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Towards an ethical-dialogical approach to religious education: a theoretical analysis from the cases of Ireland and England

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Abstract

This article draws on the experiences of Ireland and England, which support different conceptions and practices of religious education (RE), in order to provide a normative framework for the organisation of RE in multicultural states. This analysis consists in an assessment of three conceptions of RE: the liberal conception, which emphasises neutrality and objectivity; the pragmatist conception, which is egalitarian in character; and the tradition-oriented conception, which is based on a substantive ethics. Rejecting the view that RE should be only informative and free from criticism of content, I will make the case for an ethical-dialogical approach to RE, whereby pupils can learn from each other's beliefs and experiences, as availed by their own cultural traditions, without setting aside their capacity to evaluate different moral claims. This approach to RE is especially designed to multidenominational schools that recognise the ethical potential of learning from religion, but are sensible towards issues of conscience in plural environments.

Keywords Religious Education · Ethical-Dialogical Approach · England · Ireland · Multiculturalism

How can religious education (RE) meet the requirements of intercultural learning in democratic contexts? In this article, I assess different conceptions and models of RE in Ireland and England, with a view to construing a normative framework that meets the requirements of a dialogical rationality. Pointing out the links between cognitive and experiential knowledge, I reject the liberal view that RE should be purely information-oriented. Furthermore, I stress that, without a transcendental perspective of truth enquiry, egalitarian models of RE are not well suited to motivate citizens to expand their cultural horizons beyond the boundaries of their local communities. With this in mind, I make the case for an ethical-dialogical account of RE, which allows for the articulation of moral perceptions from each pupil's

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experience of the religious phenomenon, as well as the critical appreciation of religious and secular truth claims.

1 The neutralist-liberal conception

The neutralist-liberal conception of RE is characterised by a particular emphasis on the idea of impartiality, which is supposed to be achieved when the educative process is carried out in an "objective, critical and pluralistic" manner, as in accordance with the normative principles supported by the European Court of Human Rights (Folgerø v. Norway, 2007; Hasan and Eylem Zengin v. Turkey, 2008; Lautsi v. Italy, 2011). As I will show, this perspective points to the assumption that there is a neutral, independent standpoint of reason, which is the source of normative values and scientific standards for any educative enterprise. Underlining this perspective is a secular view of public morality, as well as a formal account of the educative process, which separates cognitive knowledge from its practical dimension.

1.1 The neutralist-liberal conception: Ireland

Among the proponents of the neutralist-liberal conception in Ireland are organisations such as the Humanist Association of Ireland (HAI), the Education Equality group and Atheist Ireland. Although they all share the view that the educational system in Ireland has to be reformed, so as to prevent discrimination in admission and enforce children's and parents' rights of conscience, their proposals regarding the study of religion at present are somewhat different in nuance.

For the HAI, the public school should foster social cohesion through the imparting of shared values that account for the needs of every citizen and group represented in the country. RE should be merely informative, based on the comparative study of religious and non-religious worldviews. They are strongly opposed to the denominational model which, in the HAI's opinion, reinforces divisive tendencies in Irish societies, especially in separating pupils during classes of RE. In contrast with this practice, the HAI favours a model of RE that can be accessible to all pupils, without violating their basic rights, with the confinement of confessional instruction to outside school hours.

Indeed, the perception of RE that the HAI stands for is one that entails an objective imparting of RE contents, regardless of the religious composition of the school, with a view to achieving educational neutrality. As they note in their 2011 submission to the Irish Human Rights Commission for Education and Religion:

> In the good society, religious belief would be a purely private matter and the public arena, including schools, would be strictly neutral in this area. Schools should promote social cohesion and an open society, based on shared human values, and genuinely inclusive and accommodating towards religious and non-religious requirements of those they serve, including tiny minorities. Otherwise, we risk a tyranny of the majority, where powerful or well organised minorities can insist on their needs being accommodated and disregarding those of others (HAI, 2001, p. 14).

The relegation of issues of belief to the private sphere, combined with an egalitarian conception of education that, drawing on "shared human values", precludes differential treatment for majority groups and minorities, points to a liberal perception that separates objective and practical knowledge. According to this view, an RE syllabus should have as its only purpose the examination of the factual and cognitive dimension of religious phenomena.

This concern with the objectivity of the educative process is also shared by Atheist Ireland, which strongly criticises the multidenominational model of RE carried out by Educate Together schools, in view of its tendency to bringing in symbolic elements for constructive knowledge, as well as blurring the boundaries between the public and the private sphere. For their members, RE should be devoid of interference from religious practices in the local community in such a way that celebrations, rituals and religious symbols are completely absent from the school environment. They believe that only this conception of secular education is capable of meeting the UN's requirements for a pluralistic education. In their words:

> A non-denominational or secular school would provide an ethics programme, but it would not combine moral and spiritual development as part of an ethics programme. A secular school would recognise that morality is independent of spirituality (Doyle, 2014).

