

Conclusions

The Nature, Epistemological Foundations, and Future of Religious Education in Colombian Schools

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The diversity of beliefs, worldviews and conceptions regarding the religious that exist in the country evince great cultural richness that necessarily converges in classrooms¹⁰. However, lacking a clear institutional framework concerning religious education in the school environment, this richness becomes a problem. Legislation has not responded to the pressing needs of either the education system or society in general. In this respect, it is pertinent to point out that Religious Education is not only a field of study or knowledge. It is a discipline of intellectual inquiry and dissertation that can generate research, knowledge, and practices having to do with the spiritual and transcendental dimension of persons; that is to say, it potentiates spiritual intelligence. Thus, religious education, as a discipline, has “an organized field of research, knowledge, and practices. It can have different levels of generalization, such as disciplinary matrixes, fields, or areas” (Bolívar, 2008, p. 17).

10 Although many cultures have undergone processes of cultural, linguistic, political homogenization, some communities in Colombia have preserved their traditions, in some cases, more consciously than in others. Several communities have incorporated ancestral practices and elements of Christianity into their beliefs. In addition, there are diverse conceptions, churches, and practices associated with Christianity, but each one of them with their own distinguishing characteristics.

As a discipline, RES has undergone a historical process of differentiation and institutionalization within the Colombian context, which has allowed it to configure itself as such. Consequently, it is characterized by the following dimensions: a) institutionalization base, b) construction of objects of knowledge, c) communication networks, socialization, training of new members, d) regulation mechanisms, rules, and social conventions.

Regarding RES's institutional foundations, there are legal and normative frameworks pertaining to educational policy in Colombia, which have regulated the understanding and practice of RES. Among them are: Law 115 of 1994, Law 133 of 1994, Decree 1278 of 2002, Ministerial Directive 002 of 2004, Decree 4500 of 2006, and Decree 2450 of 2015. Unfortunately, these laws, decrees, agreements, and ministerial directives reveal an ambiguity and incoherence that affect their understanding. On the one hand, they say that RES is a fundamental and essential area in the education of persons. And, on the other hand, they state that it is not compulsory and they leave it to the free choice of students or their parents/legal guardians. In addition, religious freedom is promoted, but the certificate of competence of the teacher must be issued by a church entity. This demonstrates the need for the State, through the National Ministry of Education (MEN, according to its acronym in Spanish), together with the academicians and professors of RES, to promote reflection and research scenarios to clarify its institutional foundation.

RES has studied the construction of objects of knowledge, through its theoretical development, based on the Constitutional Reform of 1991 and Law 115/94. Consequently, in the 1990s, it was conceived as a process of evangelization by ecclesial institutions. Theorists, such as Peresson and Siciliani, were key figures. At the end of that decade, two groups of scholars and researchers appeared who conceive RES on the basis of other perspectives: a) José Luis Meza and his colleagues from Universidad Javeriana, who articulated RES with the theology of liberation and the sciences of religion; b) Jaime Laurence Bonilla and Elizabeth Coy, together with their team of researchers from the Universidad San Buenaventura of Bogotá, who articulated RES with the theology of religious pluralism and religious diversity. And now,

in the second decade of the 21st century, we, Andrés Hernández and Dayro Botero (researchers from the Universidad Santo Tomás and from the Universidad Católica Lumen Gentium of Cali, respectively) state that the nature of Religious Education in Schools is the spiritual dimension and intelligence. And we propose an epistemological corpus for RES, based on nuclear theories, practices, and other theories.

Understanding RES as a discipline is not an isolated action. Its praxis is grounded in the institutional character and the construction of objects of knowledge, based on a collaborative perspective, in which communication networks emerge with full meaning. REDERE, for example, seeks to unify criteria in the pedagogical concretion of RES in Catholic schools; CONACED extends the spectrum to comprehensive education, and CELAM, to Latin American reality. All these networks have points of convergence with the Ministry of National Education. This government institution - with guidelines, such as the Curricular Achievement Indicators of 1998, or the Guiding Document for Assessment of Religious Education Competencies of 2012- shows a clear interest in understanding school disciplines and in comprehensive education. In local contexts, this task is carried out by the different Secretaries of Education.

