

Article

The Abu Dhabi Document: A Potential Cornerstone for Islamic-Christian Dialogue in Italian Educational Contexts

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Abstract: In Italy, the migratory phenomenon has also had an impact on the school system, becoming an interesting potential field for intercultural and inter-religious encounters. As regards, for instance, the presence of pupils and students and their families of Islamic faith, very frequently, emphasis is placed almost exclusively on specific issues and requests, such as exemption from the teaching of the Catholic religion or specific diet. On the other hand, we rarely discuss how the presence of diverse faiths can create a unique opportunity for mutual knowledge to spread and promote the “culture of encounter”. In fact, engagement with religious others is an unavoidable duty, both pedagogical and civic. Therefore, starting from an analysis of pedagogical-educational aspects of the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, the aim of this article is to outline a rethinking of the concept of intercultural/inter-religious dialogue, above all as a pedagogical challenge and a preventive measure against extremism, within the broad framework of inclusive citizenship.

Keywords: Italian school; intercultural/inter-religious education; Abu Dhabi Document



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1. Introduction

In Italy, according to the data provided by the Ministry of Education, the number of pupils and students with non-Italian citizenship (hereinafter NIC) has changed from the number of 37,478 in the school year 1993/1994 to 872,360 (10.6% of the total school population) in the school year 2021/2022, of which 588,986 born in Italy (67.5% of NIC pupils and students). As for the countries of origin, they have grown over the years to reach a variety of more than 200 countries, namely almost the whole world, creating a process of demographic transformation. However, the most numerous communities of NIC students are from Romania, Albania, and Morocco ([Fondazione ISMU 2023b](#)). Actually, over the years, the migration phenomenon has also affected the school system, and this situation is correspondingly associated with linguistic, cultural, and religious differences ([Cuciniello and Mahfoudhi 2022](#)). The Italian school, as a result, has progressively become a multicultural and multi-religious school, a field of potential encounter between people of different cultures and religions, meaning with “encounter” dialogical situations where a person fully strives to understand another’s point of view ([Buber 2002](#)).

Culture is not an abstract concept. It is, in fact, a very complex concept and, consciously or unconsciously, can be misused or misinterpreted. From an individual perspective, culture can be defined as a “set of shared characteristics that gives to a person the sense of belonging to a certain community” ([Cunha and Gomes 2009](#), p. 100). Moreover, from a more process-oriented perspective, culture is “the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas” ([Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997](#), p. 6). Finally, from a macro perspective, culture can be defined as “a set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or of a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs” ([UNESCO 2001](#), p. 4).

In light of this framework, it is also worth pointing out that the term “culture” has also been criticized because it is too static and objectifying. Indeed, the term “culturality” was preferred in its place since it communicates the concept’s changing and fragmented nature (Abdallah-Preteceille 2006). It is a fact that in contexts characterized by cultural pluralism, Hajisoteriou and Angelides (2017, p. 367), referring to Leclercq (2002), report that “intercultural education aims to stress the dynamic nature of cultural diversity as an unstable mixture of sameness and otherness”, and in this perspective, Portera (2008) associates intercultural education with a dynamic understanding of culture. This is a challenge, after all, that relates to the dynamic concept of culture itself, continuously shaped through communicative interactions (Holmes et al. 2016). Indeed:

Interculturality refers to the capacity to experience cultural otherness, and to use this experience to reflect on matters that are usually taken for granted within one’s own culture and environment. Interculturality involves being open to, interested in, curious about, and empathetic towards people from other cultures, and using this heightened awareness of otherness to evaluate one’s own everyday patterns of perception, thought, feeling and behaviour in order to develop greater self-knowledge and self-understanding. (Council of Europe 2009a, p. 10)

For this reason, intercultural education alongside inter-religious education, as integral life skills starting from early childhood (Vilà Baños et al. 2021), appears to be indispensable for both fostering pluralistic interfaith dialogue (Keaten and Soukup 2009), peace and social cohesion and preventing conflicts, as well as radicalization and extremism (Mohagheghi 2004; Abu-Nimer and Smith 2016; Vilà Baños et al. 2020).

