

# COOPERATION BETWEEN LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND RELIGIOUS ACTORS AS A KEY FACTOR IN PREVENTING CONFLICT. THE CASE OF HINDU AND SIKH COMMUNITIES IN THE ITALIAN CITIES OF NOVELLARA AND REGGIO EMILIA

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**Abstract:** *Religious actors are often called to take an active part in initiatives promoted by European Institutions because of their potential to prevent conflict and ease social tensions that can arise among people of different religions. Member States are called to support a sustained, open and transparent dialogue with the different religions communities as a tool for peacekeeping and promoting social cohesion in Europe and at its borders. The role of local authorities is crucial in this process; virtuous cases are the Italian municipalities of Novellara and Reggio Emilia, whose abilities to value the presence of Sikh and Hindu communities in their territories led to the publication of a Handbook for Local Authorities, titled "Valuing religious communities as key actors of social cohesion", with the patronage of the Council of Europe: an example of how local best practices can influence European principles from the bottom up. The paper aims to explore in detail the different ways in which these religious actors and local governments collaborate and cooperate: the enhancement of places of worship, the promotion of interfaith dialogue and the shared participation in religious festivities. These are policy strategies aimed towards a collective education for plural and inclusive citizenship.*

**Keywords:** *Religious actors, Local Authorities, Hindus, Sikhs, Interreligious dialogue.*

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## Introduction

Religions often appear as abstract entities, separated from the material world and distant from everyday reality. Instead, according to the scholar Marco Ventura, they would have a fundamental threefold role on the plane of history: for peace, for sustainable development and for the future (Ventura, 2022).

The scholar traces three fundamental positions in the face of violence in the name of religion: an anti-religious position, which considers religion to be intrinsically violent; a possibilist position, according to which religion is characterized with respect to violence, by a structural ambivalence; and a pro-religious position, according to which religions would not be violent at all and violence would be entirely produced by those who instrumentalize them.

The dimension we refer to is the one opposed to violence, namely *the religion of peace*, the more resilient and widely practiced without making headlines in the media, the one that Ventura calls “the religion of spiritual weapons”. The role of religious actors is crucial also for sustainable development and the preservation of the planet, in accordance with the sustainable goals of the UN agenda, because their influence and their institutions are global and their economic power is substantial. Finally, religions are the most important key actors for the future: there is a need for religions to work together, to engage in dialogue, to cooperate for the future because the magnitude of the world’s challenges is such that no church, no religion, can answer them alone. So, Interreligious cooperation is “programmed” to try to overcome the limitations of each individual religion, and such overcoming is necessary to produce the higher power that humanity needs to face contemporary challenges, a power that Ventura calls “super-religion.”

For all these reasons, religious actors are often called to take an active part in initiatives promoted by European institutions and local governments because of their potential to prevent conflict and ease social tensions that can arise between people of different faiths (Fabretti, Giorda, Grieria, 2018).

The role of local authorities is crucial in this process. Analyzing some documents produced by European institutions and some practices from which some guidelines arise it is possible to highlight the circular dimension through which top-down and bottom-up processes, principles and practices, institutions and communities mutually influence each other.

# 1. Religions and Democracy: a legal-political framework

In recent decades, the debate on the compatibility between religions and democracy has always been relevant: communism with State atheism; its fall and the subsequent ethno-nationalist movements in the Balkan area (and beyond) that in the 1990s often made political, divisive instrumental use of religion; theocratic States that at several latitudes have superimposed religious laws with civil laws; the limitations on religious freedom associated with these phenomena.

These are all elements that have led the secular world to reflect on the concept of secularism and how the latter should be understood, whether religions and dialogue with and among them find a place in it, and what role they play in a democratic process of an education for plural citizenship.

European institutions have long wondered about the issue. In particular, the Council of Europe – which aims to promote Human rights, Democracy and the Rule of law in European countries – has issued numerous recommendations to invite member states to engage in dialogue with religious communities.

In 1998 the Recommendation *Religion and Democracy* stated that “democracy and religion need not be incompatible; quite the opposite, they can be valid partners”.

