

The Cultural-Experiential Horizon of Religion in the School

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► ABSTRACT

This article re-thinks religion teaching in scholastic education from a cultural-experiential perspective. It proposes religion as a human fact, a socio-cultural reality with deep connection with search for meaning, construction of life's project and personal identity. The traditional framework raises the question of confessionality in which dogmatic presuppositions are identified as problematic and as constituting a real obstacle to the possibility of religious pluralism in a scholastic context. The new dispensation begs instead for an «educational hermeneutics» that conducts pedagogical analysis to a sustained and updated reflection on the scholastic identity and on the relationship between education and pedagogy, teaching and learning. The article presents an alternative - anthropologico-hermeneutic – approach towards an integrative construction of religious data (taking into consideration the global changes and current anthropological-cultural dynamisms) whereby religion in the school is linked to culture and experience rather than to faith or particular confessions. Its hypothesis is that such approach would respond more significantly to the psychological, cultural and social needs of students.

► KEY WORDS

Culture; Education; Educational hermeneutics; Experience; Learning; Pedagogy; Religion; Religious Experience; School; Teaching;

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Introduction

Investment in the education and formation of the human person requires constant evaluation and updating based on new challenges. From this perspective, the demand for continuous modification of knowledge and competence within the framework of ‘lifelong learning’ in the 21st century, necessitates a review of the traditional functions attributed to the scholastic system towards the perspective of an ‘educational hermeneutic’ that seeks a new understanding and interpretation of the character and identity of school education in relation to the changing reality. It is within this general context that religion is expected to re-define its scope and approach as a scholastic discipline.

This article intends to provoke a re-think of religion teaching in the school by proposing a paradigm shift from confessional to non-confessional paradigm based on the recognition of the demands of the scholastic character. Its central argument lies in the assumption that religion, which is an integral part of culture and experience, should be regarded as a frame of reference that covers the whole of life, which itself becomes the basis of interpretation. Hence, it indicates the need to situate its teaching in a close relationship with experience and culture, arguing that such a realistic approach rooted in life would guarantee a satisfying religious and global development of the student. In specific terms, the model responds positively to the demands of scholastic pluralism before which the confessional approach finds itself limited with respect to a proposal of a religious reflection that is open and fair to all.¹

To highlight the significance of the cultural-experiential horizon to religious teaching, we retain it useful to begin our exposition on the nature and scope of religion as a scholastic discipline. Then follows a critical reflection on the confessional framework vis-à-vis the scholastic identity and pluralist character. The next step discusses the cultural-experiential horizon of religion in the school, situated within the context of rapid global transformations and anthropologico-axiological hermeneutic framework. As such, it designates the religious dimension as a specific interpretive category in the perspective of search for meaning, and within which pedagogical and didactical implications will be considered.

1. Nature and scope of religion as a scholastic discipline

The teaching of religion is didactic activity which, by description, refers to a fundamental task of facilitation of learning in the process of transmission of cultural knowledge within a relational-communicative context (the scholastic and extra scholastic environment) in which students learn that which is proposed for their integral human development.² Religion itself claims to accompany the journey of man in the interpretation and construction of reality, sustaining him in his unresolved confrontation with both the mystery that envelops life and the destiny that awaits it.³ Hence, whatever we can establish consensually on the nature and scope of religion as a scholastic discipline must necessarily highlight the intrinsic relationship

¹ Cf. Z. TRENTI, *La religione come disciplina scolastica. La scelta ermeneutica*, Elledici, Leumann (TO) 1990, 33; C. MACALE, *L'insegnamento della religione cattolica in un tempo di pluralismo religioso*, in «Orientamenti Pedagogici» 66 (2019) 4, 836.

² Cf. C. LANEVE, *Il campo della didattica*, La Scuola, Brescia 1997, 7-9; C. OKAFOR, *Formation of Teachers as Pastoral Agents: Building Teacher Capacity for Pastoral Agency in Catholic Schools*, IBMS Ltd, Mauritius 2018, 11.

³ Cf. Z. TRENTI, *Religione*, in J.M. PRELLEZO – G. MALIZIA – C. NANNI (Edd.), *Dizionario di scienze dell'educazione*, LAS, Roma 2008, 987.

that the compound word «teaching religion» shares with the concepts of teaching and religion respectively.

The human being has always been preoccupied with fundamental questions of life and the place of humans in the universe. The interrogations themselves emerge out of multiple provocations: the universe and its origin, existence, destiny, suffering, pain, happiness, death, immortality, etc. In most cases, historical conditions and cultural accents assign priority to one aspect of these realities over the other. So it happens religion is summoned in the interpretation of the interior yearnings and to offer reasons to the restlessness and uncertainties that punctuate human reality. Thus, emerged the awareness of the humanizing meaning of religion.

Over the decades, the study of religion has recorded developments up to a significant shift in the cultural horizon that de-emphasised exploration in the contents that guided religious research, and emphasized more on the existential connotations that qualify it, provoking a current of cultural-anthropological research that set a new cultural sensitivity defined as existential. The pedagogico-didactic fallout of the new sensibility nurtures a methodological renewal that coherently takes a distance from too much concern for contents and priority of doctrinal exposition to more concentration on the learner. Thus the educational function of religion came to dwell within the cultural confines, revealing religion as an indispensable element for elaborating interpretative symbols of life and conferring these symbols with rationality and meaning. From this perspective, an encounter with religion in the school should be less preoccupied with doctrinal orthodoxy and more sensible to the contribution it makes to the meaningful construction of students' existential project.⁴

The insistence on existential significance and its consequent pedagogical accentuation is taken seriously in the way religious truth is proportioned in educational process. If the objective of the school is centred on the formation and maturation of the student, then the contents are to be proposed as provocation such that the scholastic proceeding explores the educational force of religious truth and transfers it to the existential plain. In this sense, the adequacy of correct formulation and presentation of religious truth does not lie on the basis of abstract orthodoxy, but on a comprehensible exposition that enhances cultural forms. As Z. Trenti was moved to affirm: religion that enters into the school is no longer only factuality, it is already reflection, a critical return on lived experience, and hence, the need for its verification.⁵

Scientifically speaking, religion teaching explores the religious dimension of life in its methodological approach and pedagogical-didactic point of view. In a general sense, it is linked, but not to be identified with «religious education» which is directly connected to culturally connoted and historically circumscribed religious experiences.⁶ In a more restricted

⁴ Cf. Z. TRENTI, *Natura e Finalità*, in Z. TRENTI (Ed.), *Manuale dell'insegnamento di religione. Competenza e professionalità*, Elledici, Leumann (TO) 2004, 92-93.