According to Leclercq (2002, p. 3), “intercultural education is not so much a matter of teaching something different, but more of teaching differently within the existing curricula”. In this perspective, for example, in 2015, the Council of Europe, through the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, developed a *Toolkit for organizing intercultural and interreligious activities* to better understand one’s faith or one’s personal and social values in order to help reduce the risk of radicalization through a process of cultural awareness (Council of Europe 2015). Indeed, engagement with religious others in the school curriculum is an unavoidable pedagogical and civic duty (Jackson 2004; Gómez and Pavan 2019).

Intercultural education, seeking to reduce stereotypes and prejudices and the space for xenophobic discourse (Zapata-Barrero 2011), has become a fundamental principle of the Italian school system since the 1980s when students of foreign origin began to considerably increase in number. It has involved new didactic and, above all, pedagogical challenges regarding the testing of new possible ways of intercultural coexistence, whose main difficulties consist in discovering essential stability between diversity and integration (Traversi and Fabi 1998; Pattaro 2014). In this regard, it should be remembered that “Intercultural education cannot be just a simple ‘add on; to the regular curriculum. It needs to concern the learning environment as a whole, as well as other dimensions of educational processes, such as school life and decision making, teacher education and training, curricula, languages of instruction, teaching methods and student interactions, and learning materials” (UNESCO 2006, p. 19). Furthermore, at a time of increased religious diversity, the theme of inter-religious dialogue is of critical importance (Cornille 2013), most notably in light of the fact that this issue is inevitably linked to the increase in religious illiteracy and its effects on the social and political milieu (Melloni and Cadeddu 2019; Cuciniello 2021b). On the contrary, especially in the educational field, it is essential that religion and its teaching become specific knowledge, clearly defined, comparable with the knowledge relating to the other study subjects, and with common values that shape the ethos of society (Zani 2005). Lastly, in 2007, the *Toledo Guiding Principles* were developed, especially for teaching about religions and beliefs, in order to contribute to an improved understanding of the world’s increasing religious diversity and the growing presence of religion in the public sphere. As far as the preparation of curricula, textbooks, and educational materials is concerned, it is declared that OSCE participating States, whenever they choose to promote the study and knowledge about religions and beliefs in schools,

“should take into account religious and non-religious views in a way that is inclusive, fair, and respectful. Care should be taken to avoid inaccurate or prejudicial material, particularly when this reinforces negative stereotypes” (OSCE–ODIHR 2007, p. 17). From this point of view, “the impact of religious practice on the areas of public policies, such as health and education, without discrimination and with due respect for the rights of non-believers” (Council of Europe 2008, p. 23) should also be remembered.

Regarding the dialogue between people of different faiths, specifically between Catholic Christians and Sunni Muslims, on 4 February 2019 in Abu Dhabi, Pope Francis and the *Grand Imam of al-Azhar*, Ahmad al-Tayyib, signed the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* (hereinafter *Document*), as a joint statement calling for the reconciliation of people of goodwill in the service of universal peace. Moreover, it is noteworthy that this historic meeting and the signing of the *Document* took place exactly 800 years after the journey of Saint Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226) to Egypt in the course of the Fifth Crusade (1217–1221), when he met al-Malik al-Kamil (c. 1177–1238), the fourth Ayyubid sultan of Egypt. The *Document* ends by saying: “Al-Azhar and the Catholic Church ask that this Document become the object of research and reflection in all schools, universities and institutes of formation, thus helping to educate new generations to bring goodness and peace to others, and to be defenders everywhere of the rights of the oppressed and of the least of our brothers and sisters” (Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb 2019, n.p.).

Document analysis is a form of qualitative research through which the document is interpreted by the researcher with the aim of giving voice and meaning to an evaluation topic (Bowen 2009). Moreover, it helps to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin and Strauss 2008) in many fields, including in the specific one of education (Merriam 1988). Hence, in the present article, in addition to some theoretical reflections concerning intercultural education and inter-religious dialogue as a pedagogical challenge in the “culture of encounter”, there will be a specific identification and an analysis of all the pedagogical-educational elements of the *Document* that could prompt teachers and educators to rethink the concept of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue through mutual knowledge. Indeed, through the knowledge of others, including their religious identity, mutual understanding, tolerance, and peace are achieved; therefore, every school curriculum should also have an inter-religious and intercultural dimension (Council of Europe 2007; Vilà Baños et al. 2020).