As the European Court has been insisting on the necessity to provide citizens with access to a schooling system whereby educational contents are imparted in an objective, critical and pluralist manner, it is easier to assume that a secular education, drawing mainly on the historical dimension of the religious phenomenon, can best serve this purpose.

The Education Equality Group seeks to remain neutral towards multidenominational and non-denominational preferences, while opposing the practice of National Community Schools of segregating pupils in RE classes according to their religious backgrounds. Instead, they advocate for "faith formation in all state-funded schools to be confined to a distinct period of time (not permeated throughout the school day) and taught after core school hours so that parents can effectively choose whether or not their children receive instruction in a particular religion" (Education Equality, 2016: Sect. 2.3, ii). Hence, along with the others, this organisation shares a scepticism towards the possibilities of religious narratives to convey moral reasons that may concern all citizens in the national public life.

1.2 The neutralist-liberal conception: England

As in Ireland, the organisation Humanist UK, formerly the British Humanist Association, pushes for RE to become "an inclusive, impartial, objective, fair, balanced and relevant subject allowing pupils to explore a variety of religions and non-religious worldviews" (Humanist, 2017). Even though the group welcomed the initiative of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to publish a non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education (NFRE) (2014), their leadership have been raising concerns about the proper place given to Humanism in the composition of RE syllabuses, as suggested by that document. In fact, even though the NFRE recommended the study of Christianity throughout all key stages, it endorsed a demographic logic for the appreciation of other religious and secular ethical systems. In this sense, humanism should become part of the RE syllabus, only

"where appropriate", while the decision regarding its inclusion should be at the discretion of each Local Education Authority (LEA). Thus, against what they refer to as the "NFRE's deliberately light touch approach", the organisation has been seeking parity in the treatment of Humanism and other religions, which in their view can only be achieved through the centralisation of the RE syllabus in accordance with a National Framework (Watson, 2007, p. 2).

Here, the departure from an in-depth approach to religious phenomena that results from the widening of the range of religions covered by the syllabus, with the aim to make RE impartial towards the diversity of religious and non-religious lifestyles, points to a similar epistemological interpretation of the process of knowledge acquisition, which prescinds from practical engagements in the assessment of ethical contents.

This is also the perception of the National Secular Society, which has been raising serious criticism of the privilege enjoyed by Christianity in RE provisions, while stressing the necessity for objectivity and neutrality in the whole curriculum:

> (…) we believe the in-depth teaching of a specific faith should be a parental responsibility, for those that want it, and not the role of state education. It is no more the role of the state to instil religious beliefs as it is the state's role to question the validity of religious beliefs, or, similarly, political beliefs.
> We would therefore like to see religious education replaced with a new programme of study that allows pupils to take a more objective and religiously neutral approach to the consideration of moral and ethical issues (National Secular Society, 2013: 9).

Importantly, while conceding that the ideas pertaining to the normative and value-based elements of religious belief can be covered in an inclusive programme of philosophy and ethics, the society is clear in asserting the autonomy of public values from theological moral claims (National Secular Society, 2017, p. 23).

1.3 Assessing the neutralist-liberal conception

The liberal claim that the privilege conceded to Christianity in RE syllabuses and in the life of school violates basic standards of liberal equality by marginalising minority worldviews and reproducing structures of dominance deserves to be addressed. Indeed, the liberal objection is sound in that reflective thinking requires a polyphonic appreciation of accepted social values and public norms. Nevertheless, when it comes to the educative enterprise, it is necessary to bear in mind the experiential dimension of the process of knowledge acquisition, which in pragmatist philosophies are associated with the intellectual canons of a tradition or cultural perceptions articulated from within social activities. As John Dewey and Richard Rorty have noted, the immersion into social activities is a fundamental part of any learning effort, as it is through collective experiences that individuals acquire the resources to find meaning in the objects of their thinking.

In fact, for Dewey (1929, p. 30), every science has as one of its aims to bring into light the "specified course of searchings, doings and arrivals, in consequence of which certain things have been found". In other words, philosophical and scientific consensus are realised through the reconstruction of the path of historical experiences that have led each individual to reach distinct conclusions about a determinate object. Since those conclusions derive

from particular "choices" regarding distinct criteria of justification, this reconstruction is necessary so that rational agents can evaluate each other's findings according to the same framework of reasons (Dewey, 1929, p. 31). While Dewey himself contends that experience "has its equivalents in such affairs as history, life, culture", Rorty (1999), Dewey's closest disciple, points out that intellectual freedom and the individual quest for the good can only take place once a process of socialisation that familiarises the pupils with historical narratives and social practices has been carried out. Even though individuation, which follows socialisation as a critical assessment of social practices, is the culmination of the educative process, it draws on the cultural resources of each language community. In other words, embeddedness in a tradition precedes social criticism.