⁵ Cf. TRENTI, *La religione come disciplina scolastica*, 116-117; 119-120; 120-122.

⁶ Cf. M. ROTHGANGEL – T. SCHLAG – F. SCHWEITZER (Eds.), *Basics of Religious Education*, V&R Unipress, Göttingen 2014, 13-14. An instance of religious education is the Christian catechesis which used to occupy a central place in the school before the eventual distinction that assigned a specific role to religion based on the peculiar scholastic identity. The evolution of the distinction between *teaching of religion* and *religious education* formed an important prelude to the academic study of religion, especially in some European contexts such as Italy, Germany, Spain, Belgium, England and the Scandinavian countries (cf. C. BISSOLI – J.L. MORAL, *Orizzonte educativo dell'esperienza religiosa. Religione e "IRC" nella storia dell'istituto di Catechetica*, in ISTITUTO DI CATECHETICA a cura di J.L. MORAL, *Studiare Catechetica oggi. La proposta dell'Università Pontificia Salesiana*, LAS, Roma 2018, 195-201; E. ALBERICH, *Educazione scolastica e azione ecclesiale. La distinzione della religione nelle scuole e catechesi della comunità cristiana*, in TRENTI, *Manuale dell'insegnante di religione*, 399-402; TRENTI, *Natura e Finalità*, 93-95; J. PAJER, *Dio in programma. Scuola e religioni nell'Europa unita (1957-2017)*, La Scuola, Brescia 2017, 28-40).

sense, the nature and scope of religion as a scholastic discipline is tied specifically to the scholastic character with emphasis on cultural elaboration. Whatever further development must consider this as an unavoidable point of departure.

Ultimately, religion moves in harmony with other disciplines, sharing a common responsibility with global education for the quality of formation that is expected in the society. Since both emphasize the centrality of the human integral development, the educational relevance of *religion* and *education* will be evidenced in their mutual interaction and co-responsibility. From this perspective, its material object is the study of religious fact in its cultural value; its formal objective is the cognitive, critical, and ethical formation of the student as a person and a citizen.⁷

2. The confessional approach vis-à-vis the scholastic character

Religion as a scholastic discipline has always shared memory and development with religious education. The latter, often with an institutionalized framework, has almost always maintained a confessional character. But in a scholastic context, the confessional structure can hardly escape the tendency to indoctrination and polarization⁸ in two fundamental areas: *theology and language of communication*. Both seem to be distant from the custom with which contemporary human experience is interpreted. Christian theology, for instance, adopts a *deductive* method based on the content of dogmatic enunciations founded on specifically chosen scriptural citations upon which more precise theological conclusions are constructed.⁹

The case is not different with the Islamic theology and doctrine.¹⁰ As such, religious didactic and pedagogy cannot escape deductions drawn from *abstract* principles and the risks of being cut off from concrete human experience.¹¹ Perceiving religion «abstractly» as an alternative to the project of humanization would mean marginalizing it from human experience. This renders religion less relevant to students' life. Thus we argue that integrating religion in the project of self-discovery can be achieved when religion is viewed as profoundly situated within its anthropological configuration.¹²

As long as religion in schools remains a prerogative of particular religious traditions, there is bound to be problems - prejudice, misconceptions, polarisation, conflicts and violence

⁷ Cf. F. PAJER, *Insegnamento della religione*, in PRELLEZO – MALIZIA – NANNI, *Dizionario di Scienze dell'Educazione*, 990.

⁸ Cf. D.U. ASUE – D. KOJO, *Pedagogy of Christian Religious Education in Nigerian Schools*, in "Journal of Education and Practice" 9 (2018) 8, 37-45.

⁹ This is not a relegation of the value of the deductive method to research. The focus here is to bridge the gap between the abstract and the concrete, between theory and practice. It is an attempt at an approach that privileges a constructivist perspective. The learning process should take into consideration the specifics of concrete experience and offer students the opportunity for interpretative analysis of the religious data in relation to real-world complex problems Cf. M.J. PRINCE – R.M. FELDER, *Inductive Teaching and Learning Methods: Definitions, Comparisons, and Research Bases*, in «Journal of Engineering Education» 95 (2006) 2, 1.

¹⁰ The Islamic religion shows evidence of 1) literalist reading of Qur'an as a direct revelation; 2) investment in the afterlife death instead of life before death; 3) the Sharia as a body of legislation derived from the Qur'an, the Hadith, and the Islamic jurisprudence; 4) the imperative to wage jihad; 5) Its theology and language entertain no questioning. As such, it will be foolish to insist that the violent acts of Islamic extremists can be divorced from the religious doctrine that inspires them (cf. A. HIRSI ALI, *Heretic. Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*, Harper, New York 2015, 24; 41).

¹¹ Cf. J. DUPUIS, *Il cristianesimo e le religioni. Dallo scontro all'incontro*, Queriniana, Brescia 2001, 28.

¹² It seems quite absurd to continue to count on some abstract and theoretical presuppositions on man – which are today unsustainable - without interrogations on whether they can be confirmed in concrete lives of persons. We should be grateful today to human sciences for a more profound knowledge of the human being (cf. J. MORAL, *Cittadini nella Chiesa, cristiani nel mondo. Antropologia, catechetica ed educazione*, LAS, Roma 2017, 49-50).

among people.¹³ If religious teaching is to be authentic and effective, it must abandon its narrow concentration on exclusive socialization into Catholicism, Protestantism or Islamism, which makes pluralistic teaching difficult. Consequently, the situation begs for educational response in the direction of consensus interpretation of religious fact organized around a hermeneutic perspective anchored on meaning.¹⁴ In light of the above expectations, the cultural-experiential horizon builds on a rational perspective that conceives religion as a human fact, a specific response to man's confrontation with reality, search for meaning, and experience of self-transcendence.