2. Intercultural Education and Religious Otherness: A Pedagogical Challenge

In 2008, the EU, with the proclamation of the *European Year of Intercultural Dialogue*, started strongly promoting the concept of intercultural education and dialogue as a key competence for teachers working in changing and diverse classrooms (Holmes et al. 2016; Skrefsrud 2016), in today’s super-diverse contexts. (Vertovec 2007). Above all, the *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*, obviously connected with the “2008 Exchange on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue”, provides several orientations for the promotion of understanding and reciprocal respect, in accordance with its introductory declaration: “Promoting intercultural dialogue contributes to the core objective of the Council of Europe, namely preserving and promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law” (Council of Europe 2008, p. 8). Later, in 2016, the EU adopted the resolution titled *The role of intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity and education in promoting EU fundamental values* (2015/2139(INI)), remarking on the importance of an intercultural, interfaith, and value-based approach to education “in order to address and promote mutual respect, integrity, ethical principles, cultural diversity, social inclusion and cohesion, including through exchange and mobility programmes for all” (European Parliament 2016, p. 4). It is clear that these documents, as well as others on this specific issue, have had the objective of giving more political weight to intercultural education as a pedagogical approach, as a means to sustain the EU’s commitment to integrating diversity by promoting intercultural dialogue, including its religious dimension that can elevate and enhance dialogue,

as outlined in the *San Marino Declaration* (Council of Europe 2007). Lastly, intercultural education involves some fundamental measures, for example, intercultural training of teachers and educators, reinterpretation of knowledge with an intercultural emphasis, and analysis of textbooks through an intercultural approach. In particular, teacher training plays an important role (Abu-Nimer and Smith 2016): starting with an accurate formulation of educational work, one can promote and support an indispensable education for a culture of peacebuilding and coexistence (Kadayifci-Orellana 2013; Guetta 2016).

“Religious practice is part of contemporary human life, and it therefore cannot and should not be outside the sphere of interest of public authorities, although the state must preserve its role as the neutral and impartial organiser of the exercise of various religions, faiths and beliefs” (Council of Europe 2008, p. 22). In the light of this reflection, however, it is well known that the process of secularization has engendered, among other consequences, a marginalization of religious experience, confining it to the private sphere. On the contrary, it could represent one of the aspects that promote dialogue with others, even with those who do not currently recognize themselves in a specific faith or in any faith. Indeed, “Those holding nonreligious world views have an equal right to contribute, alongside religious representatives, to debates on the moral foundations of society and to be engaged in forums for intercultural dialogue” (Council of Europe 2008, p. 23).

In this scenario, it is a fact that, in the background of international migrations, even Italian society appears to be characterized by a certain religious pluralism. As regards the specific presence of foreign Christian and Muslim residents, according to data provided by the ISMU Foundation, as of 1 January 2023, Christians (mainly Orthodox, Catholics, Evangelicals, and Copts) are confirmed as the majority group by religious affiliation. ISMU estimates that they are less than 2.7 million, against the more than 1.5 million foreign Muslims (Fondazione ISMU 2023a). It is undeniable that we have moved effectively from Catholicism as “the religion of Italians” to the pluralistic “Italy of religions” (Allievi 2014; Saggiaro 2020; Colombo 2020; Ambrosini et al. 2022). Following this, in recent years, there has been an awakening of interest in religions in general and Islam in particular. One of the reasons for this growing interest can be, in fact, found in the terrorist attacks that have aroused great attention, dominating the public discourse, especially when young people with a migrant cultural background, born and raised in Europe, are involved (Kristeva 2021). On these grounds, it should be emphasized once again that the intercultural and inter-religious skills of those who live and work in contexts characterized by significant cultural and religious pluralism are highly required (Porcarelli 2020; Aneas and Vilà 2023). At the same time, rethinking critical intercultural pedagogy, religious differences have to be understood as positive resources in the growth processes of individuals and societies (Holmes and Corbett 2022).

