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Abstract

The paper is part of the wider debate on Religious Education (RE), with a special focus on the teaching of the Catholic religion. It is a denominational teaching that has evolved from a catechetical approach to a full-fledged school discipline. In the last years there has been a further development in which this teaching has taken up the challenge of multiculturalism through the promotion of inter-religious dialogue. Through an analysis of the literature, we propose to deepen the pedagogical identity of this discipline. Both theological and pedagogical issues as well as legal aspects will be considered in this analysis. We will also consider the international debate on the teachings about religions and beliefs. We can therefore speak of dialogical teaching and try to outline its pedagogical profile by linking it to the *theology of hospitality*. We propose a confessional religious teaching, Catholic, but with an attitude of dialogue and hospitality.

Keywords: *Religious Education reform*, *Teaching catholic religion*, *Interreligious and intercultural dialogue*, *Pluralism*, *Hospitality*, *Pedagogy of dialogue*

1. Introduction and Research Method

The political and cultural debate on Religious Education (RE) is very relevant today and must consider a plurality of elements, including pedagogical ones. Sowing peace seeds during times of war is essential, and teachings about religions and beliefs can have a relevant role. These teachings suggest building bridges instead of walls.

The aim of our work is to explore whether and under what conditions the teaching of the Catholic religion in Italy can contribute to a culture of peace. The research methodology is a qualitative analysis of pedagogical documents and literature (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2012). The study was based on a previous work on the evolution of Catholic education in Italy (Porcarelli, 2022). A thorough analysis was

made of the literature written in Italian concerning Catholic doctrine and of all the primary sources (normative texts and documents of the Italian Episcopal Conference). The innovative contribution of this work is a comparison with international literature on two topics that can represent a profitable triangulation with RE in Italy. It is the overcoming of the paradigm of secularization that gives rise to the pluralist approach (Berger, 1999; 2014) and the fact that authoritative international institutions emphasize the importance of religious teachings in pluralistic contexts (OSCE/ODHIR, 2007). The work of triangulation and connection between the different suggestions is the original contribution of this paper.

A first focus concerns the general perspective with which we consider religious identities. We need to overcome the prejudices of an exclusionary secularism. The paradigm of secularization has gradually been replaced by that of pluralism (Berger, 1999; 2014), which has also been translated into specific cultural projects, such as Harvard University's *Pluralism Project* (Eck, 2001; 2015). A second element to consider is the international debate concerning teaching about religions and beliefs, especially in public schools. An important document is the *Toledo Guiding Principles* (OSCE/ODHIR, 2007), which highlights the cultural and social reasons for these teachings. The perspectives opened by this document have generated a widespread debate (Gearon, 2019; Jackson, 2019; Vacca, 2019).

Our reflection focuses on recent developments and the current pedagogical profile of Catholic RE in Italy (Cicatelli, 2022; Porcarelli, 2022). The thesis of this paper is that the teaching of the Catholic religion, while maintaining the prerogative of a denominational teaching, has moved from an approach of catechism to an approach of multiculturalism. A pedagogical reading of this approach is proposed here, applying the principles of a theology of hospitality to the teaching of the Catholic religion (Brewer, 2021; Bretherton, 2017; Kearney and Taylor, 2011; Wrobleski, 2012). From this approach we derive a disciplinary structure based on dialogue, which is why we speak of a dialogical discipline with the attitude for building bridges. This perspective is not very developed in the specialized studies on Catholic religious teaching in Italy. Many of these studies are mainly based on the legal profile of such teaching and its concordat status (Cicatelli, 2020; 2022). In other countries, interesting reflections have been developed that offer useful suggestions, such as those of Rossiter (2018). In a context very different from the Italian one (Australian Catholic schools), he outlines interesting hypotheses for developing the RE curriculum, considering the changing cultural scenarios at the global level.

2. Religious Discourse in the Age of Pluralism

We live in complex and "fluid" societies where people from different cultures, often with different religions, live together. This phenomenon, which exploded in the last decades of the 20th century, was initially interpreted from the perspective of secularization. This led to an attitude of distrusting cultures and religious communities,

fearing the risks posed by fundamentalism. This attitude of suspicion and distrust towards religion has been described by some Italian scholars as the "paradigm of suspicion" (Caputo, 2018; Porcarelli, 2018).

