Discipline and Subjectivity in Religious Education

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Abstract

The paper examines the relationship between disciplinary power and subject formation in Religious Education through the theoretical insights of Michel Foucault. The general objective is to discuss how curriculum and pedagogy in Religious Education are engaged in the process of constructing normalized religious subjects through discipline, surveillance, and internalization. The reason behind such a focus is the need to critically analyze the unseen power relations that constitute pedagogical space and student identity. The paper analyzes relevant curricular texts and pedagogic practices and how they illustrate the functioning of knowledge-power relations within classroom space. Some of the findings point towards Religious Education, albeit unintentional, as a reproducing and normalizing ideological space. The review concludes by suggesting ways of change and resistance in the form of more participatory and reflexive pedagogical paradigms. The current paper adds to the literature on educational subjectivation with critical significance to teachers, researchers, and curriculum planners who are interested in democratic and emancipatory religious education.

Keywords: *Religious Education*, *disciplinary power*, *subjectivity*, *education and power*

Introduction

Religious Education is sure to be most controversial subject of modern times because it primarily deals with issues of identity, morality, social values, and representation of ideologies. Despite that change that occurred in the last decades regarding the content and approach of the subject, power relations that rule the subject are masked to a great extent and need to be examined. This essay seeks to critically analyze Religious Education from a power analysis grounded on Michel Foucault's theoretical works. Power-knowledge, disciplinary power, and subjectivation are discussed with the view to situating the same image mechanisms of education not as mere transmittal conduits of knowledge, but as situated within the religious subject constitution process.

Disciplinary power is a control mechanism that makes subjects docile by normatively structuring their ideas and actions. Power-knowledge is a theory that explains the co-constitutive intersection of power relations and the production of knowledge, underlining the prescriptive character of what is "right." Subjectivation refers to the fashioning of individuals into subjects through hegemonic discourses and power relations in which they become identities that are not self-constituted but rather pedagogically and socially constructed. Using this theory, Religious Education is neither epistemological nor neutral but an active site of power, subject constitution, and normalization of subjects to some moral and cultural norms.

1. Foucauldian Perspectives on Power and Education as a Mechanism of Subject Formation

Michel Foucault's power theory has been particularly useful in shifting analytic interest away from centralized monoliths of domination to the diffuse, everyday forms of power invested in institutions, discourses, and practices. Foucauldian theory does not conceive of power as an intrinsic ability radiating from a center to a periphery but rather as a network of relations that invests and constitutes social bodies. Education here is not examined only as a process of transmission of knowledge but as a primary location for the exercise and reproduction of power (Ball, 2013).

Central to Foucault's theoretical framework is the premise of power-knowledge, which shows the inseparable complexity involved in differentiating between the exercise of power and the production of knowledge. Discourse aimed at achieving the legitimation of "truth" necessarily involves mechanisms of discipline and regulation over individuals. The character of education is more than mere transmission; it is a means by which cognition, action, and identity are shaped, controlled, and regulated. Disciplinary power, in which surveillance, training, normalization, and punishment are typical, works in a subtle yet forceful way. Foucault's previously discussed concept of the "microphysics of power" demonstrates how this kind of power is inscribed on the subject's body through tiny, mundane practices that significantly influence the creation of subjects. The success of disciplinary power does not rely on overt repression but on internalized norms and self-surveillance induced by ongoing observation and judgment (Foucault, 1977).

The procedure by which individuals are not born but constructed into subjects by some power and discursive relations is called subjectivation. Subjects are not merely recipients of power but also producers and authors of power. Education, Religious Education in particular, moves beyond the simple growth of the cognitive sphere of students; it contributes significantly to constructing identity and thus forming "believers," "moral beings," or "obedient" subjects according to dominant discourse requirements. Institutions, or schools, have a key function in coordinating the process of change. They serve not only as sites of socialization but also as active tools involved in producing normalized subjects. They are not involved in a process of information transmission but are rather mechanisms that actively contribute to the reproduction of social power relations and the normalization of stable modes of being and thinking. At this point of relational dynamics, Religious Education becomes implicated in the

process of the production of a certain type of individual: the religiously integrated and morally guided individual that consumes and performs the normative expectations provided by the prevailing institutional order (Foucault, 1980).