The crucial nature of this partnership is expressed in a dual sphere of action: by tackling societal problems, the authorities can remove many of the causes of religious extremism and democracy has proved to be the best framework for freedom of conscience, the exercise of faith and religious pluralism; for their part, religious communities can be a valid partner of democratic society, through their moral and ethical commitment, the values they uphold, their critical approach and their cultural expression. Therefore, the document emphasizes three important aspects:

- 1) *The role of Religious leaders* that could make a considerable contribution to the efforts to combat prejudices and stereotypes, using their role as informal educators and their influence on believers. This process also requires the development of ecumenism and dialogue between the different religious denominations;
- 2) *The role of education* to combat ignorance, stereotypes and misunderstanding of religions: States have to cooperate with religious educational institutions in order to introduce, or reinforce, in their curricula, aspects relating to human rights, history, philosophy and science. School and university curricula should be revised, as a matter of urgency, so as to promote a better understanding of the various religions;
- 3) *The role of local authorities* to promote better relations with/ between re-

ligions and “to engage in more systematic dialogue with religious leaders about the major problems facing society, which would make it possible to take account of the population’s cultural and religious views before political decisions are taken”.

The Presidency Conclusions of the Brussels European Council held on 12 and 13 December 2003 at the Freedom, Security and Justice Section, under the heading *Interfaith Dialogue*, encourages the Member States to support: “a sustained, open and transparent dialogue with the different religions and philosophical communities as an instrument of peace and social cohesion in Europe and at its borders [...]” The document also emphasizes how the goal of this dialogue should be understood not as a mere exchange of opinions, but as an achievement of social harmony while respecting diversity, thus greater security in Europe and in the whole world.

In 2005 Recommendation on *Intercultural and interfaith dialogue: initiatives and responsibilities of local authorities* stated that States should make European citizens aware that the mixture of cultures and civilizations have contributed and continue to contribute to the construction of Europe “in order to promote, among citizens, a culture of dialogue, tolerance, negotiation and reconciliation”.

Therefore, it is not only up to the various ethnic and religious communities to communicate and promote themselves, seeking spaces for dialogue and encounter with the State and with the other cultural realities: it is a duty of institutions to train citizens to be aware and respectful of the plurality that inhabits and enlivens their society.

In 2008 *The White Paper on Intercultural dialogue* emphasizes how the concerns and areas of action of religious communities largely coincide with those of European institutions: human rights, democratic citizenship, promotion of values, peace, dialogue, education and solidarity.

So, if in certain historical periods religious actors were kept out of the public space, due to the contingency of current events, today in the framework of European institutions there is no incompatibility between democracy and religions: on the contrary, it is precisely in the space of citizenship education and in the processes of maintaining peace and promoting social cohesion that they can find a fertile ground for dialogue between them and with the State.

To better understand the Italian legal and political framework about the relations with religious communities and their places of worship, it is important to mention the *National Integration Plan for persons entitled to International Protection* produced in 2017 by the Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration of the Ministry of the Interior. In the section titled *Proutes Of Social Inclusion: Programme And Policy Priorities* there is a paragraph specifically dedicated to *Interreligious dialogue*, defined as “a tool of integration”. The document recognizes

the social role of immigrant faith communities and places of worship in relation to integration processes:

“Places of worship, in particular, perform complex and multifaceted religious, social and cultural, political and economic functions. In some of them, for example, Italian courses are organized for immigrants, information of a bureaucratic-administrative nature is provided, and food and clothing are distributed to the poorest people. Also noteworthy is the commitment of numerous religious entities in the field of welcoming refugees”.

Although the National Integration Plan has been developed from the security perspective with which the relations of the Italian State with religious confessions are managed, we can extrapolate a culturally and socially relevant element: places of worship often also make up for the shortcomings of the State.

Thanks to their widespread presence in suburbs where institutions are weak and need the help of religious communities, they perform fundamental functions for regularization and inclusion of migrants, but also for the education of second generations, the young Italians of various origins and different religious faiths.