In the sociological debate, the paradigm of secularization, that has tended to relegate religious experience to the private sphere and to exclude from the public sphere, has been considered obsolete for more than twenty years (Berger, 1999). The new perspective is that of pluralism, proposed by Peter Berger (2014): "I propose that a new paradigm should be able to deal with two pluralisms–the co-existence of different religious and secular discourses. This co-existence occurs both in the minds of individuals and in social space" (p. IX). It is possible to promote mutual understanding that increases the likelihood of finding agreements and avoiding conflicts with a constructive approach. Pluralism is a point of balance with two "extreme" positions, fundamentalism and relativism, which undermine the foundations of peaceful coexistence: "fundamentalism balkanizes a society, leading either to ongoing conflict or to totalitarian coercion. Relativism undermines the moral consensus without which no society can survive" (Berger, 2014, p. 15). The debate on how to conceptualize a postsecular world from a pluralist perspective is very broad and includes different disciplinary approaches: from the social and political (Admirand, 2019; Mavelli & Petito, 2012) to the philosophical and theological (Larson & Shady, 2009; Weaver, 2020).

Based on Berger's paradigm of pluralism, Harvard's Pluralism Project has a political soul, as evidenced by the general definition found on the project's website: "pluralism is an ethic for living together in a diverse society: not mere tolerance or relativism, but the real encounter of commitments"[1]. The pluralist perspective proposes the overcoming of both relativism and tolerance: in order to live together in good harmony, it is necessary to include all subjects, each with its own identity. Different identities are not an obstacle to be "tolerated," but rather a treasure to be cherished. The specific cultural contribution of the Pluralism Project (Randall, 2015) is well described by Diane Eck, for whom the language of pluralism is dialogue:

> When I say that the "language" of pluralism is dialogue, this means the expression of critique and counter-critique, the mutuality of voices that count and have something to say. It is a language of give and take, and the bridges of understanding created by dialogue are also bridges snarled with traffic. Dialogue is not always the language of agreement or "common ground," but the language of relationship. But as in any relationship, it is strongest in its mutuality, and it is weakest when one incorporates the other (Eck, 2015, p. 62).

Dialogue is not just a subjective disposition. It is a method and a language aimed at building bridges rather than walls between the different subjects in relationships in which religious identities are involved (Porcarelli, 2022). It is essential to overcome opposing approaches that can emerge also at the cultural level. Very interesting are the reflections of three Australian authors (Bouma, Halafoff & Barton, 2022) showing

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[1] www.pluralism.org

how "binary" oppositions in religion lead to misunderstandings and prejudices. Religious fundamentalism leads to an overemphasis on differences and to the creation of contrasts based on them. The fundamentalist's belief is that he has a monopoly on truth, just as secularist relativism is a form of irreligious fundamentalism.

3. The debate on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools

The debate on teaching about religions and beliefs is broad and articulated. It is necessary to consider both the cultural identity of the schools (public or private, religious or non-religious) and the normative structure of the different countries (Russo, 2021): this is how religious freedom is protected, but also the freedom to teach and the existence of concordats or agreements with the main religions. In the US, for example, there is a strong tradition of exclusion of confessional religious teachings from public schools. There are, however, excellent private schools, many of which have religious inspiration. In this scenario, we can understand the proposal of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) to fill a gap in relation to religious teaching in public schools in a way that is compatible with US culture: "it is possible to diminish religious illiteracy by teaching about religion from an academic, non-devotional perspective in primary, middle, and secondary schools" (AAR, 2010, p. 3).

Questions of RE in Europe are much more complicated due to different cultural traditions and laws in European countries (Ferrari, 2014). Some general principles were outlined in an important document prepared by an expert group in Toledo (OSCE/ODIHR 2007). The result is the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, prepared by the ODIHR Advisory Council of Experts on Freedom of Religion and Belief. The two key points underlying the *Guidelines* are designed to demonstrate an open attitude towards religions: "first, that there is positive value in teaching that emphasizes respect for everyone's right to freedom of religion and belief, and second, that teaching about religions and beliefs can reduce harmful misunderstandings and stereotypes" (OSCE/ODIHR 2007, p. 12).

The document underlines the important role of teaching about religions and believes in promoting mutual knowledge between people of different faiths and cultural backgrounds. In this way, it will be possible to overcome stereotypes and discrimination and to live together in a more peaceful and respectful way. We can also consider how to teach about religions in ways that fully respect all students' human rights and religious freedom. The question remains open between those who believe that only historical and comparative approaches are truly neutral (AAR 2010) and those who believe that confessional, but cultural rather than catechetical, teaching can also be neutral (Cicatelli 2022; Porcarelli 2022). This possible situation is clearly addressed in the fifth guiding principle of the Toledo document, where it is stated that where teachings are provided that are described as "not sufficiently objective," in such a case "recognizing opt-out rights may be a satisfactory solution for parents and pupils,

provided that the opt-out arrangements are structured in a sensitive and non-discriminatory way" (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007, p. 16).