This theoretical stance allows for close examination of the mechanisms invoked within Religious Education and allows for the deconstruction of the cloak of neutrality under which this subject is usually presented. In this manner, Foucauldian theory provides an invaluable instrument for the excavation of the repressed yet ubiquitous structures of power that underpin both the pedagogical process and the subject thereby constituted (Foucault, 1982).

2. Religious Education as a Disciplinary Mechanism

Religious Education, within the context of the Greek education system, constitutes a significant locale in which disciplinary power is exerted, through which hegemonic normative constructions of religious identity, belief, and ethical behavior are replicated. As in the Foucauldian model, Religious Education's topic cannot be addressed as an area of knowledge but rather as a system of discourse, practices, and mechanisms for the production of particular subjectivities for serving the needs of the prevailing ideology. In this sense, the pedagogical process is more than the simple teaching or initiation of students into religious traditions; it is a matter of the dynamic shaping of their identity in terms of the sacred, the ethical, and the communal dimensions. The structure of Religious Education, its content in the curriculum, and the pedagogical stance it adopts all assist in establishing a horizon of expected belief and practice, one that is internalized not through coercion but through unobtrusive conformity to what is presented as natural, desirable, and socially consistent. Disciplinary power is exercised not as an overt imposition, but through the normalization of certain religious sensibilities (Biesta, 2021).

These sensibilities are inscribed in the language of the curriculum, the beat of pedagogical routines, and the symbolic power of the teacher. The student is imagined not as the passive receiver of knowledge; they are seen as a developing subject who is increasingly being called into a subject position that aligns with institutional norms of religiosity and virtue. The position of this subject is not fixed or universally accessible; rather, it is conditional upon an individual's readiness to comply with the discursively imagined model of the "good believer." This exemplar is marked by emotional susceptibility to particular moral instruction, faith in the doctrinal accounts as truth, and the performative display of respectfulness within the learning context. The outcome is a learning environment in which deviance is rendered intelligible, not via punishment, but through exclusion, silence, or omission. Inability to conform to Religious Education's implicit norms can make the student unintelligible within its discursive arena and diminish the field's capacity for internal critique or pluralism. The Religious Education pedagogy has features that encourage the normalization of particular readings about religion, religious practice, and moral being. "Correct belief" is frequently expressed in terms of a single objective truth, thereby excluding or marginalizing other readings or unconventional perceptions. A disciplinary regime is thus created, within which the student is urged to integrate not just intellectually but

existentially, by embracing the required attitudes, beliefs, and norms of behavior. These norms operate not only as outside expectations but also as internalized standards of belonging and individual adequacy, operationally governing the student in a quiet way towards a preordained religious selfhood. The pedagogical approach works by affirmation and silence both, in the sense that the significance of what is explicitly said is not more than what is not said (Hanam et al., 2022).

The boundaries of acceptable belief and behavior are policed not solely by subject matter but by tone, emphasis, and silences that together construct a context in which conformity is lived rather than necessarily legislated. Within this constructed context, the student is not only learning religion but is initiated into a specific religious narrative and must navigate meaning, identity, and moral orientation within its parameters. The process of learning is an internalized performance of assent where deviance is experienced more as dislocation one step beyond a prefigured and rehearsed common moral order than as disagreement. The ideal subject not only knows how to do it but is delicately attuned: emotionally attuned, ethically aligned and spiritually attuned to the script set before them. Nor is this a sudden or an overtly forceful process. It is a gradual one, through repetition and habituation, until the distance between the institutional ideal and the student's own self starts to diminish. In this diminishing space, otherness, whether theological, cultural, or existential, fades away not because it is negated, but because it becomes implicitly irrelevant in the pedagogical logic. The success of the pedagogical model is not gauged by the quality of critical thinking skills but by the ease with which students replicate the values permeating the curriculum. In the end, this educational model promotes a form of internal discipline, insofar as authority is not perceived as an external requirement but as a manifestation of an internalized convergence with the moral code of the school, internalized as a component of the student's conscience. Textbooks and curricula have a particularly significant role to play in realizing this normative function. The instructional curriculum, its articulation, the selection of theme units, and the treatment of religious phenomena collectively emphasize the predominately Orthodox Christian perspective perspective as the normative and self-evident world schema of understanding (Apple, 2004).

