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**REINVENTING EDUCATION**

**2-5 June 2021**

**VOLUME I**

**Citizenship, Work and The Global Age**

**ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"**

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**ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"**  
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***Title* Proceedings of the Second International Conference of the Journal "Scuola Democratica" – Reinventing Education  
VOLUME I Citizenship, Work and The Global Age**

This volume contains papers presented in the 2nd International Conference of the Journal "Scuola Democratica" which took place online on 2-5 June 2021. The Conference was devoted to the needs and prospects of Reinventing Education.

The challenges posed by the contemporary world have long required a rethinking of educational concepts, policies and practices. The question about education 'for what' as well as 'how' and 'for whom' has become unavoidable and yet it largely remained elusive due to a tenacious attachment to the ideas and routines of the past which are now far off the radical transformations required of educational systems. Scenarios, reflections and practices fostering the possibility of change towards the reinvention of the educational field as a driver of more general and global changes have been centerstage topics at the Conference. Multidisciplinary approach from experts from different disciplinary communities, including sociology, pedagogy, psychology, economics, architecture, political science has brought together researchers, decision makers and educators from all around the world to investigate constraints and opportunities for reinventing education.

The Conference has been an opportunity to present and discuss empirical and theoretical works from a variety of disciplines and fields covering education and thus promoting a trans- and interdisciplinary discussion on urgent topics; to foster debates among experts and professionals; to diffuse research findings all over international scientific networks and practitioners' mainstreams; to launch further strategies and networking alliances on local, national and international scale; to provide a new space for debate and evidences to educational policies. In this framework, more than 800 participants, including academics, educators, university students, had the opportunity to engage in a productive and fruitful dialogue based on research, analyses and critics, most of which have been published in this volume in their full version.

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## Eastern Spirituality and Democratic Citizenship: Teaching of Religion in Aldo Capitini's Lessons (1949-1950)

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**ABSTRACT:** *The aim of the present research is to rethread the didactic and pedagogical proposal of Aldo Capitini regarding the teaching of religion. He is the founder of Non-violent Italian Movement and proposes a new religion inspired by the vision of the India Master Mahatma Gandhi. By using a phenomenological and hermeneutic method I examined various sources: literary (books, articles, critical literature), archive files (epistolary, memos, lecture notes) legislatives, visual, audio-visual, internet. Capitini elaborates an 'open religion' to be taught in the 'school of the future', a laical religion that establishes a dialogue with all the different religious traditions and goes beyond the separation between East and West. A precious and useful document for my research has been few lecture notes found in the Aldo Capitini's Foundation Study Center in Perugia, a written work that summarizes the academic Lectures of Theory of Education given in the University course of 1949-1950 specifically dedicated to the teaching of eastern religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shintoism, Islamism, Sufism. These different traditions are introduced to the students at the University courses as religions that have something in common, not only among themselves but also in relation with western religions. Capitini points at the 'religiousness' as the common element of all the religions as a matter to be taught at school, anticipating the longing for the sacred that is spreading today, in the post-secular age. The capitinian education for a holistic religion, open and laic, which has been elaborated starting from the contest between eastern and western religions, can be proposed as an education for peace and for supporting the western democracies of our times, and it is searching for a commune foundation beyond the religious differences, it respects the pluralism and encourages the education for a planetary citizenship in response to the present processes of globalization.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Didactics of Religion, Oriental Spirituality, Planetary Citizenship, Secular education, Democratic school.*

### Introduction

Aldo Capitini (1899-1968), a 20th century Italian philosopher, is remembered as anti-fascist, non-violent, anti-establishment and anti-

clerical because of the clash he had with the Catholic Church after the Concordat stipulated with Mussolini in 1929. During the twenty years of Fascist dictatorship, he developed his political, religious and pedagogical thought, in which the idea of a post-Christian religion that goes beyond confession prevailed. His biography is the story of a deeply religious man who lived his relationship with God not as an escape from reality, but as a premise for religious and social commitment with regard to changing and improving society (Romano, 2016, 6). On the basis of this idea of an open and diverse religion, democracy is achieved as a religious practice that finds its foundation in the ontological and pedagogical principle of the coexistence of all, which «includes all beings that are born, the living and the dead» (Capitini, 1967, 78).