As a consequence, although research has found that intergenerational transmission of religiosity results in higher family functioning and improved family relationships (Dollahite et al. 2019) and has shown that specifically Italian younger generations are not merely abandoning their faith (Bossi et al. 2023), it remains essential to prevent the increase of religious illiteracy (Valk et al. 2020), given that the different faiths can represent an important opportunity to (re)discover one’s cultural and religious identity, as well as common elements in relation to other religions. However, religious illiteracy is not a phenomenon that can be analyzed sociologically only in relation to our era since the lack of useful means to understand religious vocabulary comes from history (Melloni and Cadeddu 2019). Actually, this issue includes different paradigms (cultural, social, juridical), and, primarily in the school, it goes well beyond time, space, and resources dedicated to religious teaching (Caimi and Vian 2013). Furthermore, the absence of religion from school programs, not only related to a single subject, produces social and cultural difficulties. This means that it is indispensable to design and activate a responsible multidisciplinary approach to find interdisciplinary strategies. Ultimately, within a multi-confessional and multi-religious society, religious illiteracy, together with functional illiteracy and stereotypes and prejudices, can be at the root of (inter)cultural mishaps and imply significant social costs

(Naso 2014). Indeed, not infrequently, this ignorance is translated even through the spread of disparaging categories applied to the beliefs of others, labeled as primitive, irrational, violent, and fanatical (Cuciniello 2020).

Finally, considering that textbooks mirror the values of the society in which they are published and used (Farrell and Heyneman 1989; UNESCO 2005), a critical review of their content should be permanently conducted by teachers and educators. In this respect, it is noteworthy to mention UNESCO's statement that "all people engaged in educational action must have adequate teaching materials and resources at their disposal. In this connection, it is necessary to make the necessary revisions to textbooks to get rid of negative stereotypes and distorted views of 'the other'" (UNESCO 1995, p.11). The problem is that, although the intercultural approach appears to be increasingly present, textbooks can still show a stereotyped and ethnocentric vision of other cultures and religions, following a shallow monocultural approach. In particular, as far as Islam and Muslims are concerned, it turns out that many Italian textbooks still tend to be Eurocentric. Thus, they are inappropriate in terms of providing students with a balanced understanding of this religious tradition and Islamic societies (Cuciniello 2020). It becomes more and more necessary to have a perception of textbooks as a means of promoting peace and mutual understanding among all nations since "Whenever new teaching materials, textbooks and the like are to be produced, they should be designed with due consideration of new situations [. . .]. Distance education technologies and all modern communication tools must be placed at the service of education for peace, human rights and democracy" (UNESCO 1995, p. 11).

3. The Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together

The pontificate and the magisterium of Pope Francis have been characterized from the beginning by an authentic openness to the other. This *modus operandi* is also clear in the following statement from *Evangelii Gaudium*: "Evangelization and interreligious dialogue, far from being opposed, mutually support and nourish one another" (Pope Francis 2013, no. 258). Actually, it reaffirms a Second Vatican Council (1965) decree that establishes an essential bond between evangelization and dialogue. Besides, through the strong appeal to the eighth centenary (1219–2019) of the meeting during the Fifth Crusade between Francis of Assisi and the Sultan of Egypt, al-Malik al-Kamil (Jeusset 1996; Tolan 2009), following the example of the poor man of Assisi, on many occasions Pope Bergoglio has stressed that if there is no peace without justice, there can be no peace without dialogue. Therefore, the foundation of the encounter between people who recognize themselves in any faith is certainly the path of communication, exchange, and mutual understanding.

For this purpose, the *Document*, also known as the "Abu Dhabi declaration" or "Abu Dhabi agreement", was drafted following a long and careful reflection carried out by a commission set up by Pope Francis himself and the *Grand Imam of al-Azhar*, Ahmad al-Tayyib. In fact, Pope Francis declared:

In an epoch such as our own, in which there is a strong temptation to see an ongoing conflict between the Christian and Islamic civilizations, and also to consider religions as a source of conflict, we wished to give an ulterior, clear and decisive sign, that it is indeed possible to come together; it is possible to respect one another and to dialogue; and that, even in the diversity of cultures and traditions, the Christian and Islamic worlds appreciate and uphold common values: life, family, religious sense, honour for the elderly, the education of young people, and still others. (Pope Francis 2019b)

The *Document* also marks the beginning of a different way to dialogue, as it underlines that we need to have the courage to recognize and share common values in order to reach higher goals, which refer to unity and communion, that is, to human fraternity. In fact, the text also proves to be very concrete, as it illustrates and analyses various fields (political, social, religious) in which change must be solicited. Therefore, far from being simply a new Christian–Islamic declaration, it stands as a path traced by the highest representatives of

the two major world religions, which “makes all human beings brothers and sisters” (Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb 2019, n.p.).