These communication networks serve as regulation mechanisms for the pedagogical actions of RES in Colombia, both for school and university education. It is a fact that the Colombian Ministry of Education shows its concern for the guidelines regarding nomination and quality in Decree 2450 of December 17, 2015 and Resolution 02041 of February 3, 2016. Likewise, it is interested in strengthening the comprehensive training of teachers, based on a holistic anthropological conception of human dimensions and intelligences. This work engages nine Colombian universities that currently offer an undergraduate degree in Religious Education. In addition, these networks are means of socializing pedagogical experiences, from which social conventions emerge that favor the teaching and learning processes of RES.

In that order of ideas, Religious Education in Colombia is a mandatory and fundamental discipline for comprehensive education, to which the country's educational policy is committed. The different

epistemological, theoretical, practical, and research developments of religious Education since the 1990s have made it possible for us to propose our own corpus today, based on its object of study, namely: the unfolding of the spiritual and transcendent dimensions and the development of the spiritual intelligence of a person. The constructs included in RES as a school discipline, are:

- Nuclear theories: spiritual dimension, spiritual intelligence, transcendent dimension.
- Practical theories: RES curriculum, didactics, and assessment.
- Other theories: Independent but closely related disciplines that make possible the development of the object of RES: anthropology of religion, sociology of religion, psychology of religion, philosophy of religion, phenomenology of religion, among others.

This corpus has a very broad horizon. In fact, it is an original proposal within the epistemological, theoretical, and conceptual constructions in Colombia. Furthermore, it is necessary and urgent to deploy each one of the theories that make RES a teaching and learning scenario that empowers people. However, it is pertinent to point out that, in this text (a research product), we have only been able to: a) affirm the object of study and the nature of RES and b) outline the contributions of the other theories, such as the studies of religion, to its epistemological construct.

Other Theories: Studies of Religion

Regarding the particularity of the studies of religion, in terms of denominational and pastoral perspectives, it must be taken into account that religious systems have specific characteristics (canons, doctrines, rites, consecrated persons, books...), which can be addressed epistemologically only if they are studied with non-denominational attitudes and intentions and based on theoretical procedures, without losing sight of their experiential horizon. For this reason, if it is necessary to address religious doctrines and prescriptions from the

denominational perspective, such references should be made, in the studies of religion, in such a way that already established creeds are not defended. Since RES must account for the religious in all its amplitude and address all the dimensions it involves, it is necessary to address all of the elements that allow for a clear, complete, and comprehensive understanding of the religious.

When we say that it is necessary to resort to studies of religion, this is not done so that the student has a range of options to choose from. This broad view of religion makes it possible to know or identify religious practices and experiences, as well as to recognize, understand, and value the reality of religious and cultural diversity. In other words, the history of religions, comparative history, and the contributions of ethnology and ethnography are only inputs for the construction of a complete conception of religion.

Many different elements from the studies of religion are suitable for RES. Diez (2002) has pointed out several of them: *amplitude* and *comprehensiveness* allow us to account for religious beliefs and practices, in relation to all the aspects associated with it: politics, economics, arts, and language, as well as for the great number of perspectives and ways to approach religion: *autonomy* implies approaching religion without the conditionings of a specific religious denomination; *plurality* means taking into account all religions, religiosities, and worldviews in order to identify cultural traits or conceptions associated with the religious; *objectivity* indicates that the studies of religion and RES do not make moral or aesthetic judgments concerning belief systems or the religious practices of cultures that may not be understood, or are far removed.

Now, having identified the importance of addressing the studies of religion with the intention of epistemologically grounding RES, it is worthwhile to dwell on some considerations arising from the analysis of those disciplines that take religion as their object of interest.

All of the studies of religion, analyzed here, from anthropology to the phenomenology of religion, contribute to understanding and valuing cultural and religious diversity. In fact, the particularity of each religious conception leads to different scientific and common sense perspectives, as well as to aesthetic and historical ones. Although human groups

construct their life on the basis of social and institutional values (this is the aim of taking action), they also express themselves by means of beliefs and symbols. Therefore, the religious requires an approach based on all aspects: social, institutional, reflexive, and individual. That is why, in the reality of classrooms, where there is both religious plurality and non-commitment to a religious denomination, it is necessary to generate aperture to dialogue and respect.

