

Laicism and Education Ensuing Problems in Italy

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Abstract

In a democratic society like Italy, marked by an ever increasing pluralism and multiculturalism, citizen is required to a careful re-thinking of his role and an awareness of the functions that he is called to exercise within public life. In reference to these functions, he can develop and strengthen specific capabilities that call into question the education. Building a lay space, which allows the coexistence of different ideologies and views of the world, on the basis of mutual respect and respect for dissent regarding particular moral systems or deep beliefs, appears inevitable. This is a skill that can become the focus of educational care. This paper aims at clarifying and arguing such hypothesis.

Keywords: Laicism - education - reasonable citizen - John Rawls

1. Introduction

Laicism is amongst the most publicly debated subjects in Italy today. Increased pluralism and growing multiculturalism – constantly raising social, political, ethical, religious, and educational questions never experienced previously – are to be considered among the main reasons of such interest. And there is more. The difficulty in attributing a well-defined meaning to the concept of laicism has only contributed to heating this debate. There seems to be, in fact, quite a heterogeneous range of ways of intending laicism, even among those who identify themselves as lay (D’Orazio, 2009). It should be observed, for clarity’s sake, that on a strictly political level, laicism is a basic principle in a democratic system, clearly stated, moreover, in the Italian Constitution. It is actually the principle of laicism which regulates, on the one hand, co-existence among citizens in a democratic society, while guaranteeing, on the other hand, individual freedom. I shall analyse and discuss the concept of laicism as a founding principle of a democratic system.

This concept must be clearly distinguished from another notion of laicism, which has also been part of the history of the Italian Republic, that of opposition laicism: a notion of laicism based on the opposition between non-believers – in any religious creed – and believers. This has created two opposing factions in Italy – the lay and the catholic – which has led to losing sight of today’s much wider political, cultural, moral, and religious pluralism. Clarifying the notion of laicism as a founding principle of the socio-democratic structure is, obviously, a necessary step when reflecting – and, if it were the case, deciding to intervene – on the institution of school intended as the core of the educational system in our democratic society. School is, in fact, where tomorrow’s citizens are supposed to be forged (Cambi, 2007; Frabboni, 2007; Bonetta & Cives, 1996). Once the connection between democracy and laicism has been acknowledged, it is important to question not only the meaning of laicism within the school, but also laicism as an educational finality. Laicism, in other words, intended as an individual’s mind-set, as is appropriate for a democratic citizen. It is up to the school to instil, promote and develop – in other words, to forge – such notion.

2. Democracy and justice

One of the manifold features of a democratic system is its foundation on a principle of justice. It is possible to reflect on the notion of laicism, attributing it a satisfactorily precise meaning, starting from this very principle. John Rawls is commonly acknowledged as the most authoritative expert on a model of democratic society, which considers the principle of justice above that of good.

Rawls's work, *A Theory of Justice*, published in the United States in 1971, sparked a passionate philosophical and political debate, involving interlocutors speaking from positions quite different from one another. Each participant did, however, acquire and use Rawls's terminology. This shows that, irrespective of whether Rawls's theory of justice may be shared or not – a theory, moreover, constantly revised and adjusted by the Author–, Rawls no doubt deserves to be credited with the merit of expressing fundamental concepts, such as society, justice, citizens, cooperation, or pluralism, with great clarity. If these concepts were taken for granted, it would not be possible to make any adequately rigorous reflection on any question pertaining to democracy. I intend, therefore, to make my observations on the sense of laicism in education starting from some of the theses exposed by Rawls. To begin with, an important thesis on a democratic society is that of, as mentioned previously, stating the priority of justice over good. A society – made up of a plurality of individuals, each with their own objectives, interests, faiths, and moral beliefs – is better organized when it is ruled following principles which, per se, do not presume any concept of good. What justifies these principles is not the fact that they optimize good or social welfare, but that they satisfy the requirement of fairness, in other words, of mutuality, parity among all subjects. The priority attributed to justice, therefore, poses a limit to the concepts of good which individuals may choose to pursue. That is to say that, each time that the values of an individual – or a faction – clash with the principle of justice, the latter must prevail. Another important thesis in Rawls's theory is that of his idea of society, defined as a “fair system of cooperation.”