This basic principle, together with others, is also found in *Fratelli tutti*, the third Encyclical of Pope Francis, subtitled *On fraternity and social friendship*. It was signed on 3 October 2020, on the occasion of his visit to the tomb of Francis of Assisi and was published the following day on the saint’s feast day. In fact, the Encyclical calls for more human fraternity and solidarity and is a plea to reject wars (Pope Francis 2020a).

Pope Francis and the Grand Imam, right from the preface of the *Document*, declare that the reflections and calls contained therein are meant as an appeal to all people “who have faith in God and faith in *human fraternity* to unite and work together so that it may serve as a guide for future generations to advance a culture of mutual respect in the awareness of the great divine grace that makes all human beings brothers and sisters” (Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb 2019, n.p.). Accordingly, they address authorities, leaders, persons of religion all over the world, regional and international organizations, religious institutions, and leading thinkers so that the principles of the *Document* may be translated into policies, decisions, legislative texts, courses of study, and materials to be circulated. The declared purpose is to rediscover “the values of peace, justice, goodness, beauty, human fraternity and coexistence in order to confirm the importance of these values as anchors of salvation for all, and to promote them everywhere” (Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb 2019, n.p.). This means that, on behalf of their respective realities, namely the Catholic Church and Al-Azhar, the request of the two signatories is that the *Document* become *modus operandi et vivendi*, “habits of working and way of life”. It should not remain a dead letter but the object of studies, research, and reflections in all educational contexts in order to teach new generations to encourage paths of mutual respect, collaboration, and peace and, at the same time, to become defenders of the rights of the oppressed and the least. (Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb 2019, n.p.).

Lastly, it can be said that the *Document* also deconstructs traditions and customs, overcoming past discussions and intellectual and doctrinal controversies between the two faiths (Cuciniello 2021a). What the promoters ask, therefore, is that all people of faith, both in the Christian and Muslim world, feel called to be a channel for the dissemination and realization of its content. In this direction, both at the institutional level and at the local level, various groups and associations, centers of worship, and cultural realities have already commenced work to actualize the principles of the *Document*. For instance, since 19 August 2019, the “Higher Committee of Human Fraternity”, an independent body of world religious, academic, and cultural leaders, has started to implement the purposes set out in the *Document* at the international level.

3.1. A Tool for Intercultural and Inter-Religious Dialogue

Pope Francis has shared his vision of education at several events through his encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, speeches, and audio messages. He considers a triple identification profile for education: it is an act of love because it generates life in its multidimensionality; it is also an act of hope in that it helps to break down skepticism, incredulity and conceptions and attitudes contrary to the dignity of the human being; finally, it contributes to humanization by removing individualism, recognizing differences, discovering fraternity, and taking responsibility for the environment. Hence, beyond geographical boundaries, Pope Francis defines the school as a platform for bringing children and young people closer together, a privileged place for the promotion of the person (Klein 2021).

From this perspective, the connection with the *Document* signed on 4 February 2019 in Abu Dhabi is evident. Actually, right from its title it emphasizes the concept of promoting people and fraternity to achieve world peace and coexistence, stating that “among the most important causes of the crises of the modern world are a desensitized human conscience, a distancing from religious values and a prevailing individualism accompanied by materialistic philosophies that deify the human person and introduce worldly and material

values in place of supreme and transcendental principles” (Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb 2019, n.p.). In fact, the final version was the result of a fraternal open discussion between the representatives of two great world religions, testifying how different faiths can live peaceably and disseminating a culture of mutual respect. For this reason, considering fraternity to be an identity and constitutive trait of humanity rather than a moral duty, “the Pope proposes to include education for fraternity in educational processes because it is precisely his contempt that has given birth to the culture of rejection, of selfishness, of seeing others as rivals or enemies” (Klein 2021, p. 25). There is no doubt that this can only happen by developing competencies for intercultural and inter-religious dialogue that enable people to function in diverse, complex, and democratic societies (Aneas and Vilà 2023). In most countries, they are indeed part of the educational curriculum as key competencies.