The National Integration Plan mentioned also another important document signed in the same year in which the State and the Islamic communities stated they wanted to undertake a new institutional phase of collaboration, *The National Pact For An Italian Islam, expression of an open and integrated community, adhering to the values and principles of the Italian legal system*, drawn up in collaboration with the Council for Relations with Italian Islam, adopted by the Italian Ministry of Interior.

The Pact considered the significant presence of a new religious pluralism in Italy which includes numerous associations, citizens and residents that refer to the Islamic religion. The document stressed the need to contribute to fostering the harmonious and constructive coexistence of the different religious communities with a view to consolidating social cohesion and promoting integration processes.

The document also highlighted the important role played by Islamic associations in countering any form of religious radicalism implemented through propaganda, actions and strategies contrary to the national legal system and the delicate role that Ministers of Worship play in their communities and in places such as hospitals, reception centers, penitentiary institutes, etc.

Another element to be emphasized is the intention of the State to support and promote, in collaboration with Islamic Associations, public events aimed at strengthening and deepening dialogue between Institutions and the Islamic community, valuing the contribution in terms of spiritual, cultural and social heritage made by Muslim communities to the Country.

## 2. The role of religious actors and places of worship in the integration process in Italy. The case of Emilia Romagna

The contents of the documents presented above confirm the importance of a transparent and regular dialogue between religious communities and institutions. The role of local authorities is crucial in this process. It is them who are able to spread widely throughout the territory, intercept with more ease and proximity the needs of citizens of different religious faiths and can try to respond to the critical issues identified by the State in the management of relations with them.

Virtuous cases are the Italian municipalities of Novellara and Reggio Emilia, which, in recent decades, have seen the settlements of migrants from Indian Punjab and from Sri Lanka growing up in their lowlands.

In particular, over the years Novellara has become a crossroads of communities and religions. The various administrations that have succeeded one another have facilitated the establishment of places of worship, being aware that to welcome means to recognize and give dignity to all religious groups and that through dialogue it is possible to build relationships and opportunities for growth and exchange. A constant and continuous attitude of openness has always been maintained with the religious communities with whom institutions meet periodically to exchange information, important themes and projects.

For these reasons, several communities have decided to form an association and even set up their places of worship in Novellara as the Sikh temple, inaugurated in 2000, has been expanded and constantly upgraded in recent years, becoming a point of reference in Italy.

The Hindu community has also invested in a new temple, inaugurated in 2017. Other religious communities, such as the Muslim community or the Orthodox one, have established their places of worship in Novellara for many years and have always maintained a constant relationship with local authorities.

In 2016, the Municipality of Novellara decided to approve the "Open cultures" programme; a series of guidelines for the development of intercultural and inter-religious policies to continue promoting and directing daily actions aimed at increasing dialogue, giving value to differences and building bridges in every sector of the Institution. One of the most important objectives is that of promoting the sharing of religious celebrations the Communities hold most dear and which characterize their identity.

In 2001 the city of Reggio Emilia, through the Mondo Insieme Intercultural Foundation (the municipal body that deals with pluralism, interculturalism and integration) started very good policies aimed at promoting cooperation with and between religious communities.

The promotion of inter-religious dialogue has become over the years one of the areas of research and analysis of the municipal administration, and in 2020 it became one of the objectives of the administration's programme, as part of the actions called "Reggio Città di DiTutti" ("Reggio City of all", Presentation of intercultural policies, 2022). In the programme the connection between intercultural and citizenship education becomes therefore natural: while citizenship education encourages the development of individuals as active and responsible citizens, within the framework of universal rights and values, education intercultural promotes skills for constructive coexistence in a cultural and multifaceted social fabric which can be defined as "intercultural competences".

Through the Mondinsieme Foundation, a strong relationship of trust has been developed with ethnic and religious associations in the Reggio Emilia area, which have joined the Foundation and promoted international solidarity and cooperation projects with their countries of origin. Diaspora associations are also taking on a role as facilitators of new diplomatic relations with countries of origin and in creating intercultural twinnings to the cities and territories where the communities come from.