The insistence on adherence to the scholastic character, moves consistently with the urgency to comply with the student's process of maturation, which, in turn, should have recourse to adequate exploration of competent sources. Since the scope of educational activity spans through life, aligned with the quest for existential meaning, religion should also represent a significant interpretative key for multiple social circumstances that surround the student. At the same time, it should demonstrate the ability to bring about progressive maturing of the religious yearnings and presentiments which it is unconsciously destined to accomplish. It is in these aspects that religion finds authority and legitimacy beyond its epistemological dimension.¹⁵

In establishing the pedagogical matrix of religion, E Damiano draws attention to the problem regarding the "institutionalization" of scholastic discipline. Contrary to the «classical» understanding on the exploration-elaboration of cultural contents, the scholar insists that the justification of the collocation of religion in school should have sciences of education as a frame of reference, instead of those of religion.¹⁶ From an epistemological point of view, Damian underscores the responsibility that pertains to the domain of pedagogy – one that should not be blinded by the presence of other sciences – without discountenancing the indispensable contributions of the sciences of religion. Religion in school entails complementarity with other disciplines that share a common interest. But it should also designate its specificity through its educational contribution.¹⁷

With such a complementary and interdisciplinary disposition, religion teaching will be able to combine resources and strategies to arrive at contextual and methodological interpretation of the phenomena of culture and religious experience in the light of humanization. In the long term, its general objective embraces an integral proposal towards equipping students to learn to engage in critical, reflective understanding of their own religious experiences and those of others, and thus come to gradually possess the ability of autonomous interpretation of religious data, formulation of intelligent and responsible judgments about religious-cultural issues. In this manner, they will be well equipped to counter stereotypes and long-standing misrepresentations of religion(s). Ultimately, the specific goal of religion in school is captured in its ability to sensitize, expose and inform students about religions and different

¹³ Problems arise when religion in school does not recognize the reality of religious diversity and thus fails to give room to "that which is different", preventing in this manner, the possibility of "option" (cf. N. SLEE, *Conflict and Reconciliation Between Competing Models of Religious Education: Some Reflections on the British Scene*, in "British Journal of Religious Education" 11 (1989) 3, 126-135; UNITED NATIONS, *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance*, <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/d_intole.htm> (13/03/2019).

¹⁴ Cf. J. MORAL, *Ricostruire l'umanità della religione. L'orizzonte educativo dell'esperienza religiosa*, LAS, Roma 2014, 185; 187-191.

¹⁵ Cf. TRENTI, *La religione come disciplina scolastica*, 9; 11.

¹⁶ Cf. E. DAMIANO, *Lo statuto disciplinare-scolastico dell'insegnamento della religione*, in C. BISSOLI – Z. TRENTI (Edd.), *Insegnamento della religione e professionalità docente*, Elledici, Leumann (TO) 1988, 140.

¹⁷ Cf. TRENTI, *La religione come disciplina scolastica*, 11.

belief systems in their diverse responses to the ultimate questions of life. Far from proselytizing, catechizing, indoctrinating, imposing or conforming students to religious beliefs, its pedagogical approach should be educational.¹⁸

3. Beyond confessionality: the question of theology and language

Religion is a discipline with a number of different approaches. Even within the confessional model itself, it is possible to identify some other models.¹⁹ However, given the challenges of diversity, and the need for critical reflection, it is sensible to rethink religion teaching within a relatively new framework. Simultaneously, we need to recognize the complicated nature of such a demand especially in contexts in which it might be difficult to implement a non-confessional approach. By and large, whichever approach one chooses to adopt must not dispense with both the scholastic character and the historico-cultural nature of religion, which eventually constrain its presence in the school to remain essentially interpretative, critical and cognitively oriented.²⁰

Arguably, the confessional paradigm should not be qualified as an obstacle if it is open and respectful of the different attitudes towards religions. After all, whichever particular religion one assumes for educating is fundamentally a historico-cultural question. But then, if the task of the school is to promote the learner's critical capacity in the concrete confrontation of historico-existential situation, then religion cannot be imposed but rather be allowed to manifest itself as an incontrovertible historical fact in which it takes shape, elaborates its own certainties, and proposed as something familiar and verifiable to students.²¹

On its own, the theological reason offered by the confessional approach is recognised as profound, but its profundity remains controversial within a pluralist context. Within an imagined mono-religious scholastic setting, the confessional-theological framework might not be considered problematic (except of course, with reference to its theological interpretation). However, when confessional approach is employed in a multi-religious context, reading from theological texts (considered decisive for education), should refer to "theologies" of different religions where students are expected to encounter different "sacred texts and written traditions". In which case, the teaching aim is to help students understand different religions through their theologico-scriptural traditions, which, obviously, has certain justifications,²² but should it be considered a better "starting point" in a pluralist context?

The question of theology: Theology behind the confessional curriculum assigns the basic concepts of particular religions a major role in forming the content and methodology.²³ But the theological underpinnings have been criticised prior to the Second Vatican Council, as largely a priori, deductive and non-historical.²⁴ Appeal to experience was followed quickly by

¹⁸ Cf. O. JAWONIYI, *Rethinking the Religious Education Curricula in Nigerian Schools*, in "Journal for the Study of Religion" 22 (2009) 2, 76.

¹⁹ Cf. J.P. WILLIAME, *Different Models for Religion and Education in Europe*, in R. JACKSON et al (Eds.), *Religion and Education in Europe. Developments, Contexts and Debates*, Waxmann, Münster 2007, 57-58.

²⁰ Cf. PAJER, *Dio in programma*, 170-172.

²¹ Cf. TRENTI, *La religione come disciplina scolastica*, 49.

²² Cf. JAWONIYI, *Rethinking the Religious Education Curricula in Nigerian Schools*, 68-69.

²³ Cf. N.H. THOMPSON (Ed.), *Religious Pluralism and Religious Education*, Rel. Education Press, Alabama 1988, 25.