An education in democratic citizenship is for Capitini a spiritual exercise which is practiced as care for one's inner life and has a social purpose, similar to that of Mahatma Gandhi whose nonviolent approach and oriental religious vision he shares. According to the Indian leader «those who claim that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means» (Pontara, 1973, 31), therefore only by «experimenting with the truth» and promoting self-improvement can a decentralised power be built, a power that is neither hierarchical nor pyramidal, but inspired by «an oceanic circle» where everyone feels responsible and participates. This is the same situation that Capitini calls «omnicracy», that is the power of everyone (Capitini, 1999, 135-7).

Capitini's curiosity for oriental traditions does not end with Gandhi's nonviolent and spiritual vision, but extends to different religions and many masters, especially Indian ones, to whom he often refers in his writings, such as Buddha and Lao Tzu. As will be clarified, the knowledge of oriental spirituality leads Capitini to hope for a fruitful encounter between West and East in order to rethink the religious sphere within a universal and collective dimension, which makes no distinction between believers and non-believers, Christians and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, atheists and agnostics, but rather includes and values everyone through reference to the co-existence of all. It is, therefore, an educational project, which in order to promote genuinely democratic citizenship, has to reform the teaching of religion, and at the same time social/civic education: both types of teaching contribute to the formation of a world citizen, that is, a citizen who is able to perceive humanity in a «global, compassionate and loving» way (Romano, 2014, 211).

### **1. The religious practice of democracy**

The religious theme runs throughout Capitini's thinking and is always intertwined with social concerns: in order to change society political and social commitment must not be separated from religious commitment.

Capitini also understood the necessity for political engagement, «to pass through public life» (Giacchè, 1991, 15), in order to achieve true democracy. Religion and politics for Capitini cannot be separated and what, in my opinion, deeply links them is the pedagogical paradigm of co-existence; the educational path consists in a passage from the inner to the outer, and it is in this sense that religious education and democratic education coincide: «the old society, the old reality, the old man transcend through what I call the 'presence of the one-all', or reality of all, which is the eternal co-existence of everyone in the production of value. [...] The means to overcome insufficiencies [...] is religious openness» (Capitini, 1950, 153). A religious and political reform programme should therefore be placed within a larger educational project, a path of human and spiritual renewal that has as its final outcome the establishment of an open society and ends up transforming democracy into omnicracy.

The world becomes a laboratory where the mystic puts his own religiosity to the test, practising it, excluding any form of contemplative asceticism and choosing to live in the world in a new way, without submitting to it but engaging in its transformation with a critical and constructive attitude.

In 1937, Capitini published his first book entitled *Elementi di un'esperienza religiosa* (Elements of a Religious Experience), which escaped fascist censorship being considered harmless by the censors who failed to understand its content, which was not only religious but also political and educational. As the author himself clarifies in the introduction to the second edition of 1947, the volume expressed a spirit that was «the opposite to that of prevailing fascism» (Capitini, 1947, 7), «more than a work of controversy» it was an invitation, addressed especially to young people, to «raise their soul to a completely different plane» (Capitini, 1947, 6). The aim was not «to found a new religion with a leader, a dogma, believers and meetings», but to liberate everyone through sincerity, love, truth and to show them the way to build a new society. It was not a treatise, Capitini pointed out, but the sharing of a state of mind and of a perspective, which affirmed the intimate divine framework of reality, and gave value to all beings: «this book of mine is not written thinking of one person, but thinking of everyone; everyone is a citizen here; the one who is the latest to arrive and who I meet is like someone I have known for a long time» (Capitini, 1947, 14).

Moreover, he acknowledged, his indebtedness to Gandhi for the breadth of focus of the book, where social, political and economic themes were treated together with those of a literary, philosophical, religious and moral nature: «Gandhi – he wrote – showed me with facts and his clarity of expression that my tendency to politics was no different from my intimate religious experience of serving best what is absolutely good» (Capitini, 1947, 11). Following the suggestions of Gandhi and Eastern philosophers, Capitini proposes an «open religion», which because of the co-existence of everyone assumes the character of

unanimity and universality, since «religion is a passionate openness to a liberated reality; it is the recognition of the primacy of unity and love with all» (Capitini, 1955, 15). However, it is also a practical religion that has the power to transform society: it is «service of the impossible, refusal to accept the current ways of having a fulfilled life and world as if they were absolute and the only ones possible» (ibid.). It is a non-institutional and secular religion, inspired by the vision of different Western and Eastern mystics, such as St. Francis of Assisi and Buddha, whom Capitini considers «the highest examples of religious life» (Capitini, 1957, XIV).