In most instances, heterodox beliefs, nonmainstream religious practices, or secular worldviews are portrayed either as anomalies or as objects of "knowledge" only, without pedagogical or experiential correlative value. The choice of particular passages from the Bible, the focus on particular types of ethical teachings, and the invocation of exemplary behaviors collectively facilitate a disciplinary process involving the identification and internalization of the subject over an extended period. The function of the course is more than to present information or to impart religion; it unabashedly takes place as a reasoned attempt at character formation, life teaching, and inducing self-awareness. Further, the evaluation of students frequently occurs not only through knowledge of subject matter but through the articulation of "correct" answers or sheer repetition of previously ingested viewpoints and thus subtly perpetuates the control role of the discipline. In this model, the student is more initiated into a regime whereby success is less an issue of questioning and more one of alignment, whereby resonance

with given truths is valued over the creation of interpretive agency. The course structure, through its presumed measuring of conformity, creates a student that internalizes but acts in conformity, creating responses that are an articulation of internalization and not reflection. This creates a latent epistemological hierarchy of cognition, where a critical detachment is subtly discouraged in favor of emotional and ethical proximity to set ideals. The pedagogical process is not so much an invitation to encounter different perspectives but a cultivation of the student's cognitive and affective response to a particular idea (Jackson, 2004).

Here, the possibility of genuine discourse is limited not by overt refusals but by a curriculum obsessed with validation and the exclusion of deviance to the point of pedagogical invisibility. Thus, the school operates as a microcosm of power, and the students are not only educated but also surveilled, promoted, guided, or pushed out, based on their adherence to the established norms of religious and moral "normality." The role of Religious Education as a disciplinary mechanism is the finest illustration of the broader cultural and ideological operations of the education system and calls for a critical re-examination of the subject in light of power dynamics and the formation of subjectivity. The Foucauldian method renders transparent these issues, otherwise masked in the mainstream discourse of "religious education." (Karamouzis et al., 2011).

3. The Construction of the Religious Subject

The formation of the religious subject within the context of Religious Education is not the result of a neutral or mechanical cognitive process, but rather an effect of pedagogical and institutional practices that lead subjectivity to specific normative forms. The "good" or "proper" religious subject entails a checklist of expectations and models not necessarily articulated but pedagogically worked through discourses, silences, pedagogical practices, and assessment mechanisms. The subject is created in a continuous negotiation between knowledge, faith, and obedience that do not come as separate fields of value but as interconnected containers that support conformity to mainstream religious and moral normativity (Fejes et al., 2015).

This normativity is not instituted through overt coercion or command, however, but saturates the education process through repetition, gradual familiarization, and affective identification with particular moral and religious reference points. The subject is formed not because it is told explicitly what to be, but because it is called upon to perform meanings and roles that are presupposed as self-evident as the only natural or viable forms of being within the school and broader social order. In this perspective, religious education's task is not exhausted in the transmission of content but functions as an ongoing shaping of modes of thought, affective openness, and behavioral orientation. The learners are not just requested to know but to feel, to desire, and to act within a specified system of values. This is not experienced as external imposition; instead, it assumes a character of authenticity because it is internalized as a personal attitude, desire, or even as a form of "free" choice (Fejes et al., 2013).

The normative authority of religious doctrine lies precisely in the invisibility of power: in the fact that the subject assents not only to the content offered but also to

the very form in which it is offered. Moreover, the subject learns to judge itself by this form. Deviation does not need to be punished, for it is often anticipated by a rejection of the nonconforming self from within. Religious Education is no longer functioning as a simple subject of knowledge transmission but is instead transmuted into a machinery for the construction of inner life, with a role much more profound than that identified at the level of the formal curriculum. Knowledge in Religious Education is not simply presented as information content, but it is placed in a system of truth with moral and existential claims. Faith in the learning of such knowledge is not aimed at the comprehension of religious phenomena but at faith formation, faith being understood as trust in a normative order of things. Obedience, therefore, is not commanded as an externally imposed directive but as the result of an internalized process of identification whereby the student feels that the embrace of the taught truth is either self-evident or attractive. This is not achieved through explicit imperatives or overt coercion, but through the establishment of a pedagogical space in which acceptance is equated with maturity, moral development, and social inclusion (Koç, 2025).