²⁴ The re-thinking of theology, which came about after the turn of the Second Vatican Council, signalled a radical turn for Christian theology. Among the vast literature on this topic, the following few references can be consulted: G. ROUTHIER, *Sull'interpretazione del Vaticano II. L'ermeneutica della riforma, compito per la teologia, 1-2*, in «La Rivista del Clero Italiano» 92 (2011) 11, 744-759; G. ROTA, *Il Concilio Vaticano II e la Tradizione: i punti nodali di un dibattito*, in «Teologia» 37 (2012) 3, 415-449; M. VERGOTTINI, *Contro la "mitizzazione" del concilio: paraconcilio, metaconcilio e anticoncilio*, in «Teologia» 37 (2012) 3, 450-478.

a turn to hermeneutics, the art of interpreting experience.²⁵ Religious experience has always remained prior to theologies and hence, religious pedagogy should flow from historical experience towards theology and not the other way round.²⁶

With the anthropological turn, theologians came to recognise at least four facts which are considered decisive for conceiving and postulating faith and theology: 1) inculturation of revelation and faith based on the assumption that the «Word of God» does not arrive to man in a pure state, but is always incarnated in human thought and language of a given culture; 2) the pre-understanding of the theologian stems from the cultural, psychological and social contexts in which he lives. Such pre-comprehension can become prejudices; 3) the mediation of human sciences in interpretation of the enculturated Word of God. The expression of faith by a believer passes through the cultural context, thus causing changes in the words used, as well as images, symbols, sentiments, judgements and decision made. The existence of the Word of God within the language of a given culture requires recourse to the complex of hermeneutic sciences for an ever more adequate understanding of its contents; 4) orienting every theological reflection to praxis. These imply that a complete theological reflection always involves a theology of human promotion from personal and collective points of view.²⁷

As historical reason becomes the pivot of a new theology, the itinerary of "interpretation for better understanding" should recognise the mediation of human sciences in interpretation and thus lead theology to critical confrontation with indications deriving from sciences instead of adopting "apologetic and critical stance" in the face of scientific theories in defence mechanism that often manifests in dogmatism and indoctrination, thereby blocking the possibility of dialogue with contemporary scientific paradigm.²⁸

The question of Language. The linguistic turn reveals that «once it became clear that all experience is interpreted experience, then a new appreciation of the importance of language was inevitable. It is language that gives rise to thought, empowers praxis and weaves a narrative».²⁹ The theological language of the pre-Vatican period was rather obscure and incomprehensible, characterized by abstractionism and essentialism, with a consequent distance from both the founding Christian experience and the experiences of the contemporary people. The anthropologico-linguistic logic situates theology within the crucial question of language because the entire mode of human experience is configured in language. As such, theology must take seriously the human linguistic nature, because language delimits the confines of the world and contributes significantly to the construction of identity.³⁰

We are not only immersed in language, we are also plunged into history such that whatever claim of divine revelation, is made with human words and within a given historical context. Thus with a growing attention on human characteristics involving every discourse on God, the legitimacy of theology today must confront the modern process of reconstruction of rationality – a process within which language exercises a decisive influence in the formation of thought. A renewal of theological understanding takes into cognizance the fact that "to speak of God" is, at the same time, a special way of speaking of man and his world. Hence,

²⁵ Cf. D.A. LANE, *The Experience of God. An Invitation to do Theology*, Paulist Press, New York 2003, 7.

²⁶ Cf. M. LEE, *The Blessings of Religious Pluralism*, in THOMPSON, *Religious Pluralism and Religious Education*, 123.

²⁷ Cf. G. GROppo, *Teologia dell'educazione*, LAS, Rome 1991, 266; M. MIDALI, *Teologia pratica 2. Attuali modelli e percorsi contestuali di evangelizzazione*, LAS, Roma 2008, 253-282.

²⁸ Cf. J. MORAL, *Modernità e cambio epocale. Prospettive culturali e teologiche contemporanee*, LAS, Roma 2019, 173-174. Both theology and sciences need each other for a more comprehensive approach to interpretation of reality and search for truth. Just as science can lose the wisdom that pushes towards an "ever greater truth", by being content with handy knowledge about manageable truths, so too, theology can minimize its claim to construct an "absolute knowledge" and dogmatic certainties (cf. *Ibidem*, p. 175).

²⁹ LANE, *The Experience of God*, 8.

³⁰ Cf. MORAL, *Modernità e cambio epocale*, 234.

analysis of revelation as such, should equally involve the human manner with which it is expressed and interpreted. In interpreting the word of God, theology can only make use of human language. Hence for theology to remain faithful to its mission, «it must speak the word of God today in a more comprehensible manner».³¹

Theology, therefore, becomes a «conditioned theology» based on the fact that God is revealed to humans in a human way. The need to stress the completely human nature of theological language implies that, like all properly human words, they must make sense and have meaning especially within a particular context of use. Unless one intends to consciously pursue meaninglessness, one cannot exempt theological language from the thorough interpretation of the meaning of such language and how one intends to use it in practical life. As Butterworth expresses, it is precisely the tendency of theology to remain a kind of druidical gnosis, using words of its own and exempt from the normal rules of meaninglessness, that got theological language such a bad name and reduced it to such ineffectiveness.³²

The quest for meaningfulness and comprehension has an essential and indispensable relation to a given socio-cultural milieu. From this perspective, every religion represents a distinct sociocultural response to divine revelation. As such, all human experiences, including the human experience of the divine revelation, occurs within the filtered existential context of one's particular socioculture. Because of diversity of culture and language, different cultures filter and interpret this «revelation» differently. In this sense, no one socioculture can ever exhaust the inexhaustible richness of God's revelation.³³ For this reason, a hermeneutic reconstruction of theology should be situated within the horizon of dialogue and communication, as well as historical determination and anticipation of meaning.³⁴ This implies openness and respectful attitude towards diversity of theologies even within a strictly confessional setting.

The consequences of such a hermeneutic reconstruction have been articulated by J.L. Moral as follows: 1) the recognition of the character of the interpretative construct of all theological concepts and the need to avoid whatever procedure to sacralise or declare them untouchable. Original affirmations or enunciations can be subject to revision; 2) Revelation or "whatever" God communicates never exists in a "pure state", but within the limits of human interpretation, which in turn, depends on human identity, history and culture. Fixed theological concepts impose interpretations that close the horizon to other interpretations of faith; 4) essentialism renders theology prisoner of axiomatic and deductive structures which can result in epistemologically inadmissible conclusions. One cannot therefore continue to base reality on «metaphysical facts», whose guaranty refers immediately to God; 5) consensus reached on the terrain of knowledge convinces us that it is not enough to pay attention to conceptual structures, we should also consider «mental patterns», «collective imaginaries», «symbolic universes» and «plausibility». History reveals that when experience is based on knowledge and interpretations of old paradigm, a grave consequence is highlighted in the area of imagination and «mythical» mental patterns which exercise enormous influence on praxis. The passage from knowledge to interpretation; from dogmatic paradigm to hermeneutic paradigm, calls into question the permanent presence of human sciences for establishing interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary dialogue which are so essential today; 6) since the anthropological-cultural epochal changes have had a direct impact on the theological and educational perspectives, linked to the reconstruction of theological and pedagogical reasoning,

³¹ *Ibidem*, 172.