Finally, we can consider the evolution of the approach of the Council of Europe: "the earlier view of excluding the study of religions in public education—because religion was felt to belong only to the private sphere—was reconsidered" (Jackson, 2016, p. 15). The turning point is the Recommendation adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 10 December 2008 *on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education*. The Recommendation defines the *Principles for taking the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions into account in the framework of intercultural education*, emphasizing how "information on and knowledge of religions and non-religious convictions that influence the behavior of individuals in public life should be taught in order to develop tolerance as well as mutual understanding and trust; (…) intercultural dialogue and its religious and non-religious convictions dimension are an essential precondition for the development of tolerance and a culture of "living together", as well as for the recognition of our different identities on the basis of human rights" (Council of Europe, 2008a, p. 4). The Council of Europe also provided a *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* (Council of Europe, 2008b), which deepens the conceptual framework and the policy approaches to the promotion of intercultural dialogue (Jackson, 2014).

4. History and Legal Status of Religious Education in Italy

RE in Italy has always been linked to the teaching of Catholicism, which, since the time of the Albertine Statute (1848), had been designated as the state faith. In the school reform of Giovanni Gentile (1923), the teaching of the Catholic religion was the "foundation and crown" of all elementary education, but it was not intended for high schools, where the queen discipline was philosophy. The Concordat of 1929 extended religious instruction to all school levels, but from a catechetical perspective, as a scholastic space granted to the Catholic Church. Teachers should be priests or religious and, alternatively, lay persons, with the bishop's suitability. It was possible, on request, to be exempted from having to attend this teaching.

The Italian Republic confirms the Lateran Pacts, mentioned in the Constitution, and the Republic's school system maintains institutional and regulatory continuity in relation to the Kingdom of Italy, confirming the teaching of religion. Following the evolution of the programs of religious instruction (Dal Toso, 2020) during the first 35 years of the Republic (from 1948 to 1984), it is possible to observe a progressive evolution of the contents. The subjects of the programs became less catechetical and more cultural. Since the end of the 1960s (i.e., after the Second Vatican Council), there has been an increasing openness to the intercultural and interreligious dimension, which is clear in the 1979 revision of the secondary school programs.

In 1984, the Concordat between the Italian State and the Holy See was re-examined. The new agreement is a recognition of the fact that Catholic values are part

of the historical and cultural heritage of the Italian people and places this teaching within the framework of the school's objectives. Confessional character is still present, and it's underlined in the name: "Teaching of the *Catholic* Religion" (TCR). Teachers may be priests, religious, or lay people, provided they hold a degree in theology or religious studies awarded by a Pontifical University. The bishop declares teachers' suitability and can also revoke it. Students (or their parents) may decide to choose TCR or not.

Since 1984, there has also been an evolution in the way RE programs are written. They are drawn up based on an agreement between the Italian Episcopal Conference and the Ministry of Education of the Italian Republic. The programs drawn up in the eighties emphasize the cultural specificity of a confessional doctrine that is characterized in a cultural and not in a catechetical sense (Dal Toso, 2020). Catholic RE programs have been characterized over the years by a greater intercultural and interreligious openness, which is very evident in the National Guidelines for the Teaching of Catholic Religion in the first cycle, published in 2010, and those for the second cycle, published in 2012.

5. The TCR's Cultural Profile in the Most Recent Curricular Guidelines

With the beginning of the 21st century, great changes are carried out in the Italian school system: schools become centers of educational experimentation with economic autonomy (DPR 275/1999); according to a deep reform of the school (L. 53/2003), the programs' content and format had to be reviewed (now ministerial programs are called *National Indications* and have the format of *Curricular Guidelines*).

The agreement between the Ministry of Education and the Italian Episcopal Conference for kindergarten and primary schools was signed on August 1st, 2010 (DPR 11/2/2010) and has produced curricular guidelines that underline how Catholic religion is part of the cultural heritage of Italian people. The pedagogical identity of the TCR is explained in the *general premise*, in which we can read that "the explicit comparison with the religious dimension of human experience plays an irreplaceable role in the complete formation of the person (...), allowing the acquisition and appropriate use of cultural tools which, by developing to the maximum the process of symbolization which the school stimulates and promotes in all disciplines, make it possible to communicate even about realities which are otherwise inexpressible and unknowable" (DPR 11/2/2010, all. p. 2). The curricular guidelines recall that Christianity is part of the historical heritage of the Italian people, but explicitly emphasize the TCR's openness to intercultural dialogue: "In this way, in a context of cultural and religious pluralism, the TCR contributes to the formation of people capable of dialogue, respect for differences, and mutual understanding."