Among the intercultural strategies of Reggio Emilia, it is important to point out an aspect that will be better explained in the section specifically dedicated to Tamil communities: the promotion of specific paths for places of worship in order to integrate welfare policies promoted in collaboration with them. A concrete example is the guidelines and the active support of local authorities on the urban-building adaptation of places of worship and the activation of agreements related to the active social role that these places can have toward the communities of worshipers and non-worshipers.

The adhesion of Novellara and Reggio Emilia to the Intercultural Cities network programme of the Council of Europe increased dialogue and exchange with initiatives of other territories and their ability to value the presence of the different religious and ethnic communities led to the publication of an Handbook for Local Authorities, titled *Valuing religious communities as key actors of social cohesion* (2021), edited with the patronage of the Council of Europe: a concrete example of how local best practices can influence european principles from bottom-up. The aim of this publication – which seeks to offer some ideas to public administrators and officials of the local authorities of these two towns that belong to the Intercultural Cities network of the Council of Europe – is to fit between the official recognition through legal protocols and the "practice" of religious freedom. In fact, when dealing with practical issues related to the exercise of religious freedom, it is necessary to refer these matters to local institutions and administrations (Regions, Provinces and Municipalities) ranging from problems related to the opening of places of worship to those related to food standards in school canteens, from the celebration of the various religious holidays to the right to be buried in accordance with one's own will.

The handbook includes indications on potential concrete actions that local authorities could implement to foster the creation of intercultural contexts and to

make the places of worship potential interlocutors in the cities. It deals with the issue by referring to different areas:

- the regulatory and guidance tools by supranational institutions;
- the relationship between religion and public space;
- the relationship that local authorities can build with the different religious communities, by managing the so-called community welfare (social, health and education dimensions).

The cases described above help identify the crux of the issue: defining a strategy for interreligious dialogue is not in itself a critical issue, much depends on how such dialogue is perceived and managed within the cities. Suitable governance strategies and tools can not only effectively address these complexities, but they can also transform religious pluralism into a resource accessible to the whole community. As stated by The Mayors of Novellara and Reggio Emilia, Elena Carletti and Luca Vecchi, the strategy for inter-religious and spiritual dialogue not only is important in terms of inclusion and social cohesion with the communities in the area, but it also defines the attractiveness of a territory and its international vocation.

### **3. The presence of Sikh and Hindu communities in Novellara and Reggio Emilia**

Sikh communities began arriving in Europe in the 1980s to escape the violent crackdown unleashed against them by the Indian government.

The Sikh population in Italy is about 100,000, residing mainly in the regions of Lombardy, Veneto, Emilia Romagna and Lazio.

In Emilia-Romagna there are about 10,000 Sikhs. Many of them chose the Po Valley for different reasons: the similarities with their territory (Punjab is in fact a vast plain at the foot of the Himalayas) and the area's high demand for labor. For the government of the region, struggling with a lack of local manpower in the fields, farms, and factories employed in the parmigiano-reggiano supply chain, their arrival was the solution to a real problem.

Of course over the years, as communities became more permanent, work occupations also became more diversified. Today, many second generations are studying at university or working as cultural mediators, clerks, accountants, and lawyers.

Sikh religion took root also thanks to the seven temples (in the provinces of Piacenza, Parma, Reggio Emilia, Castelfranco, Bologna) placed in the territory, including the Gurdwara Singh Sabha in Novellara. Camouflaged in an industrial area near the state highway, the Gurdwara Singh Sabha has more than 5,000 regular worshippers and it is the most important place of worship of Sikhism in Italy, the second in Europe. It was inaugurated 20 years ago, in 2000, by Romano Prodi, then president of the European Commission.



Part of Sikh rituals takes place in the *langar*, a space in the temple dedicated to offering meals to those who attend or visit it, Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike: this element of solidarity is considered as an element of welfare by local authorities.

The municipality of Novellara values Sikh festivities, especially the Vaisakhi, the Harvest feast, which, in the month of April, brings more than 10,000 believers with their colors, traditions and prayers to the Novellara Square, after a procession through the streets of the city that makes the Sikhs visible from a cultural and religious perspective and not only in terms of “what they do for the economy of the area”. The procession is called Nagar Kirtan, meaning “praise God in the streets of the city”.