³² Cf. R. BUTTERWORTH, *On Theological Language*, <<https://www.theway.org.uk/back/12Butterworth.pdf>> (17/08/2021), 112.

³³ Cf. LEE, *The Blessings of Religious Pluralism*, 65.

³⁴ Cf. MORAL, *Modernità e cambio epocale*, 232-235.

it is necessary to combine the truth claim of any religious faith with praxis, considering the latter as a place of verification of the former, and resting such praxis on human growth and maturation with which the sciences of education are chiefly concerned.³⁵

4. Approaching religion from a cultural-experiential perspective

The motivation for the cultural-experiential horizon is partly connected to the reaction against the dogmatic-polarizing nature of the confessional framework on the one hand, and the consideration of the scholastic critical and pluralist character, on the other. It is intended to respond to the expectations of global challenges that necessitate an anthropologico-cultural starting point for religious research and recognises the interpretative, constructivist, personalist, and transformative character of human experience. As such, it goes for a non-monolithic interpretation of religion that integrates the rich resources of various approaches and the contributions of sciences in attempt to acquire a transdisciplinary knowledge for interpreting the human person and his place in the universe.

As an alternative approach, the cultural-experiential horizon supports the argument that the pluralist character of the school does not necessarily admit of preference to a confessional structure. Such a prerogative demonstrates outright discrimination and exclusion of other religions, and has the capacity to spark off agitations and exacerbate divisions among people. The school society, which is a reflection of the larger society, embodies diversity. Hence we designate pluralism as an interpretative category. It is only reasonable to interrogate on the possibility of a religion teaching that will be fair «to all» in a scholastic context. That seems a more adequate response to the question of the credentials religion should exhibit in order to capture everyone's attention, even those who may not recognize its significance for their lives.

The imperative to reflect on the possibility of a religion teaching with an "inclusive character" presupposes two things: the recognition of the religious dimension of the human person, and reference to the cultural dimension of religion. Thus, in defining which religion can be proposed in the school, a threefold perspective can be considered as guiding principles: 1) religion in relation to culture, which not only connotes religion's intrinsic relationship with culture, but also religion as liberating and critical in the face of culture; 2) religion in relation to the promotion of the human person which the school educates; 3) religion in confrontation with human reality to be deciphered even in its dark aspects and indefinite thickness that envelops it with mystery.³⁶ To put it another way, there has to be a constructive re-interpretation of religion that is built on authentic anthropological synthesis with a cultural-experiential basis.³⁷

4.1. Human life as mediated by culture and experience

The concept of culture has always been at the root of the analysis of every human reality. Human life is mediated through culture. In Gadamer's articulations, grasping whatever we can call a universally shared human nature is always mediated by our own cultural biases and the knowledge pools from which we draw.³⁸ Vygotsky was keen to observe that the development of our superior intellectual processes, which, to a large extent depend on cultural-linguistic conversations in which we participate, characterize our way of thinking.³⁹

³⁵ Cf. *Ibidem*, 237-238; 249-250.

³⁶ Cf. TRENTI, *La religione come disciplina scolastica*, 33.

³⁷ Cf. MORAL, *Cittadini nella Chiesa, cristiani nel mondo*, 13, 16-19; 20-22.

³⁸ Cf. C. TAYLOR, *Gadamer on the Human Sciences*, in R.J. DOSTAL (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, 129.

³⁹ Cf. S.L. VYGOTSKY, *Thought and Language* (trans. by A. Kozulin), MIT Press, London 1986, 68-95.

With culture, humans elaborate on nature in the bid to reconstruct their material environment and organize their world. Thus, culture reveals the complexity and depth of human experience, and the realization that we live more authentically as much as we consciously know how to interpret ourselves and lucidly construct our own future. From this perspective, «culture assumes a central place in the call of man to *humanize* his own world, to give credible motivations to his efforts and to progressively orient himself in a horizon of meaning that renders his existence authentically human».⁴⁰

The educational character of the school underscores the fact that learning cannot escape culture-embeddedness: the knowledge that is acquired becomes culture (a meaning system) the moment it enters a scholastic education. Thus the school is defined as a cultural context because it is a place of cultural elaboration and transmission.⁴¹ Therefore, the quest to approach the study of religion from a cultural perspective stems from the need to recognise the intrinsic and inextricable link between religion and culture; the latter understood as a complex concept encompassing all that is connected to a human group and human experience: language, meaning, values, norms, symbols, ideas, arts, costumes, traditions, practices, attitudes, signs, knowledge, learning, and models of behaviour; the environment in which human beings perceive, evaluate, act, live, grow, and have their being; the totality of all the acquired human experiences, more or less organized, inherited, shared and transmitted, embracing the material and the spiritual, the mundane and the transcendence, science and technology, education and aesthetics, oral tradition and literature, social structures and systems of values, institutions and social norms, models of thinking, visions of the world, emotional traits, psychological peculiarities and styles of living of a human group: all these as facets of socio-cultural phenomena within which people express their conceptions of meaning, worth and value. Culture is thus summarised in its anthropological sense as the totality of human ways of life and particular interpretation of the human condition.⁴²

And religion remains an aspect of culture that projects meaning.⁴³ A religion without culture is condemned to fundamentalism; by the same token, a religion teaching that fails to recognize culture becomes dogmatic.

