parties - represents an act of protection of legality and the principles of pluralism. It is important that these checks verify whether the activity was carried out in compliance with the rules on religious freedom, the secular nature of schools, and the protection of minors, and whether the principles of transparency and adequate information to families were respected. From a legal point of view, the activity must be assessed in light of a balance between respect for religious freedom, the protection of children's rights, and the principle of neutrality of educational institutions. Transparency, adequate information, and the consent of families are essential elements in ensuring the legitimacy of such activities, in compliance with current legislation.

In this regard, it should be noted that the Veneto Regional School Office, in its own note, examined the school's educational project, which did not reveal any problems: the institution clarified that it had never strayed from the scope of its educational project, which was also supported by the children's parents. For its part, FISM, the Federation of Catholic Nursery Schools, after the media uproar sparked by the photos posted on *Facebook*, seems to want to take remedial action and is organizing training courses for all teachers to teach them what, and above all how, to post on social media about what they do (see, for example, <https://www.trevisotoday.it/attualita/susegana-caso-moschea-9-maggio-2025.html>).

Although the storm has subsided following the checks carried out by the Regional Education Office and the response provided, it is useful to reiterate the importance of bearing in mind the limits that mark Italian “*inclusive*” secularism¹, without at the same time resorting to its incongruous “*partial focus*”², which may not take into due account all the principles summarized in it, starting with that of the independence of the “*distinct orders*”.

In this regard, it is useful to recall what Prof. Carlo Cardia³ said, namely that it is “*impossible to ignore the historical evolution linked to religious pluralism, which is tending to grow increasingly in society and which requires, today more than yesterday, the adoption of a positive secularism, capable of making acceptance the essential criterion of its relationship with the school,*” insofar as this “*is based on that profound respect for all faiths and all beliefs that is at the origin of all formulations of the right to religious freedom. This respect must be manifested first and foremost in relation to indirect manifestations of religious affiliation, and therefore to symbols that may be historical, socio-cultural, and personal. Religious education is certainly a vehicle for knowledge, but it is proposed and developed with an animus participationis that transmits to the conscience values and principles whose full significance and profound meaning are sought to be*

¹ Maria d'Arienzo, *Religious Pluralism and Intercultural Dialogue. The Legal Inclusion of Diversity*. Luigi Pellegrini ed., Cosenza; Mario Ferrante, *Law, Religion, Culture: Towards an Inclusive Secularism*, in *State, Churches, and Confessional Pluralism*. Online magazine (statoechiese.it), no. 35, 2017.

² Fabiano Di Prima, Marco Dell'Oglio, *Religious activities in public schools, between secularism, “libertas Ecclesiae” and collective religious freedom*, in *State, Churches and Confessional Pluralism*. Telematic journal (statoechiese.it), November 28, 2016, p. 55 ff.

³ On the occasion of a lecture given for the State – Church – School cycle, organized by the Catechetical Office and the School Office of the Diocese of Rome and hosted at the Liceo “E. Q. Visconti” on October 26, 2016.

explained.” In light of the above, there is a need to reconsider, from a new perspective, the complex relationship between secularism, religious freedom, and constitutional law, given the absence of a regulatory framework that clearly defines the limits and modalities of exercise religious practices in schools⁴ in order to respect the specific nature of the Italian church, while ensuring a balance with the fundamental rights of all members of the school community. The current regulatory and judicial framework appears to lack a coherent regulatory basis capable of defining the principles and methods of application, in accordance with the Italian model of “*dialogical and cooperative*”⁵ secularism, while recognizing the importance of religion as an element of identity and culture in society.

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⁴ See Fabiano Di Prima, Marco Dell'Oglio, *Religious activities in public schools*, op. cit.

⁵ See, in this regard, the introduction by Maria D'Arienzo, Mario Ferrante, and Fabiano Di Prima to the volume they edited, “*Le intese: attualità e prospettive, prendendo spunto dalla recente Intesa con la Chiesa d'Inghilterra*” (Quad. monografico n. 4, Rivista Diritto e Religioni), Luigi Pellegrini, Cosenza, 2023.