## 2. Lessons on Oriental spirituality

In Capitini's personal library, kept in Perugia at the Aldo Capitini Study Centre Foundation, there are many sacred texts belonging to the Eastern tradition, such as the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, Tao, as well as many critical books on the history of Eastern religions and biographies of some Indian masters. Capitini looked with interest at a form of rationality that went beyond the West, and he became more interested in Eastern thought thanks to the influence exerted on him by the philosopher Piero Martinetti, who had published a volume on Indian philosophy in 1897; the aim of both authors was to build a bridge between the two cultures in order to regenerate the decadent West (Romano, 2014, 37-38).

Capitini's interest in oriental traditions is focused above all on the dimension of sagacity: it is not a matter of a knowledge, which like western philosophy incessantly searches for the truth, but of a form of wisdom that manifests itself as a religious practice. Within the perspective of a holistic vision, the divine is not sought in a realm that transcends the world of nature, since it is at one with it. Oriental philosophy is *sophia*, it has a religious nature and it is a life practice oriented towards the attainment of perfect harmony of man with the cosmos.

A theme that Capitini learnt from the oriental mystical tradition is the educational value of silence: «a man turned to an oriental sage and asked him 'Teach me brahman (the fundamental principle of the universe and of all reality), O sublime one'. The sage then said, 'I already teach you, but you do not pay attention. This atman (universal spirit or soul) is silent'» (Capitini, 1968, 419). This story clarifies how for the oriental mystic the truth cannot be expressed with words, an idea already held by the Chinese master Lao Tzu who lived in the sixth century BC and who, according to Capitini, has the merit of wanting to start from within to remake man (Capitini, 1950b, 53). «He takes the ancient concept of Tao (absolute principle, inexpressible, perfection) and purifies it», releasing the individual «from the illusory bonds of the world to put him in the presence of something ethically superior,

absolute, in which lies his liberation» (Capitini, 1950b, 53). In his only book, *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu declares that «the Tao of which one can speak is not the absolute Tao». Therefore, the sage teaches without words (Mancuso, 1995, 28), meaning that the truth is ineffable, it can only be communicated in silence and not through words (Mancuso, 1995, 18). Truth for the mystic is not a thought but an experience that cannot be voiced. However, the very effort to express it can arouse in the listener the desire to know the inexpressible, making him aware of his thirst for ecstasy and peace; thus begins a journey of learning, an inner search which for Capitini begins with silence, continues with meditation, music and kindness, and has the effect of exercising «strict detachment from insufficient reality and an approach to liberated reality» (Capitini, 1955, 98). This is what also happens in Buddhism with the practice of meditation, a technique that leads to silence in a gradual way and like prayer for other religions, according to Capitini is «a true devotion, through which one achieves that inner absorption, whereby the spirit, increasingly gathering within itself and detaching itself from the external world, is gradually reduced, through successive stages of silence, to a state of supreme calm» (Capitini, 1968, 421). This state is called *nirvana*, namely, «the extinction of all impulses, cravings, attachments, the attainment of the absence of passions» (Parrinder, 2001, 109).

Therefore, it is not surprising that within the Pedagogy course held at the University of Pisa between 1949 and 1950, Capitini chose to devote some lessons to the Eastern religions that coexist in India. The course was entitled: *Man's Liberation in Eastern Spirituality*. In the notes made for the preparation of his students' examination, Capitini presents, in 140 pages, some oriental traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Sufism, Shintoism, Zoroastrianism (Capitini, 1950a).

The aim of these lessons is to introduce future teachers to other cultures and religions, so that they can cultivate an intercultural perspective and promote interreligious dialogue in the school of the future, making it a workshop for omnocracy, where care for the sacred goes hand in hand with care for the social. Capitini criticised the traditional teaching of religion in Italian schools as a form of catechism and dogmatism, and called for a more secular and open religion.