The agreement between the Ministry of Education and the Italian Episcopal Conference for secondary schools was signed on June 28th, 2012 (DPR 20/08/2012).

This document emphasizes more explicitly the contribution TCR can make to intercultural education, enabling students to dialogue and compare:

> The study of the Catholic religion promotes, through appropriate pedagogical and didactic means, the knowledge of the Christian-Catholic view of the world and of history as a source of meaning for understanding oneself, others, and life. For this purpose, the TCR addresses the universal question of the relationship between God and humanity, understanding it through the person and work of Jesus Christ and comparing it with the witness of the church in history. In this context, it offers content and tools for systematic reflection on the complexity of human existence, in open confrontation between Christianity and other religions, Christianity and other systems of meaning. In today's multicultural context, the TCR proposes to encourage students to participate in an authentic and constructive dialogue. This will educate them to exercise their freedom from a perspective of justice and peace (DPR 20/08/2012, p. 1)[2].

A pedagogical interpretation of multiculturalism, especially when applied to religious diversity, still runs the seemingly opposite risks of underestimating differences or idealizing them ("diversity is beautiful"). The first formative goal of any form of teaching about religion is a respectful attitude towards religiosity. A second essential awareness is the universal dimension of human existence (including religious experience), which students should recognize beyond the multicultural horizon. A third awareness concerns the dynamic nature of personal identity, even in a religious sense, expressed in the subjective right to transformation, even conversion, included in a dynamic vision of religious freedom.

6. TCR's Pedagogical Identity: Dialogue Paradigm

Each school discipline has its own cultural and pedagogical identity, based on two factors: its epistemic identity (the cultural matrix) and its formative function. We will see how these two elements converge into what we might call the *paradigm of dialogue* in the case of Catholic religious teaching (Porcarelli, 2022).

Religious studies, and especially theology, are the cultural basis of this discipline. Theology is a science which, from an epistemological point of view, has its basis in divine revelation, which is the fruit of God's desire for dialogue, as we can read in the dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*:

> In His goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9), by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1;15, 1 Tim. 1:17), out of the

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[2] The text of the decree is only available in Italian; here is our unofficial translation.

abundance of His love, speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself (DV, n. 2).

Theology is based on a "foundational dialogue," which is the divine will to relate to human beings. This is the relationship that the Bible and the text of Vatican II (*Dei Verbum*) consider friendship to be.

The second reason to speak of a "dialogue TCR" lies in that intercultural openness, which we have read in the recent *Curricular Guidelines* and which, from a theological point of view, is inserted in the field of *interreligious dialogue*. Interreligious dialogue means not only respecting all religious beliefs but also being active in building ways for us to walk together. The first meeting place between different faiths is active charity: people of different faiths can work together to help the poor and needy. From a Catholic perspective, interreligious dialogue has a theological basis. It is the awareness that while the Holy Spirit is manifest in the Church, his presence and action are universal, without limits of time or space. "The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only the individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures, and religions" (John Paul II, 1990, n. 28). In the life of the Church and in other religions, it is possible to find real gifts of the Holy Spirit, which must be appreciated through dialogue.

Indeed, it is always the Spirit who is at work, both when he gives life to the Church and impels her to proclaim Christ and when he implants and develops his gifts in all individuals and peoples, guiding the Church to discover these gifts, to foster them, and to receive them through dialogue. Every form of the Spirit's presence is to be welcomed with respect and gratitude (John Paul II, 1990, n. 29).

The third reason to speak of dialogue in relation to the teaching of Catholic religion is because it has always been associated by teachers and students with a time when they are free from the anxiety of evaluation, and thus the time when they can freely discuss. Students' vital worlds become part of the issues that need to be addressed in the TCR.

7. Searching for a Theological Framework

The world of theological studies is a vast and complex one, and there are many lines of thought that are intertwined in this complexity. It would not be appropriate here to carry out an analysis; it seems appropriate to make a few observations that are strictly functional to our topic and that can be drawn from research that highlights opportunities for dialogue in RE.