Faith is not, in this context, a subject of interrogation or negotiation, but a prerequisite for full participation in the educational process. Acceptance is a mode of self-identification, and refusal can be experienced as personal or even existential deviance. The internalization of this relation to truth, structured on the necessity of coherence with the school milieu, commits the subject to a kind of moral self-surveillance. No longer does an external power intervene to guarantee obedience; it is assumed by the individual as their own choice, as an act of their will to belong, be accepted, and become integrated into the conceptual and axiological world offered. Here, truth is no longer sought; it is copied, and belief in it is both a condition for existence within the system and a measure of successful educational assimilation. The educational act accordingly assumes the character of existential orientation, whereby the acquisition of the lesson's content is a self-determining process. Freedom of mind is not curtailed through interdiction but through the subtle imposition of what constitutes "correct" and "useful" thinking. The implicit coercion of the schema discourages critical distance and replaces questioning with empathy, conformity with discernment, and internalization with detachment. It is in this context that Foucault's concept of confession is particularly generative, not merely as a religious practice, but as a technology of power. In his analysis of the practices of the self, Foucault focuses on confession as a process of truth-production, wherein the subject is called upon to reveal itself to some authority (Foucault, 1978). Transposed onto the pedagogical landscape, we can observe that the same mechanisms can be at play when students are not merely asked to respond "correctly" but to speak and think within the bounds of a "proper" morality and religion. The demand for "correctness" in education is not confined to the reproduction of content correctly but to interpretive attitude, moral positioning, and the affective alignment of the student with the framework being taught. Confession here is not an issue of knowledge alone; it's an issue of the subject itself as a bearer of belief, conscience, and inward assent. The student's response is marked not only for its veracity as knowledge but also as a sign of compliance along

a scale of spiritual sincerity, personal purity, and moral transparency. Seemingly harmless questions and the evaluation of the "right" life attitude are not just cognitive tools. They are also covert means of subjecting the student to continual moral self-surveillance and self-direction, which presuppose the acquisition of an "inner gaze," analogous to that of confession, internalized as a criterion for self-judgment (Jackson, 1997).

Learning then takes on the character of disciplinary self-regulation, wherein the learner is summoned to stand before a symbolic "teacher" of truth — less the teacher per se, but the teaching content itself, which is invested with its own authority. The religious subject is then not passively reproduced; it is actively created, in collusion with the self itself, through a pedagogy that performs truth as a moral imperative (Grimmitt,2000).

4. Possibilities for Resistance and Transformation

Religious Education, as much as it is normative and disciplinary in orientation, is not an entirely closed or fixed body. Instead, it contains possibilities for change within it if engaged with critically. Foucault's power theory, often erroneously assumed to be deterministic or inevitable, also includes the premise that every exercise of power necessarily produces dynamics of resistance. Resistance to Foucault is not a matter of the grand rupture but can be of small, specific transgressions that redefine dominant structures' meanings and function in a disruptive relationship to fixed norms. These departures do not represent a counter system but operate within existing structures, redefining relationships and unveiling multiplicity of meaning. Change on this scale is not articulated as a total reversal but as a rechanneling of discourse, methodology, and pedagogical aims over a timescale. Change is possible in the classroom not because of formal interventions but because of pedagogical practice itself, because of patterns of interaction, and because of change in subtle interpretive reception of content. The teacher is not merely a transmitter of information or instrument of power. He or she may be a pedagogical reflexivity facilitator who posits pedagogies of knowledge that do not automatically reproduce mainstream meanings but encourage inquiry, interpretation, and disengagement. The shift from the pedagogy of permanent answers to that of generative questions is not to lower the content; it makes it more meaningfully available (Borataky et al., 2023).

The integration of alternative pedagogies into Religious Education is a necessary step towards overcoming the reproductive, traditional pedagogy of teaching and creating a culture of learning that encourages critical thinking, interpretive sensitivity, and dialogical interaction. Dialogical pedagogy, inspired by the theoretical foundations of thinkers such as Vygotsky and Freire, turns the emphasis around from monologic transmission to collaborative meaning-making. Such a setting reconstitutes the classroom as a space of co-construction and mutual responsibility of meaning, rather than one of passive reception of information. The student is no longer confined to passive reception of "correct" answers but is also extended an invitation to pose questions, experiment with pre-specified models, and engage in the meaning-construction of religious texts. In contrast, the pedagogical hermeneutic approach,

based on the human sciences and on interpretative philosophy, conceives religious knowledge as not a rigid body of facts but as a dense stellar field of ideas, context, and cultural references that require reflective attention. By its focus on interpretation and on the dialogical relationship between subject and religious phenomenon, learning takes procedural, open, and plural characteristics. The religious text, rather than being a forced authority, becomes a channel for various possible meanings, responsive to the individuality of each learner (Smith, 2022).