The human being that is educated by the school, lives a complex historico-existential experience on which religion has always had a qualifying contribution to make. Man recognises the fact of being immersed in mystery which reason itself is incapable of penetrating fully, but one which religions attempt to interpret in various ways. In today's contemporary world, a good chunk of humanity seems to renounce institutional religion due to various reasons. But one cannot renounce the intuitions about meaning and destiny which underlie the religious dimension of life. Clarifications on this dimension renders it impossible to trigger a fideism in favour of essentialism or an authoritarian conception of religion that drags towards blind credulity. A balanced interpretation of religion requires the contribution of culture to escape fundamentalism just as culture needs religion to establish an internal force of cohesion on which to tailor one's existence. The cultural-experiential approach therefore proposes a possible understanding of religion that is capable of giving space to human intentionality: one

⁴⁰ Z. TRENTI, *Educare alla fede. Saggio di pedagogia religiosa*, Elledici, Leumann (TO) 2000, 9.

⁴¹ Cf. M.B. LOGORIO – C. PONTECORVO (Edd.), *La scuola come contesto. Prospettive psicologico-culturali*, Carocci, Roma 2010, 102.

⁴² Cf. C. NANNI, *Parole e immagini. Un sussidio per la filosofia dell'educazione*, LAS, Roma 2016, 13-14; C. GEERTZ, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York 1973, 89; M. AIME, *Cultura*, Boringhieri, Torino 2013, 11; 22-26; A. LANDMANN, *The Study of Religion. Thoughts on Approaches*, in «Journal of Religious Culture» 177 (2013), 2.

⁴³ Cf. GEERTZ, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 90-125.

that is not detached from human experience, but definitely distances itself from essentialism.⁴⁴

Religion is fundamentally associated with man's specific response to the reality that he is obliged to confront and interpret. It is here that experience plays its protagonist's role.⁴⁵ The pedagogical interest of the school is expected to align with the student's condition and to reveal the congruency and solidarity within his implicit and explicit expectations. The ineffectiveness of the confessional structure, as observed by R. Goldman, is not unconnected with the assumption that religion is a body of information to be «absorbed» by students instead of a frame of reference and a coherent principle that covers the whole of life – which itself constitutes the basis of interpretation. How could such approach guarantee a more realistic religious development?⁴⁶ As Gadamer had cautioned, concrete life should not be distant from religious faith and experience; the latter itself should teach us to acknowledge reality.⁴⁷ In line with this understanding, religious teaching undertaken by any religious tradition can result significant only if it orients and favours the correct interpretation of the experience of the learner.⁴⁸

The emphasis here is that concrete experience explored in its socio-cultural provocations and existential instances, is not a basis for abstract discussion, rather, it is to be explored in its capacity to offer indispensable elements of analysis concerning complex and subterranean implications of the experience of the student in their specific religious dimensions. Thus, the hypothesis of religion is aroused to formulate its educational objective in a correct relationship between human expectations and religious response from two angles: 1) highlighting the proper dimension of religion and 2) preparing instruments for critical analysis according to a coherent methodological setting.⁴⁹ In this perspective, the school moves for a global comprehension through correct interpretation of the constitutive matrix of the student's historico-cultural experience within a particular context, by imposing the his or her cultural and religious experience as a constitutive foundation for didactic and pedagogical elaboration, choice of content and methodology to the process of maturation.

In order that there be real experience in its anthropological significance, it is necessary that certain conditions be verified: experience has to do with a reality that is personally lived (experienced) with intensity and globality, a reflected, interpreted and transforming reality.⁵⁰ Experience involves first and foremost a human subject and reality; a human subject is an individual that is capable of seeing, feeling, thinking and discerning. The reality in which the subject lives embraces the external world as composed of spirit and matter. A genuine experience is therefore preceded by some form of «conscious encounter» between the subject and reality. Thus, encounter remains a point of departure in the process of interaction within which experience itself is actualized, and which embodies a chain of events that includes critical reflection and reaction from the conscious subject towards reality. The essential elements of understanding which are brought to bear on human experience, are usually the inherited wisdom of the community in which one lives, and the tradition in which one is brought up.

⁴⁴ Cf. MORAL, *Ricostruire l'umanità della religione*, 25-26; 110.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Ibidem*, 39. The notion of experience can be very fluid, but it remains an aspect that is considered very essential in religious discourse, generally, as reliable channel of human understanding (cf. J.E. SMITH, *Experience and God*, Oxford University Press, New York 1968, 3-5).

⁴⁶ Cf. R. GOLDMAN, *Readiness for Religion. A Basis for Developmental Religious Education*, vol. 5, Routledge, London 2019, 6-10.

⁴⁷ Cf. H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, Continuum, New York 2004, 357.

⁴⁸ Cf. TRENTI, *Educare alla fede*, 24-25.

⁴⁹ Cf. TRENTI, *La religione come disciplina scolastica*, 10; 161-166.

⁵⁰ Cf. E. ALBERICH, *La catechesi oggi. Manuale di catechetica fondamentale*, Elledici, Leumann (TO) 2001, 108-113.

This fact underscores an important factor in the theory of experience: the significant role played by the scholastic community in the provision/elaboration of the overall horizon of understanding within which the student's experience begins to make sense.⁵¹

4.2. Making the case for «meaning» in religious experience

The cultural-experiential approach designates experience as a point of departure for teaching religion. This is in line with W. James' definition of religious experience, and suggestion that every theory of religion begins with religious experience.⁵² James' definition has personal character: religion as man's total reaction upon life itself.⁵³

The most characteristic human meaning of experience refers to «experience in the singular», understood as a significant experience; the result of the integration of the multiple experiences that take place within different concrete situations of a person's life.⁵⁴ Religious experience can be classified under «experience in the singular» because it reveals the character of a depth dimension of human experience within a horizon of meaning. Religious experience reveals attitudes with which a person lives, in sufficiently reflected terms, the awareness that what gives meaning to life and consistency to hope is located «beyond» one's own existence. In that sense, it is born within one's own subjective world because it is a matter of experiencing a foundation of meaning for one's existence. At the same time, it stretches beyond one's own subjectivity as one becomes aware of how insufficient it is to establish meaning and responsibility «only» within one's daily life. The central point of the process which leads to a mature religious experience is therefore determined by the «capacity of invocation» of meaning.⁵⁵

The capacity to integrate meaning lies in the interpretative character of experience. Interpretation denotes a fundamental meaning of human experience, involving language and man's communicative rationality. As reality is interwoven with experience, every experience is an interpretation. Interpretation itself is intertwined with reality in all its ramifications, involving all human dimensions and situations: bio-psychological, rational, spiritual, social or intersubjective situations, ethical and religious. Therefore, human beings grasp and appropriate reality by interpreting it in different ways through the data that comes from experience, depending on the interpretative key employed (scientific or religious). Religious interpretation contains knowledge referred particularly to mystery and transcendence, using specific language and concepts to describe common human experiences. For this reason, religion is considered a specific response, not because it interprets a reality that is different from common human reality and experience, but because it interprets it in a specific manner. From this perspective, religion is a human construct, a part of culture (a way of viewing and interpreting the world) born out of human experience. Both religion and experience therefore converge in the search for, and construction of the meaning of existence.⁵⁶

From an anthropological point of view, the most fundamental concepts of education (alongside concepts such as formation, freedom, value, virtue) seems precisely that of experience, which is an anthropological synthesis of the subjective and the objective, the particular

⁵¹ Cf. LANE, *The Experience of God*, 20-22.