An interesting research path is *intercultural theology*, which "draws attention to the intellectual and spiritual resources of people of different religious beliefs, how they interact, intersect, and diverge, and the role that the phenomena of religion can have in different contexts" (Skrefsrud, 2023, p. 5). Intercultural theology modifies the

traditional notion of stable religious identities with unchanging beliefs, dogmas, values, and rites, emphasizing a dynamic understanding of religious identities and traditions. Intercultural theology today takes the form of an "in-between theology" (Wrogemann, 2021), concerned with different cultures and contexts, with cross-boundary interactions, and thus with very different forms of missions and with reflecting on interreligious relations. According to Skrefsrud (2023), a non-denominational RE, with the presentation of different religious and value perspectives, is more in line with the approach of intercultural theology: "connecting the rich diversity of religions, denominations, and worldviews to lived reality, students are encouraged to see the significance and key functions that religion may have for people's everyday lives in contemporary society" (p. 7).

A second line of research is on *hospitability theologies* (Bretherton, 2017; Reynolds, 2010; Russell, 2009; Yong, 2008; Youngblood, 2019), which is deeply rooted in the biblical texts since the Old Testament: "the alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 19:33-34). Stories of hospitality, such as Abraham and Sarah entertaining angels (Gen 1) or the widow of Zarephath caring for Elijah (1 Ki 17), are a leitmotif throughout the Old Testament. Also in the Gospels we can find many images of hospitality, such as visits to the home of Lazarus and his family, Jesus washing his disciples' feet, the Last Supper, and the meals enjoyed by the disciples with the risen Jesus. Today, in a globalizing and interconnected world, hospitality is a practice that opens up barriers and fosters relations of mutual respect and concern. It is also a true paradigm of hospitality (Fuss, 2006; Russell, 2009), which can be a source of inspiration for new trends in the theology of religions. It is conceived as a "pilgrim theology," in dialogue with other faiths and religious traditions, seeking the mysterium alteritatis rooted in the inscrutable divine plan. Hospitality, both sacred and fruitful, can be the archetype of intercultural and interreligious encounters aimed at sharing life and going beyond the mere exchange of ideas. (Fuss, 2006).

The aim now is to apply the suggestions from the theological considerations presented here to the educational identity of TCR.

8. Conclusions: Towards a "Dialogic" and Hospitable TCR

We have seen above how intercultural theology is good to provide the basis for a non-denominational RE. Let's try to show how the theology of hospitality is appropriate to provide the basis for a denominational RE open to dialogue. For Italian readers, we have already proposed (Porcarelli, 2022) a broad reflection on how to apply the structural characteristics of authentic dialogue to TCR's identity as a discipline. In the following, a few key passages from this reflection are presented in the light of the international literature on the theology of hospitality.

In any authentic dialogue, clarity of one's own identity and sincere openness to others are important. The denominational nature of the TCR is the result of a series of historical circumstances and a concordat between the Italian State and the Holy See; however, in the present context, it can also be considered a guarantee of the cultural and spiritual identity of this doctrine. The Catholic Church guarantees that religious teachers are competent in theology and are part of the ecclesial communion. The fact that TCR has confessional disciplinary content is not a reason to close dialogue, but another element that strengthens the clarity of identity of a dialogical discipline.

In order to characterize TCR as "host" teaching (Macale, 2020), teachers should propose inter-religious lessons, hosting experts and believers of other faiths and organizing with them paths to deepen their religious beliefs. This would allow the host religion to speak without the "filters" of Catholic interpretation and would be consistent with the typical principle of religious phenomenology that religious experience must be read in the light of itself. There are already a lot of good practices in this area, with teachers taking pupils on visits to synagogues and meetings with members of the local Jewish community. It would be important for these good practices to be known, to be disseminated, and to be extended to all the main faith communities living in the area.

The inclusion of experts from other religions in the working groups of the Italian Bishops' Conference to study the TCR and evaluate the textbooks could be a further step in this direction. A positive sign in this regard is the collaboration project between the CEI (Italian Episcopal Conference) and the UCEI (Union of Italian Jewish Communities) for the production of 16 information sheets on Judaism (CEI-UCEI, 2023), which will help religion teachers and textbook writers for the TCR.

It is only the beginning of a possible dialogue with Italian Jewish communities, which could help overcome some mistrust of Catholic confessional teaching. Similar channels of dialogue should be opened with the other religious communities living in Italy. This openness to interreligious dialogue, applied also to the management of the TCR, could replace some anachronistic practices, such as the CEI's "nihil obstat" on textbooks. Some more specific legal aspects that characterize the TCR in Italy, such as the fact that the place of service of the teacher must be chosen by the bishop, could also be the subject of reflection. This is a normative provision, which could be in line with a TCR of a catechetical nature with pastoral objectives. This aspect should be overcome if we want to emphasize the cultural nature of this doctrine and its openness to dialogue.

It is not an easy challenge, but it can be met by wanting to build bridges to help overcome any barriers.

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