On the other hand, analytical thinking regarding the religious is another contribution made by the studies of religion. This is the reflection on a concrete human event, so as to understand it, based on reason, as the constitutive openness of the human being to a higher-order reality, while, at the same time, it is evidence of a self-manifestation of this superior being. In short, what we want to make clear is that religious experiences are innate and, therefore, do not cease to express themselves. Hence, the question concerning the meaning of life arises at this point: the spiritual or transcendent dimension. When the General Law of Education makes reference to that dimension, it does not explain it; it simply mentions it because it appears to be something extremely important for the human being. And it is certainly a valuable aspect for the person since it is where all those concerns that relate to the meaning of life and transcendence are found.

In order to respond to all the problems mentioned above and given the heterogeneity of the studies of religion (both regarding its nature, as well as its methods and history), it has been necessary to identify the common elements they share, in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the religious that, as we have tried to show, are common elements present in the different types of studies considered, although with their own peculiarities. Thus, the journey through the various studies of religion, (philosophy of religion, phenomenology of religion, anthropology of religion, psychology of religion, and sociology of religion) allows us to identify the contributions that each makes to the understanding of the religious phenomenon, in favor of the epistemological grounding of RES. The categories used in this attempt were elements of cohesion such as the meaning of life, transcendence, the religious, the sacred, and cultural and religious diversity, which will be developed, below, in synergy with the studies of religion.

Some Contributions of the Studies of Religion to RES

Due to their multidimensionality, human beings are capable of asking themselves about the meaning of existence. That is to say, they have the capacity to ask themselves what really endows their stay in the world with value and meaning. In terms of the spiritual dimension, this is what makes it possible to ask about the meaning of existence and seek plausible answers to that question.

In this search for meaning, spiritual intelligence plays a vital role: it enables human beings to have deep and intimate aspirations that allow them to achieve a view of life and of reality that integrates, connects, transcends, and gives meaning to life. All human beings are called upon to give meaning to their existence. The way they do so depends on the development of their intelligence, social interactions, and educational and cultural background.

As stated above, the quest for the meaning of life is undertaken in several ways: a) doing or producing something, b) experiencing something or loving someone, c) facing an inevitable, fatal fate with an adequately strong attitude. Human beings want to know both the “why” and the “what for” of things. Therefore, questions arise such as: Why am I in the world? What is the meaning of my existence? What can I expect after my death? What is the meaning of the world? Why suffer? Why struggle? What experiences are worth living? What is worth doing? How to make sense of my life?

All the above, together with what Victor Frankl has called the *spiritual unconscious*, opens up the way for discovering or becoming aware of the fact that human beings, on the basis of their anthropological being, are capable of transcendence, which empowers them to move in the realm of the unknown. This capacity is not exhausted in a religious denomination, but can also arise in cultural rootedness and other traits of social interactions.

Transcendence is also understood as the possibility of expanding the self beyond the regular confines of everyday life experiences. This category is now of great importance, since it makes it possible to go beyond the framework of the immediate and superficial, to generate

new referents and fight individualism. Seen from the psychology of religion, this enables the subject to embark on the path of maturing as a human being. When transcendence is achieved, subjects will be able to develop meditative thinking and reflection on the meaning of life and their own existential project.

The search for the transcendent involves a spirituality that is not necessarily confined to a particular creed. Thus, the spiritual or transcendent dimension obliges persons to see religion beyond a particular manifestation and rescues the fact that their existence is a faithful expression of the being of humankind. In other words, in the field of RES, it is possible to potentiate the religious experience, provided that a permanent search for the transcendent is undertaken, of that beyond which may or may not be represented in the divine.

RES has the possibility of guiding subjects towards a global vision of existence, so that they can live fully and happily. To achieve this, it is necessary to encourage the construction of a complete synthesis of the world in order to find the place that is occupied by the self. RES, based on the transcendent dimension of humankind, helps prepare this synthesis by providing global perspectives to address the question of meaning. Therefore, religious education based on the studies of religion opens up the universe to accompany human beings in the endeavor of transcending themselves and the natural world. Thus, natural objects and manufactured by humans are transformed into symbolic realities, into instruments that communicate something what lies beyond.