Moreover, the interdisciplinary nature allows Religious Education to go beyond the constraints of an independent body of knowledge. By uniting religious education with scientific, historical, sociological, and artistic methods, it further extends the horizons of interpretation and enhances students' appreciation of religion as a socio-cultural fact. By analytically linking religion with other activities and expressions of humans, the approach facilitates more synthetic and critical inquiry into the subject, allowing learners to locate religious experience in a broader context for the study of the human condition. Finally, the religious education approach of the body acknowledges the lived experience and the agency of the body to learning. Learning is not just intellectual but also bodily, affective, and participatory. Through the use of experiential channels such as role-playing, ritual repetition, story, and drama, the learners are being encouraged to engage the content in an integrated way, having empathy, reflexivity, and awareness of dialogue (Hildenbrand et al., 2022).

The transformation from the "right" and "obedient" pupil model to that of the reflective and actively involved member reconstitutes the position of Religious Education. This is not a question of changing teaching practice but a reconstruction of the pedagogic understanding of identity, subjectivity, and learning. Change, in this case, affects not only the curriculum content but also power relations constructed in the classroom. Therefore, Religious Education can be redefined no longer as a means of imposing uniformity but as an open pedagogical space. Space in which religion is presented as an object of dialogue and meaning-construction, in which education calls for critical thinking, and in which identity is not predetermined but constructed on freedom, questioning, and self-knowing. The acknowledgement of the learner as an active agent and co-designer of learning turns pedagogy into a two-way dialogue. Content is no longer a didactic exposition of an already constructed world but an open-ended stimulus for multiple readings. Religion is no longer depicted as merely one source of meaning but as an intertexture of narratives, values, and experiences that encourage exploratory interpretation and moral questioning. Learning in this movement is not confined anymore to the possession of prior knowledge but is a task of personal and collective meaning-making. The classroom is not anymore a site of control and the measurement of conformism but a site of construction of reflective abilities wherein difference is not an object of exclusion but of contact. Students are provided with the autonomy to structure their experiences, doubts, and ethical positions without being forced to conform to a preexisting religious or ethical model. This liberty does not undermine pedagogical duty but, rather, deepens it. Education must endow the students with the tools of critical comprehension, not merely direct them towards predetermined verities. Religious Education, in this new frontier, can be

a place of sympathy, spiritual questioning, and civic awareness constructively contributing to the formation of persons capable of thinking, feeling, and deciding responsibly in a multifaceted and plural world (Correil, 2017).

Discussion – Suggestions

The analysis that comes after reaffirms that Religious Education, as it is currently instituted within traditional pedagogic regimes, is a discipline device for the production of specific religious subjectivity. Adopting Foucault's vocabulary of power, discipline, and subjectivation, the study defines the process by which Religious Education produces pupils who internalize preformulated models of belief, morals, and behavior not by coercion or oppression but by normalization, replication, and subliminal pedagogical regulation. Some of the main findings are that the current model of Religious Education is susceptible to prioritizing obedience over critical thinking and conformity of interpretation over diversity of experience. This is facilitated by curriculum design, textbook content, and testing practices that privilege certain theological views, normally tacitly held by dominant religious institutions. The end result is reproducing an ideal religious subject who is obedient, conforming, and morally disciplined rather than encouraging interpretive agency or dialogical engagement. However, the research also draws attention to important points of resistance and pedagogic transformation. These include small but significant moments in the pedagogy that facilitate negotiating meaning, diversifying interpretation, and decentralizing power.

Teachers as brokers of the curriculum and learning facilitators have the potential to alter Religious Education as a site of ideological reproduction into one of critical inquiry. With these findings, some pedagogical suggestions are made. First, Religious Education must integrate dialogical pedagogies that encourage students to co-construct meaning and engage critically with religious content. Second, curricular frameworks must be rewritten such that they signify the complexity, diversity, and historicity of religious phenomena and avoid reducing religion to moral education or cultural heritage. Third, interpretive, interdisciplinary, and embodied analysis and pedagogical strategies must be deployed more broadly in order to encourage more richly conceived access to both the intellectual and affective aspects of religious scholarship. Finally, teacher education programs need to educate teachers as much for content roles as conversation facilitators in roles as open-ended negotiators of difference who are able to conduct difference with intellectual modesty and pedagogical tact.

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