But what are the common aspects of the different religions presented during the lessons that can contribute to the reform of the teaching of religion? In the first place Capitini dwells on the «eschatological tension in which the final destination of man and of reality itself is expressed and experienced; where we are going, what will become of us, what is our liberation» (Capitini, 1950a, 187). This is an element that distinguishes the East, where spiritual tension is placed at the forefront and «the call to divinity is everywhere, in every house there is a place reserved for prayer and reflection», from the West, where instead more importance is given to material concerns (Capitini, 1950a, 59).

The theme of man's liberation is at the heart of Eastern spirituality and lies in the overcoming of the ego, i.e., the empirical self, in recognition of the illusory nature of the material world, or the 'veil of Maya' in the Vedas, and the reuniting of all with the One, i.e., God or Unity-Love, present in the world according to a pantheistic vision of existence (Capitini, 1950).

Despite the attention paid to different religious traditions, Capitini does not hide his admiration for Buddhism, since it has created «the highest ideal of man, one who aspires and practices to become Buddha, who is more than the gods. [...] Only man can embark on liberation by sublimating the possibilities within him. There is a faith not in technique and science, but in the power of the inner life» (Capitini, 1950, 191). Capitini sees Buddha as the master par excellence, since he is compassionate, free from the illusions of the world and wants, in turn, to free those who are still enslaved by it.

On closer inspection, the Buddhist religion is an education that «is based [...] on the efficacy of its teaching. It is possible to try Buddhism, because it is more than a faith, it is a practice» (Vigilante, 2010, 60), which in its techniques of awareness, such as meditation, concentration and silence, points the way to truth (Romano, 2020).

In the refusal [...] of Buddha – says Capitini – to give simple cognitive satisfaction regarding liberated reality (nirvana) we can see the value given to practice, to active liberation, to the laborious approach towards liberated reality: in the world as it is now, man can only rise, convert, change his values, dismantle his worldly habits and commit himself. The importance of practice is [...] in the call to a commitment, to an act, without which one cannot see the world more deeply [...]: an orientation and a choice (Capitini, 1955, 93-4).

The precedence given to practice that distinguishes Buddhism and other Eastern traditions is at the basis of Capitini's practical mysticism, in which religious education, namely an «incessant process of self-education» (Giacchè, 2008, 5) gains importance: the person persuaded does not reach awakening in a definitive way, but experiences an infinite process of enlightenment and continuous religious striving towards his own liberation (Pasqualotto, 1997, 12). In this educational practice of self-care, the person who assumes a leading role is the master, who in line with Eastern views, Capitini distinguishes from the teacher: the master is not an expert who communicates second-hand knowledge, but the one who shares his first-hand experience, becoming the interpreter of direct revelation and inviting his disciples to a concrete «renewing and broadening experience» (Capitini, 1956b, 44).

In this regard, it should be remembered that in the democratic education hypothesised by Capitini the figure of the master-prophet is central, a master who has travelled a path of self-awareness in *interiore homine*: «the prophet, before speaking, must engage in an inner work of

purification» (Capitini, 1956b, 44) and then announce a truth that is in open conflict with the surrounding world, urging mistrust of the present and openness to the future. The teacher-prophet is the one who is committed to improving himself and his pupils, who he lovingly accompanies on both their inner and outer journey of learning. He is not an authoritarian master who binds his disciple to himself, but an authoritative friend who commits himself, within the educational relationship, to encourage necessary detachment from his disciples, disappearing to help them become masters of themselves, «to make room for the liberated and for the festive state of liberation» (Capitini, 1956b, 56).

In Capitini's terms, the master par excellence among the Orientals is Gandhi, a non-violent master who brings a mystical vision to politics, building a bridge between East and West. The teacher, according to Gandhi, is the one who by example creates loving relationships with his students and shows them the way to liberation from all forms of exploitation and oppression: to achieve this end, he uses nonviolence as an educational method and as a political force, which has both the religious and political task to make the path of love manifest in public life. The Gandhian teacher is not the wise man who accepts things as they are with imperturbability, he is not an ascetic indifferent to worldly things, he is, if anything, a reformer, an outspoken rebel, a nonviolent revolutionary who, like the master-prophet described by Capitini, observes the world in all its insufficiencies and shows his disciples the way to start a process of overcoming that world, of non-violent transformation in an authentically democratic direction (Romano, 2014, 104).