⁵² Cf. H. JOAS, *Do We Need Religion? On the Experience of Self-Transcendence*, Routledge, London & New York 2008, 52.

⁵³ Cf. W. JAMES, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1985, 34; W.H. CAPPS, *Religious Studies. The Making of a Discipline*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1995, 45.

⁵⁴ Cf. MORAL, *Ricostruire l'umanità della religione*, 40.

⁵⁵ Cf. R. TONELLI, *Postfazione. Per una lettura pastorale*, in R. GRASSI (Ed.), *Giovani, religione e vita quotidiana. Un'indagine dell'Istituto IARD per il Centro di Orientamento Pastorale*, il Mulino, Bologna 2006, 194.

⁵⁶ Cf. J. MORAL, *Pastorale giovanile. Sfida cruciale per la prassi cristiana*, Elledici, Leumann (TO) 2000, 19.

and the universal, the empirical and transcendental. With experience, the student comes to understand the capacity of human relationship to the world and man's openness to reality according to all its possibilities.⁵⁷ The essentialist epistemological foundation thus collapses in the face of the interpretative-constructive critical force of experience in which exists the probability of overcoming a reductionist understanding of religion and the possibility of advancing the experience of self-transcendence.⁵⁸

If religious experience is considered an aspect of the religious dimension, then, like other human dimensions, it should be allowed to undergo a normal development. The cultural-experiential perspective provides an environment whereby students are encouraged to have confidence in their own experience and make room for plausibility. For this reason, religion in the school should not be accompanied with the idea "to evangelize or catechize", rather, a young student should be guided to a personal discovery of the «roots of religiousness» which lies in a person's depth. This way, a sense of alienation will be reduced and the feeling of responsibility towards «others» and things around the student's surroundings, increased. In this sense, one can convincingly conclude with D. Hay that personal experiences are the roots out of which a genuine and authentic understanding of religion can best grow.⁵⁹

5. Pedagogical and didactical implications

The issue of pedagogy and didactics has radical implications for teacher-educators as protagonists of educational actions/interventions, based on the need for a method that values integral formation. Since the school is both formative and educative in its capacity to offer occasions for development in all dimensions, religion will be committed to predispose its pedagogical and didactic itinerary starting from the reality of the learner and in relation to the conditioning of socio-culture, the development of social capacities, and the exigency of constructivist-personalist educational framework.⁶⁰

Cognisance of the contemporary social changes which affect the manner in which religion is understood today by the younger generation, religious pedagogy should consider approaching religion teaching from the angle of search for meaning – assuming we accept the premise that religion is primarily a human construct and a specific response to our common human reality. Such approach will warrant a cultural reconstruction that begins with the reconstruction of rationality - within the logic that recognizes every knowledge as interpretation – to aim at a reconstruction that links theological reasoning with the real human situation.⁶¹ In recognition of the radical character of knowledge and its historical accessibility, there is need to consider pluralism as an interpretative key for dialogue and peaceful coexistence.⁶²

Since the journey of self-search/realisation passes through freedom and autonomy, which implies a balanced relation with self, others, things and perhaps the transcendent «Other», pedagogy has to consider the gross difficulty encountered by young people today with regards to choice of values in the process of construction of identity.⁶³

⁵⁷ Cf. F. BOTTURI, *Chi è l'uomo perché te ne prenda cura? Riflessioni sulla domanda educativa*, in A. TONIOLO –R. TOMMASI (Edd.), *Il senso dell'educazione nella luce della fede*, Messaggero di Sant'Antonio – Facoltà Teologica del Triveneto, Padova 2011, 12.

⁵⁸ Cf. JOAS, *Do We Need Religion?*, 2.

⁵⁹ Cf. D. HAY, *Religious Experience and Education*, in "Learning for Living" 16 (1977) 4, 160.

⁶⁰ Cf. V. ANNICCHIARICO (Ed), *Il tirocinio formativo attivo dell'insegnamento della religione cattolica*, Vivere, Roma 2014, 44.

⁶¹ Cf. MORAL, *Pastorale giovanile*, 34-35; 75-84.

⁶² Cf. *Ibidem*, 89-95.

⁶³ Cf. *Ibidem*, 30-32; 36.

The pedagogical dimension which focuses on the student as the centre of pedagogical attention, and learning as favoured by the law of «educational unity», highlights the interdependency of all disciplines (school subjects). From the perspective of its educational function, religion proposes a vision whose pedagogical strategy is drawn towards some significant directions: 1) helping students access critically their religious dimension by arousing them towards religious interests and profound questions of existence; 2) assisting students to enter into dialogue with the cultural and historical dimensions of religious facts and thus, towards active participation in discerning religious problems and values. From the perspective of «critical pedagogy»,⁶⁴ the journey of maturation requires that students do not appear uncritical before religion considered as a relevant aspect of culture and life. The centrality of maturation compels pedagogy in the direction of revealing attitudes and behaviours in students and in their determination with freedom and great responsibility towards religious values and meaning. In this direction, the teacher of religion favours constructive dialogue that promotes research and openness to the religious sense of existence; 3) taking care to offer essential references to the signs of religiosity present in a specific culture and society; 4) helping students become responsible citizens of the world.⁶⁵

The didactic dimension integrates the aspects connected to the concretization of scholastic planning, in relation to the epistemological aspect of teaching religion. So, it is a question of activating all the strategies necessary for the connection of theory with practice. In reality, it brings a pragmatic response to the expectation of relevance that educational research nurtures for practical life-application of educational theories.⁶⁶ With regards to religion, the construction of a didactic path should take into account the educational-cultural objectives that characterize the didactic intervention in its formative validity. The cultural dimension itself is linked to the acquisition of religious competence which, in turn, is a careful and lucid reflection on the nature of religion within an epistemological framework.