In Italy, since the 1990s, when the school has increasingly become a multicultural school through the presence of NIC pupils and students, intercultural education has been a positive response to this new situation and is now common in the area of school legislation. Indeed, in 1990 the Italian Ministry of Public Education, through the Ministerial Circular no. 205 *La scuola dell’obbligo e gli alunni stranieri. L’educazione interculturale* (Compulsory Schooling and Foreign Students: Intercultural Education) defined the role of intercultural education as the fostering of positive coexistence, preventing the creation of stereotypes and prejudices towards other peoples and cultures, and overcoming any form of ethnocentrism. Later, in 1994, with the Ministerial Circular no. 73 *Dialogo interculturale e convivenza democratica: l’impegno progettuale della scuola* (Intercultural Dialogue and Democratic Coexistence: The Planning Commitment of the Schools) there was the first effort to shape the “Italian approach to interculturalism”. Intercultural education is defined as one of the most important strategies to combat racism, including the complex issues deriving from the contact between different cultures. While respecting individual and collective identities in a climate of dialogue and solidarity, interculturalism opens up the possibility of mutual discoveries.

The school, as the first formal education agency, is also a space for sociality and democratic coexistence, in which one learns to know, respect, and value differences in terms of learning, gender, ethnicity, culture, language, and religion. Moreover, it should also support a real, and not merely notional, knowledge of the major religions, identifying the most important aspects of inter-religious dialogue (MIUR 2012), as well as updating study programs in order to adapt them to broader educational perspectives (Moscatò 2020). As far as Italy is concerned, religious education in public schools has always been a controversial matter, given the predominance of Catholicism and the mainly public character of the Italian educational system (Coglievina 2017). In this regard, what is stated in the *White Paper on intercultural dialogue* is paradigmatic: “Education as to religious and convictional facts in an intercultural context makes available knowledge about all the world religions and beliefs and their history, and enables the individual to understand religions and beliefs and avoid prejudice” (Council of Europe 2008, p. 30). Besides, taking into account the dialogue as a key to Europe’s Future, “Intercultural dialogue has an important role to play in this regard. It allows us to prevent ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural divides. It enables us to move forward together, to deal with our different identities constructively and democratically on the basis of shared universal values” (Council of Europe 2008, p. 4). The *Document* itself, developing the idea that inter-religious dialogue is a mutual commitment to peace and justice, to such an extent that it is a duty for both Christians and all other religious communities (Pope Francis 2013, no. 250), stresses “the importance of the role of religions in the construction of world peace”; in fact, “authentic teachings of religions invite us to remain rooted in the values of peace; to defend the values of mutual understanding, human fraternity and harmonious coexistence; to re-establish wisdom, justice and love” (Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb 2019, n.p.).

In fact, the construction of knowledge fostering respect and peaceful coexistence helps, above all, to overcome mutual stereotypes and prejudices, and even hostilities such as islamophobia and anti-semitism (Council of Europe 2009b; Cowan and Maitles 2012).

Hence, in the *Document*, the two leaders declare to adopt the “culture of dialogue” as a path and mutual understanding as a method to build bridges among diverse cultural and religious communities (Campdepadrós-Cullell et al. 2021). With this in mind, during the apostolic trip to the United Arab Emirates from 3 to 5 February 2019, Pope Francis met the members of the Muslim Council of Elders at the Founder’s Memorial and, reading his address, said: “With a heart grateful to the Lord, in this eighth centenary of the meeting between Saint Francis of Assisi and Sultan al-Malik al Kāmil, I have welcomed the opportunity to come here as a believer thirsting for peace, as a brother seeking peace with the brethren. We are here to desire peace, to promote peace, to be instruments of peace” (Pope Francis 2019a, n.p.). It is a fact that when Pope Francis, who did not choose his papal name by chance, reflects on the encounter and dialogue with the other, he is greatly inspired by the figure of the poor man of Assisi and, in particular, by his “extreme” experience of otherness in the field of the enemy which is a field of “extreme” war (Jeusset 1996; Tolan 2009).