According to this theory, cooperation, or positive interaction among citizens – aimed at the goal foreseen at the creation of society –, “is guided by publicly recognized rules and procedures which those who are cooperating accept and regard as properly regulating their conduct” (Rawls, 1993, 16). These rules and procedures are, on the other hand, the outcome of a “contractual negotiation” among its associates, carried out impartially, and aimed at defining the original consensus a society is founded on. This is how Rawls resumes the well-known theory of social contract, whose function, in the Western tradition of political thought – from Locke, to Rousseau, to Kant – is that of legitimizing those principles of justice according to which society is ruled: rules and procedures termed by Rawls as “fair terms of cooperation” (Rawls, 1993, 16). Rawls, consistently with the interpretation of society as a fair system of cooperation, defines citizens as free and equal individuals, endowed with all necessary powers to become fully cooperative members of this system. More specifically, Rawls describes citizens' freedom referring to two “moral powers” they possess: the power “to understand well” and “to have a sense of justice” (Rawls, 1993, 17). People can avail themselves of these powers – both in the sense of freedom and actual capabilities – based on reason, which consists of three fundamental intellectual faculties, those of judgment, thought, and inference (Rawls, 1993, 17). People could be, in other words, fully cooperative members of society based on their “natural endowment”, or reason. The ability, therefore, to make the minimum, indispensable use of the three intellectual faculties of judgment, thought and inference makes people free, autonomous in making their choices. That is not all: since such a requirement is available to all, all are made equal. However, what does this freedom/capacity of understanding good consist of? Rawls claims, quite simply, that individuals possess this capacity when they, making rational use of their own reason, can self-determine, revise, and pursue a concept of their own rational advantage (or good). When, that is, they are able to set and pursue their own aims and ambitions, forming their own moral, religious, and philosophical vision. Rawls called this vision “comprehensive moral doctrine.”

It is the very freedom/capacity of understanding good that defines an individual as a moral subject and, in this way, establishes and “founds” that “minimum” concept of democracy as a system in which, together with free self-determination of good, respect for both the individual and pluralism is guaranteed. The value of a person and pluralism as a fact are thus recognized. With regard to the second power – having a sense of justice – this is defined by Rawls as the capacity of fully taking in the rules of society and abiding by them. A sense of justice, moreover, shows a willingness to be helpful to others, expecting the same helpfulness in return. Social cooperation, therefore, from Rawls's perspective, retains the notion of its own fair rules, or “fair terms of cooperation”, which each member reasonably accepts (using reason, that is, in a reasonable way, taking also other people's reasons into account), on the condition that everyone else accepts them in the same way. It contains, therefore, the idea of mutuality, but also presupposes the idea of the reasonable advantage, or good, of each single member; all those who cooperate and do their part, as required by rules and procedures, must obtain adequate benefits in return.

3. Which meaning of laicism?

How can Rawls's definitions of justice, society, and citizen be of use, when reflecting on the importance of laicism in a democracy such as Italy? Their usefulness will be revealed by clarifying the very concept of laicism. In Italy, the meaning of the term laicism is interpreted in various ways (Abbagnano, 1964; Zanone, 2006; Granese, 1996). In one of its meanings, the term laicism is used when speaking of "lay culture," intended not as an ideology, but rather as a method, intending the co-existence of all possible ideologies and philosophies, through the use of critical reason and the adoption of the principles of freedom and tolerance. With another meaning, the term laicism is used to refer to the lay State, conveying the autonomy of public institutions and civilized societies from any interference on the part of the Church or other confessions. This term, therefore, does not profess a specific "lay" ideology – in the sense of a non-religious or anti-religious ideology – or any other ideology in particular. A further meaning of the word laicism refers to the culture of those whose system of creeds and beliefs does not contemplate any God, and who live abiding by criteria not conditioned by any religious creed. Here, then, laicism is a particular way of looking at the world, excluding the transcendental dimension.

Taking the various meanings of the concept of laicism into account, Giovanni Fornero (2008) has distinguished two connotations, namely "wide or weak" and "restricted or strong." In its "wide" meaning, laicism refers to a precise way of dwelling in the public space where the thought of each individual is freely expressed, pluralism is accepted, there is tolerance, and ideas are freely and peacefully debated. For its methodological character, this laicism is also termed "procedural" and, as such, can be adopted by anybody, non-believers, or believers. In its "restricted" meaning, laicism refers to a particular vision of the world, belonging to those whose thought and life are void of any God, or any faith. Actually, though, the distinction made by Fornero between "weak laicism" – emphasizing the methodological and procedural character of this kind of laicism – and "strong laicism" – the latter being rooted in a particular system of thought, or ideology – and the unconscious simplification of the term "procedural" into "formal", "conventional", or "void", has ended up provoking, in the lay world itself, a sort of devaluation of the meaning of laicism as a method, thus reducing its weight. In a historical moment, instead, when the coexistence of a constantly increasing number of visions of the world, cultures, and religions within the same territory potentially leads to ever-increasing risks of intolerance and fundamentalism, the very concept of weak laicism deserves to be enhanced.