With regard to transcendence, religion, as a social phenomenon, describes human beings' capacity to reconnect, to join a collective, which allows them to experience the totally other; in other words, to manage to establish links with what they recognize as different from themselves and establish some form of communication. However, the crisis of religious meaning brought about by modernity situates the study of the religious not in the sacred, but in the 'profane', that is to say, in everyday life. This should not be seen as a threat or as the end of religion, but rather as an opportunity. Religion is transformed and this is where RES is essential to analyze all the implications and challenges that the religious entails for human beings.

Religion, which is present in society, even in the midst of the crisis of meaning, challenges the modern human being to create a world of referents in an axiological order. Therefore, RES needs to address this reality with a critical and open look, so that the axiological construction contemplates the reality of the other more closely, given the cultural diversity of the contemporary world.

Thanks to the studies of religion, it has become evident that the human being is a being in search of meaning. Therefore, if RES wants to be truly meaningful, in the education processes of society, it must seize this juncture. It should demonstrate that religion as a phenomenon, permeates various social spheres and is an integral part of the human being. On this basis, the door is opened to find the *raison d'être* of the human being.

Religion has an important role in the process of rationalizing the world, understood as a process of clarification and systematization of ideas viewed according to their binding force (normativity). This generates, collectively, an intentionality in social action. In this order of ideas, religion plays an innovative role and is a driver of change in various social spheres; in other words, it is a pretext for action. Beliefs, religious practices, community and social aspects, aesthetics, and economic and ethical implications converge in religion. All of this shapes the way human beings are organized within society and the ways in which religion influences the historical development of societies.

On the other hand, when one delves deeply into the religious, it becomes clear that human experience, associated with the religious, both in the individual dimension and in the social relationships it implies, can confront the (epistemological) rejection that modernity imposes on ancestral mythical-religious world-views. In this sense RES makes a significant contribution since it values what is different and opens up the possibility of holistic perspectives. This is especially significant on the American continent, where ancestral cultures with worldviews, rites, and different beliefs endure and survive, but with a broader and fuller understanding of the religious.

The category of the sacred has an important place in the study of religion. It is defined, according to some perspectives, as that which is reserved for divinity, exclusive and separate from the mundane.

So, the sacred is a concomitant part of the human being, and it consists of the transcendent and the spiritual, of the totally other. All of this is articulated on the basis of hierophanies, that is to say, the essential, common structures, forms and characteristics. In religion, the sacred is one of the clearest expressions of what is called religious experience. This happens within a creed and it is the relationship with the *fane* (contrary to the profane). This experience of the sacred, which uses religious language (symbol, myth, rite, art) to communicate, refers not only to divinity. It refers to a space that allows us to go beyond, a space that is not necessarily associated with divinity.

The sacred and the profane cannot be understood as separate categories. They must be seen as intertwined because they give meaning to religious practices and are the basis for the understanding of the transcendent. Therefore, in RES, emphasis should be placed on the spiritual dimension as a natural condition of human beings which enables them to view the world differently, to be more aware of differentiated alterity, so that new referents of interaction and tolerance can be constructed on that basis.

Finally, religious and cultural diversity, which is part of the reality of the school system and of society in general, involves a great number of conceptions, practices, and perspectives, regarding the religious. All of them have led to processes of religious syncretism, interfaith dialogue, and discussions concerning religious tolerance. The diversity, contemplated here, is not only religious; it is also cultural. That is, we take into account both the beliefs and practices clearly identified as religious and the conceptions held regarding the religious. This is necessary because, in a significantly culturally heterogeneous reality, the phenomenon of secularization should be present (in addition to religious beliefs and practices). This phenomenon developed significantly in both theoretical and personal experiences. This implies that RES must also consider the conceptions that lead to the separation of the religious from the public sphere and public administration, that is, those that move religion to the private sphere, where religious beliefs and practices are simply handled as options.

Therefore, it is essential that a proposal for RES contain: a) the deployment of the abovementioned categories and dimensions;

b) its justification and development as a discipline and, in particular, as a school discipline, c) a complete, comprehensive, and complex development, based on theories and studies of religion.

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