3.2. A Tool for Preventing Extremism among the Youth

Although the *Document* seems short at first glance, and indeed it is, many points are touched upon, as outlined up to this point in the present paper. In any case, speaking of younger generations, education, and inter-religious dialogue, it is worth spending a few more words on one of its crucial issues, namely that linked to “extremism”.

Except for the adjective “human” (28 occurrences) and the word “religion(s)” (15 occurrences), throughout the *Document*, the word “extremism” is one of the most frequent terms, on a par with “fraternity” and “peace” (10–11 occurrences). This means that, not surprisingly, one encounters this word often and in different contexts, as the *Document* was intended by the co-signers to be an appeal against violence and extremism. Extremism, above all, coupled with terrorism, is conceived as a cause of suffering for many brothers and sisters, along with the arms race, social injustice, corruption, inequality, moral decline, and discrimination. Lastly, in the name of fraternity disrupted by policies of extremism and division, Muslims and Catholics of the East and West, together with their institutions, “declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard” (Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb 2019, n.p.).

The *Document* sets out from a deep consideration of our contemporary reality; thus, it recognizes the positive steps taken by modern civilization in different fields (science, technology, medicine, industry, welfare), especially in developed countries. However, it also stresses distancing from religious values, weakening of spiritual values and responsibility, and individualism. All this entails feelings of frustration, isolation, and desperation, leading many to atheistic, agnostic, or religious extremism, namely the supremacy of material values in place of transcendental principles. In particular, religious extremism, national extremism, and intolerance have produced across the world a “third world war being fought piecemeal”. In this respect, by expressing the firm concept that religions must never incite extremism, the text co-signed by the Pope and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar proposes as a solution the awakening of religious awareness “in the hearts of new generations through sound education and an adherence to moral values and upright religious teachings”. Therefore, they “call upon all concerned to stop using religions to incite hatred, violence, extremism and blind fanaticism, and to refrain from using the name of God to justify acts of murder, exile, terrorism and oppression” (Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb 2019, n.p.).

All these profound considerations, first of all, confirm the basic function of education as a tool for personal growth, equal opportunity, social inclusion and change, development of critical thinking, and so on. It is a question of developing skills and competencies which, especially in significantly plural or non-plural contexts, considering the globalization process, can also expressly build resilience among youth and reduce the spread of extremism, recruitment, and radicalization (Global Counter-Terrorism Forum 2014). Indeed,

Some violent extremists claim to perpetrate violent acts in the name of a religion, thereby distorting the tenets of these same religions. This engenders the misconception that violent extremism is a religious issue. If teaching about religions and religious beliefs is deemed necessary, one of its purposes should be to remove these misconceptions. Through these programmes, students should learn about and appreciate the values of different religions. Meanwhile, “religious education”, or “education focused on the teachings of one particular religion” should be approached prudently in accordance with national legal frameworks and established policies. Religious teachings that promote overt hostility towards other religions or communities or condone hate speech are problematic and should be condemned. Ensuring religious education that develops an open and broader view of the world, and which includes an accurate understanding of non-religious world views, is important and may require putting in place additional pedagogical guidance and teacher training. (UNESCO 2017, pp. 67–68)

In this framework, it is notable that political scientist Roy (2010), addressing the issue of the relationship between religion and culture, observes how the most successful religious expressions (e.g., “Islamic Salafism” and “Protestant evangelism”) are marked by a split in the relationship between religion, territory, and culture in which it has developed. They are subject, for this reason, to a process of “deculturalization” that is at the basis of radicalism and religious fundamentalism. It is a thesis that, as far as religious illiteracy is concerned, provides the framework in which the question can be analyzed, namely the division between cultural and religious references and the relative difficulty in learning and understanding the latter within the former. This dimension draws a perspective that goes beyond the inadequate transmission of religious knowledge and its various manifestations. In fact, it affects the relationship between culture, religion, and society.

