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ASIA/BANGLADESH - Reform on Education: "Integrating Islamic schools in the public system is positive," says a missionary

Dhaka (Agenzia Fides) - "Integrating the madrassas (Islamic schools) in the public system is a good thing: it would mean more state control and adjustment of madrassas to the standards and curriculum of public education" : this is how Fr. Silvano Garelli, a Xaverian missionary in Dhaka, scholar and author of essays on education and catechesis, comments to Fides the plan announced by the Government of Bangladesh to include the Islamic schools in public education.
"It has nothing to do with Islamizing the state education but, rather, to include subjects such as science, English, mathematics, computer science education provided by the madrassas. The proposal is included in the overall project of education reform under discussion for months in the country, that now the government intends to approve, " explains the missionary to Fides.
"In this way - he continues - the madrassas would be subject to state scrutiny and control, and the education of millions of children and young people could be protected. This is what already happens, for example, at the Christian schools, which follow the state curriculum ensuring quality education. The teaching of religion at present is divided in classes: the Muslim students have their Islam religion lesson, Christians have their Christian religion lesson and so on. There is also a proposal to establish a common teaching of religion, in a satirical and general manner, " said Fr Garello, who has just written a text to present the different religions to elementary school children.
But there are major problems - a Catholic Bangladesh source tells Fides, committed to defending human rights - and to conducting a census and controlling of madrassas in the country. There are three types: the "Alia" madrassas those already approved and funded by the state, in which the Government can have a say, just by virtue of contributions paid, then there are the madrassas of the network "Quami", which are Private, do not receive public subsidies and are very independent. "The latter, according to figures circulating are about 50 thousand. They spread a strict and extremist interpretation of Islam and are funded by Saudi Arabia. Therefore, it is very difficult for the government to take control or influence them, "notes the source of Fides.
There is also an authentic galaxy of Islamic schools "do it yourself" that arise due to local preachers, in homes, small mosques and neighborhoods, far from any public scrutiny, all over the country, according to unofficial estimates (no official data), they are more than 450 thousand. "It is equally difficult, if not impossible to control a galaxy that has not even been registered.
In addition, concludes the source of Fides, "we have serious doubts about the actual will of the government to build a truly secular state and where there are equal opportunities for all. Today, the non-Muslim citizens are still discriminated and considered second class citizens". In Bangladesh about 90% of the 165 million people are Muslims and Islam is the state religion. Christians are 0.5%, among which 320 thousand Catholics. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 06/01/2011)

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