The comparison with the traditions of the East allows Capitini to clarify his idea of democracy as a religious educational practice, where the master-prophet assumes the task of cultivating within himself and living out a 'political' and 'open religious love' (Mancini, 2005, 206). The purpose of this is the awakening of all human beings, who being educated in co-existence, engage in the world to achieve omnocracy.

### **3. The education of a new citizenship**

According to Capitini, religious-social reform creates solidarity, friendship and love among individuals and peoples, leading to the establishment of universal citizenship. Imitating the Buddhist and Hindu East it is possible to build an inter-religious dialogue that recognises every faith for its value, identity and difference, making every religion a resource for this same democracy. In this way he anticipates a problem present today in late-modern society, namely the coexistence of different faiths on the same territory, which brings to the forefront the need to promote mutual recognition, not of mere tolerance, but a true understanding of the 'religious Other', coming together in a common

search for truth (Romano, 2014, 206). It is a choice that implies the search for a common foundation of religious differences while respecting the pluralistic character of a democratic state, which has to cultivate an intercultural ethos of human dignity on which to base consensus between different faiths (Parrinello, 2011, 7). Education in the coexistence of all, going beyond the boundaries of this intercultural perspective, acquires a broader perspective that includes respect for other non-human forms of life, such as animals and plants, all united by a cosmic closeness. Namely, it opens up to a planetary perspective that educates towards a new sense of universal brotherhood inspired by the principles of open religion. It also looks at those who traditionally have been considered potential enemies, foreigners, as fellow citizens. All human beings, irrespective of geographical, social and cultural distinctions, are taught a new political conscience starting from a new notion of citizenship, which aims at fostering a sense of responsibility towards each other, breaking down the old barriers and cherishing the dream of a great human community.

Current pedagogical research proposes a new global, participatory and inclusive education for citizenship in order to build a global democracy that transforms spectator-consumers into active and aware citizens. It is a matter of education in responsible and open citizenship, no longer limited to civic education but «achieved through a set of activities and initiatives» (Capitini, 1968, 257) aimed at making all citizens of the cosmos conscious actors and participants in a power exercised from below. This is the lesson of Capitini, who gives new generations the idea of omnicratic citizenship that does not concern the exercise of power by a nation, but involves all humanity in sharing care for the common good, crossing the narrow boundaries of the State and acquiring international openness:

We must recognize – says Capitini – that civic education within the nation today cannot but be closely connected with international education, with an openness to knowledge and liking for all peoples, with the recognition that each has given and can give to the development of shared civilisation, to be seen above all as progress in the co-operative generation of values (Capitini, 1968, 257).

Ahead of his time, Capitini became spokesman for an urgency that is vital today: to educate all citizens in a common planetary destiny and in global, cosmopolitan, international and world-wide citizenship. On closer inspection, his most important contribution lies in the original, non-violent and religious solution that he proposes in order to achieve coexistence on the planet, formulating a holistic vision of the world understood not as the annulment of differences, but as the enhancement of these differences through openness of all people towards each other.

Seeing the world from a holistic perspective, as Capitini suggests through his comparison with the East, strengthens the sense of responsibility and urgency that today animates global society: the world citizen is a new man who cultivates «a new [...] loving care for the species as such and, more generally, for every form of life in which the deep kinship of man with the cosmos is revealed» (Balducci, 1985, 8).

## Conclusion

Capitini's education of holistic, open and secular religion, developed from a comparison with Eastern spirituality, leads to the understanding that we are one big human family, even if we have not yet learned to live together in peace, without violence and exploitation. The future of the earth becomes the principal spiritual question, the solution to which is found by Capitini in his practical mysticism placed at the service of the common good. Here, the inner dimension, dear to the East, and the outer world, prioritised more in the West, are subtly intertwined, with the awareness that we cannot successfully address one if we ignore the other.

Capitini's prophetic message focuses on the commitment and conscious responsibility of a new, world man who discovers in the coexistence of all things a new way of living that makes mankind more human. At the heart of this is the conviction that if an individual takes a step in the direction of the new and his spiritual quest is placed 'at the service of the impossible', the entire human species progresses through that individual and contributes to the achievement of a cosmic democracy.

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