4. Conclusions

Up to now, the *Document* has surely produced many fruits, both locally, nationally, and internationally. To mention a few, obviously among the most important is the creation on 19 August 2019 of the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity, constituted by both religious and civil leaders from different countries and creeds, as an independent international committee instituted to promote human fraternity values in communities around the world; the proclamation on 21 December 2020 by the United Nations General Assembly of February 4 as the International Day of Human Fraternity to be observed every year as of 2021, as a way to promote greater cultural and religious tolerance; the Abrahamic Family House, an interfaith complex in Abu Dhabi, officially inaugurated on 16 February 2023, with three houses of worship, respectively *a mosque, a church, and a synagogue*, named after the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, saint Francis of Assisi and Moses Ben Maimon (commonly known as Maimonides), a 12th-century Jewish philosopher and rabbinical scholar. Last but not least, the *Document* influenced the Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*, as Pope Francis himself acknowledges. If in the preparation of *Laudato Si'*, he had in Bartholomew, the Orthodox Patriarch, a source of inspiration for *Fratelli Tutti*, he has felt mainly encouraged by the Grand Imam of al-Azhar. Indeed, the *Document*, published before this Encyclical Letter, marked a sort of point of no return on the specific theme of fraternity in the sense that *Fratelli Tutti* takes up and develops some of the great issues raised in the *Document* itself, including that of fraternity. Finally, *Fratelli Tutti*, in tune with the great social documents of the Church and bearing a distinct synodal style, shows its ecumenical and inter-religious openness when Pope Francis declares that he has always paid particular attention to the issues concerning human fraternity and social friendship.

As regards the specific themes of education, religious knowledge, and dialogue between people of different faiths, on 12 September 2019, Pope Francis launched a global education alliance, namely the “Global Compact on Education”, sponsored by the Congregation for Catholic Education. It is aimed at joining efforts and encouraging change on a global scale so that education generates peace, justice, goodness, beauty, acceptance,

and fraternity among people and builds hope, solidarity, and harmony everywhere. According to the Pope, the pact is “to ensure that everyone has access to a quality education consonant with the dignity of the human person and our common vocation to fraternity” (Pope Francis 2020b, n.p.). However, to achieve these objectives, starting with placing the human person at the center, there is a need to create an “educating village”; in this regard, an African proverb is recalled: “it takes a whole village to educate a child”. Furthermore, in the text of the message for the launch of the “Global Compact on Education”, Pope Francis highlights that, in the development of an “integral ecology” in which the value proper to each creature plays a central role, the ground for this village “must be cleared of discrimination and fraternity must be allowed to flourish, as I stated in the Document that I signed with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar on 4 February this year in Abu Dhabi” (Pope Francis 2019c, n.p.). Certainly, these words stimulate us to delve deeper into the *Document* from a pedagogical and didactic point of view so as to underline all those features suitable for developing mutual knowledge and dialogue between the different faiths in educational contexts. Indeed, alongside an inclusive school, it is increasingly imperative to build cohesive communities of which everyone feels a part.

Lastly, the *Vademecum Global Compact on Education*, a handbook for implementing the Compact itself, is intended primarily for educators who must guide children and young people in building “our common home” (Pope Francis 2015) through educational and extracurricular, formal and informal courses. Specifically, in Annex no. 2, *Instrumentum Laboris*, while illustrating the project, chapter 3., *The Original Fraternity*, focuses on the cultural category of fraternity. In particular, the Pope suggests that

introducing fraternity into educational processes means recognizing it as a basic anthropological datum, from which all the main and positive “grammars” of a relationship can derive: encounter, solidarity, mercy, generosity, but also dialogue, exchange and, more generally, the various forms of reciprocity. Right from the very beginning, human life is a received fact that does not originate from our own selves. On the contrary, life transcends every single man and woman, and therefore it is not something that is self-produced, but it is given by someone else. For believers, as pointed out in the recent joint declaration of Abu Dhabi On Human Fraternity, it is a matter of recognizing each other as children of the one and only Father, and therefore as brothers and sisters who are called to mutual benevolence and stewardship (cf. Gen 4:9). (Congregation for Catholic Education 2021, p. 28)

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