There are far fewer Hindu Punjabi communities in the area and they are engaged in intensive networking among neighboring municipalities and organize holidays jointly. Here is an example of the Shobha Yatra festival that celebrates the founding of the Pagnognaga Shri Hari Om Mandir temple, the anniversary of the “consecration” of the Temple statues, organized together with the nearby temple of Novellara Shri Mata Mandir.

One of the major festivities shared with the surrounding community is Diwali, the festival of lights, which represents the victory of the good over the evil, of the light over the darkness. It is a celebration recognized by the Italian State with the Intesa, the agreement made in 2012 with the Italian Hinduist Union, an organization to which numerous Hindu temples distributed throughout the territory are affiliated.

In addition to the official recognition of Hindu holidays and the presence of Hindu temples in Italy, the role of the Italian Hinduist Union is fundamental because it receives the Otto per mille funds from the communities, which is used for charitable initiatives, funds academic researches and supports places of worship in their needs.

In Reggio Emilia there is another hindu community from Sri Lanka. The ongoing civil war started in 1983 in the Asian island between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese government, which identifies itself as Buddhist State, has generated a diaspora consisting of more than 800,000 people in the world.

In 1989, the Italian State granted them the status of political refugees in Italy, a condition that they still enjoy today. Today, in Italy there are 100.000 tamil, both catholics and hindus. The hindu community lives in different communities, in Genoa, Naples, Bari and Palermo. In Emilia Romagna tamil are about 5000, and they were almost invisible until the early 2000s. Starting from those years they became “visible” thanks to two elements:

- the collaboration with the above mentioned Mondo Insieme Cultural Center, who helped them regularize the legal status of their cultural association;
- the emergence of a real place of worship (previously people gathered to pray in homes or stores) and religious celebrations.

Established in 2019, the Tamil temple is dedicated to Goddess Sri Raja Rajeshwari, who is honored with a 10-day festival in June. During the feast days, devotees gather at the temple to participate in special rituals through devotional chants accom-

panied by drums. For the occasion, the temple is decorated with flowers and the statues of Goddess Raja Rajeshwari are adorned with robes and jewelry and placed on an altar that is also decorated. Processions are also organized, during which the statue of the Goddess is carried around the temple courtyard. On the closing day of the festival, local institutions and other citizens are also invited and participate.

A relevant peculiarity of Tamil Hindu religiosity in Italy is the large participation in ceremonies by Tamil Catholics, for whom the “ethnic” component seems to completely override the religious component, partly because of the well-known “inclusivist” potential of Hinduism.

There are hardly any religious conflicts between the two groups (catholics and hindus), and actually, from a strictly religious point of view, there are no conflicts even with buddhists (of the Theravada tradition), which is the religion of the Sinhalese “enemies”. The religious sense is very strong but at the time of identity definition the common ethnic origin (Tamil) prevails over differences in religious affiliation.

## Conclusion

The valuable work of these two cities is an example of how everyone, administrators and religious actors can benefit from harmony between the different components of society, between civic and spiritual spheres. A relationship that has to go beyond a mere regulation, but has to be established on mutual trust and awareness of the important role of each one.

Within this frame of reference, interfaith dialogue can become a powerful tool for citizenship education that enables believers and non-believers alike to broaden their knowledge about religions and their relational skills.

As observed, it is important that, in addition to the prevailing top-down process that struggles to reach the grassroots, it is crucial to activate a bottom-up process which fosters bottom-up practices. In these cases, in fact, we can say that in these cases the principles were generated from the practices.

Promoting these social mechanisms is a commitment of faith communities, and also of supranational institutions and local governments.

This involves creating structured and permanent spaces for dialogue that foster its civic dimension, meaning the contribution of religious actors to social, educational and cultural projects aimed at the common good.

In fact, interfaith dialogue falls under the political strategy of *bridging* (as opposed to *bonding*), that is, creating bridges, openings, integration and not “ties” of closure and self-referentiality.

In conclusion, these are examples of positive secularism as the ideal space for dialogue between and within religious communities and institutions that work together to build ways of peaceful coexistence (Ambrosini, Molli, Naso, 2022).

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