To this end, the significance of the «religious object» needs to be clarified according to that which sums up the cultural experience of religion and the importance it assumes in the personal life of the student. First, religion as a truly human experience - referring to the subjective dimension of every religion: there exists no religion without a subject that practices it and no human without a religious dimension. Second, religion as a «pre-confessional dimension», relating to the religious sense of every human being regardless of confessional or denominational affiliation. Third, religion as a «tension towards the transcendent» and as a search for the ultimate goal of life. Fourth, religion as a «system of meanings» and a horizon of shared and ethically pursued values in life.⁶⁷

These meanings contribute in delineating the religious competence which finds its justification in the anthropological, social, ethical and civil visions proposed by the teaching of religion. The space for religious competence cannot be reduced to only the knowledge of the religious contents, but should also include the personal relationship that the student is able to establish with such contents on the level of motivation, understanding, elaboration, evaluation and decision. This way, neither the school nor religion teaching is aimed at conditioning the religious choice of students. Both should combine resources to furnish students with con-

⁶⁴ Cf. A. MAHMOUDI – A. KHOSHNOOD – A. BABAEI, *Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy and its Implications in Curriculum Planning*, in "Journal of Education and Practice" 5 (2014) 14, 86-92.

⁶⁵ Cf. ANNICCHIARICO, *Il tirocinio formativo attivo dell'insegnamento della religione cattolica*, 44-45.

⁶⁶ Cf. G.J.J. BIESTA – N.C. BURBULES, *Pragmatism and Educational Research*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., New York 2003, 1.

⁶⁷ Cf. P.F. MANCINI, *Insegnamento della religione cattolica tra cultura e processi formativi*, in ANNICCHIARICO, *Il tirocinio formativo attivo dell'insegnamento della religione cattolica*, 163.

ceptual and interpretative instruments for elaborating religious data and to arrive at autonomous, conscious, intelligent, responsible and mature choice through cultural-experiential transformation of their manner of thinking and acting.⁶⁸

Based on this framework, the didactic itinerary could be organized and adequately structured to take into consideration the implications of the «religion lesson period», which represents the technical aspect of the collaboration between the teacher and the student in view of the realisation of the scholastic project.⁶⁹ This needs to be anthropologically relevant and to be elaborated within an atmosphere of group dynamism that favours participation and dialogue.⁷⁰ Here comes in the issue of teachers' competence, update of knowledge-base and restructuring of religious curriculum to integrate new challenges. Ultimately in the interest of significant learning, the cultural-experiential approach should anticipate a flexible methodological framework that integrates the contribution of different models.

Conclusion

The current situation of rapid epochal change provokes reactions, determines new educational demands and imposes an imperative to re-think a more inclusive and critical paradigm for teaching religion based on the recognition of the pluralist character of the schools vis-à-vis the idea of peaceful coexistence and the importance of a model that is guided by the scholastic educational-pedagogical nature, which leaves room for critical reflection, questioning, personal elaboration of religious data and construction of meaning, on the part of the student.

Religion shares a common responsibility with global education. For this reason, its relevance should be verified with respect to critical thinking and pluralism in conjunction with the formidable factor of identification. From this emerges the necessity for a balanced religious literacy and dialogue in the broadest sense of confrontation between the learner and diverse visions of the world. In this sense, religion in school finds itself in mutual collaboration with global education in the processes of acquiring knowledge, values, and attitudes necessary for religious maturity and responsible citizenship. To arrive at such a global vision requires that teaching of religion is not confused with religious instruction or indoctrination, and that teachers get updated in view significant accompaniment.

The cultural-experiential approach proposes: 1) an innovative response to the continuous research towards a vision bereft of polarising religious propaganda; 2) bridges the gap between acquisition of abstract religious notions and concrete experience; 3) allows access to indigenization-contextualization within a broader context of innovation based on contemporary challenges; 4) incorporates the synthesis of human sciences, different teaching models and learning theories; it is consistent with contemporary religious research, and renders the paradigm replicable in all contexts; 5) brings the elements of autonomy, reflection, critical rationality, and pluralism to bear on the verification of religion/religious experience; clears doubts concerning stereotypes and misrepresentations in religious discourses, and facilitates plausibility. This way, it sustains a continuous discussion regarding the proper role of religion as a scholastic discipline.

⁶⁸ Cf. *Ibidem*, 163-164.

⁶⁹ Cf. G. GIUGNI, *Ipotesi e strategie per la programmazione didattica nella scuola*, Giunti e Lisciarli, Teramo 1984, 164.

⁷⁰ Cf. B. JENDORFF, *Insegnare religione, ma come? Proposte per la prassi didattica*, Elledici, Leumann (TO) 1996, 122.

L'orizzonte culturale-esperienziale dell'IRC

► SOMMARIO

Il contributo ripensa l'insegnamento della religione nell'educazione scolastica da una prospettiva culturale-esperienziale. Propone la religione come fatto umano, realtà socio-culturale in profonda connessione con ricerca di senso, costruzione del progetto di vita e identità personale. Il quadro tradizionale pone la questione della fede in cui i presupposti dogmatici vengono identificati come problematici e come un vero e proprio ostacolo alla possibilità di pluralismo religioso in ambito scolastico. La nuova disposizione invoca invece un'«ermeneutica educativa» che conduca l'analisi pedagogica a una riflessione sostenuta e aggiornata sull'identità scolastica e sul rapporto tra educazione e pedagogia, insegnamento e apprendimento. L'articolo presenta un approccio alternativo - antropologico-ermeneutico - verso una costruzione integrativa dei dati religiosi (tenendo conto dei cambiamenti globali e dei dinamismi antropologico-culturali attuali) per cui la religione nella scuola è legata alla cultura e all'esperienza piuttosto che alla fede o alle confessioni particolari. La sua ipotesi è che tale approccio risponda in modo più significativo ai bisogni psicologici, culturali e sociali degli studenti.

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