4. "Strong laicism" and "weak laicism" in Rawlsian terms

Referring to Rawls's lexicon, I believe the question regarding the two meanings of laicism, "strong" and "weak," may be explained more clearly. In this perspective, strong laicism falls within the category of "comprehensive doctrine" and, as such, represents only one part of the interests and vision of good for all citizens. Weak laicism, on the other hand, is the expression of those "fair terms of cooperation" citizens accept and observe, not because they have been imposed by a specific authority, but because they are the outcome of a deeply felt, impartial procedure.

It is evident, therefore, how a pluralist State, intending to guarantee the coexistence of the cultural viewpoints of all people, cannot be founded on a restricted principle of laicism. A weak, procedural, non-ideological laicism, instead, can guarantee an impartial State, capable of providing a common, political space welcoming all existing comprehensive doctrines on a neutral, equal level. It is in this very neutrality, even compared to "lay doctrine", that the strength of weak laicism lies. In other words, the relationship between weak laicism and strong laicism, in Rawlsian terms, coincides with what lies between the universal dimension of justice and the specific dimension of good, the former being the expression of regulatory principles shared by a well ordered society, and the latter the expression of one of the many visions of good within society. This consideration, thus, may itself suffice to understand why the two forms of laicism may not be seen as an alternative to one another, since they exist on totally different levels. After all, it would not be legitimate to oppose the claims made by a strong laicism, which's radical and extremist features – similarly to other comprehensive doctrines rely on public confrontation, self-regulated by principles of justice.

5. Which laicism in schools?

Having made the above considerations, we may say that wide or weak laicism expresses the principle of justice in a society. As such, this laicism defines a space within which all can coexist and debate, as this space is governed by the rules of democracy, by those "fair terms of cooperation" which, at the same time, recognize individual freedoms and oppose any expression of authority, guaranteeing the founding principles of coexistence.

One of the spaces for confrontation is represented by school which, being a public institution is open to students and teachers with different cultural, political, or religious backgrounds. Coexistence in school, sharing its instructive and educational aim with all, is possible only if, still within people's legitimate right to express their own comprehensive doctrine, no one reasonably expects to be holder of the truth, of non-negotiable values which others have to accept. Thus laicism, also within the school, cannot but be intended in its "wide or weak" meaning, guaranteeing the existence of all "comprehensive doctrines" professed by its citizens, both religious and cultural, including the strong, lay doctrine. This is quite different from excluding any religious reference – as is often expected on the part of strong laicism – from this public space for learning, exchanging ideas, and living together which an educational institution should provide. Excluding any religious references would mean ignoring the importance of religious dimension in the processes of choice and orientation of life of every man and woman (Pinto Minerva, 122).

If, then, this is the way of intending a lay school, how instead is laicism, seen as an educational goal, to be intended? What does an education to laicism aim at? One thing, in fact, is to look at laicism in the school in institutional terms, and thus make sure that its rules, its essence, retain the fairness of the principle of justice; another thing is to look at laicism in terms of individual behaviours and attitudes, to be cultivated through education. Based on the observations made, it may be easily inferred that laicism, in terms of interaction among people, consists in the capacity to live in public spaces. This means abiding by the laws – which have been self-imposed through democratic procedures, empathizing with others, understanding other ways of life and thought, thinking in terms of 'us' rather than 'me', going beyond one's personal opinions, or one's own small, close community, resisting any form of manipulation in the name of the need for truth, using critical, argumentative reason, debating. Whose ideal concept of person satisfies all of these requisites, if not John Rawls's reasonable citizen, who is able to use reason not only to pursue his own benefits (using, therefore, his own rationality), but also to coexist with others (and, therefore, being reasonable)? Aiming, therefore, at reasonableness as the means of education to laicism, we can nurture and cultivate the qualities and skills necessary for a democratic life. Rationality and reasonableness entail being able to master two different ways of reasoning: within oneself, in order to determine a philosophical, religious, moral conscience; and with others, to make shared decisions. But rationality and reasonableness nurture and improve one another, so that the quest for overlapping consensus on various aspects of social life induces individuals to lower the expectations of personal benefits which may ensue. In other words, individuals are led to reconsider and retrench the intransigence of their own comprehensive doctrine, to make it "more reasonable". This is the virtue of laicism, which education may play a fundamental role in building, thus achieving democracy.

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