Dewey's and Rorty's position can be illustrated by Thomas Khun's conception of scientific paradigms. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Kuhn explains how the constitutive character of language informs epistemic paradigms to the extent that – throughout history – human beings have formulated different views of the world realities which were associated with particular linguistic pre-understandings. The shift from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican paradigm of science, for instance, allowed Western astronomy to develop new tools of research and observe movements in some parts of the sky that were formerly considered as deprived of motion – because of the assumption that superlunary heavens were the locus of perfection. In contrast, he notes, the Chinese, whose cosmological worldviews did not preclude the possibility of celestial movement, had records of the observation of new stars in the space at an earlier date (Kuhn, 1962, p. 116). As Kuhn (1962, p. 113) highlights "What a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see."

My argument here is that the pragmatist critique of objective knowledge supports a tradition-oriented approach to RE, whereby practical knowledge can be enhanced through a syllabus that reflects and accommodates local cultural activities and pupils' experiences of religious phenomena. My own view is that since those practices come to form a network of cooperative enterprises, Dewey's thinking opens up possibilities for a common pursuit of conceptions of good life, which are informed by cultural perceptions. Although I shall distance myself from the non-metaphysical assumptions of pragmatist theories in the next session, Dewey's and Rorty's emphasis on culture as the foundation for any endeavour of moral and intellectual enquiry converges with my ethical-dialogical framework of RE.

With this in mind, I should note that the claim that RE syllabuses, according to the neutralist liberal conception, should aim at covering as many religions as possible, and prioritise breath over depth, overlooks the experiential dimension of cognitive knowledge. As Smart (1968, p. 93–94) has underscored, as with the study of philosophy or sciences, one cannot grasp the reasons informing the development of different religious systems of belief without engaging with their contents as in a personal quest. Smart contends that the arid enunciation of Plato's teaching, for instance, would be sterile without the dialogical attitude by which one raises objections, establishes connections and reinterprets his propositions according to some particular concerns. Similarly, the history of sciences should be capable of showing the specific reasons why new methods and conceptions were formulated to rectify past paradigms and improve old techniques. Hence, it is not difficult to conclude that RE is more effective as a discipline when it fosters that attitude of engagement whereby the contents of religious topics find correspondence within the life, activities and aspirations of each believer. What is important to highlight is that each of these disciplines, even when

presented in the form of a historical overview, connects cultural experiences and scientific knowledge, since the contents of the syllabuses draw on particular narratives, referring to a determined space-temporal cut, which defines what is relevant to the social and political life of that particular society. Hence, if philosophy classes in Western societies tend to dedicate more time to the study of Plato, Kant or Mill, in contrast with Eastern schools such as Confucianism or Daoism, it is probably because the former had a greater impact for the shaping of social and political practices in those societies. This does not need to entail a static perception of knowledge, as the pluralisation of Western societies may lead educationalists to develop a greater interest in the philosophies of the East. However, in order to enhance the possibilities for the understanding of alien cultural and intellectual standards of thinking, a practical appreciation of activities, attitudes and lifestyles that inform those philosophies is necessary. It would be interesting, for instance, to compare Western principles of individual freedom to Eastern views about the collective life, as well as the impact of those for conceptions of rights and justice. This may be especially valid for the consideration of struggles between some children and parents from an Asian background regarding the choice of a spouse[1]. In any case, the more one can draw on the experiences of pupils of different backgrounds, the more the orientation for mutual learning can be effective.

For these reasons, an ethical-dialogical approach that accounts for the ways religion is experienced by members of the main religious traditions in the country, as well as by the adepts of other minority faiths in specific localities, should be preferred to a neutralist model that sacrifices depth for the sake of breadth. With this arrangement, the syllabus can be designed to address not only general ethical questions, but especially the more specific issues that concern the local community. Pupils will thus be able to seek mutual understanding – with the support of the syllabus and the assistance of the teacher – by asking each other about the significance of their religious beliefs and how they may actually influence their actions. Bearing in mind the experiential character of learning, intercultural activities such as school trips to museums and temples should also be encouraged in this scheme.

2 The pragmatist/postmodern conception

The pragmatist/postmodern educational framework has the advantage of taking into account pupils' particular experiences in faith activities as a starting point for the educative endeavour. Nevertheless, while this account also departs from the objectivism of liberal positions, it also fails to provide an epistemological or even an ontological foundation for systematic procedures of critical thinking and self-criticism. Indeed, with its emphasis on the individual and social utility of self-oriented practices, and its disregard for an all-encompassing account of public morality, this perspective cannot help falling into the paradox of an autonomous thinking agent that, in exercising its own freedom, may opt for disengagement and adopt a conservative stance on ethical and moral matters.

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[1] Nancy S. Netting (2006) conducted a survey with young people of Indo-Canadian origin about their views on arranged marriage. Although some of them strongly rejected the practice, many held the view that love should not be a matter of individual choice only, as it can also be brought about afterwards, in the course of a relationship. As the majority of the respondents opted for a middle ground position between reworked to have enough here to apply individual and parental choice – with the children assenting to a pre-arranged list of candidates, Netting realised that the idea of one's life as community-oriented challenges a strict account of liberal freedom. Here, interdependence comes up as an important determinant of individual choices.

2.1 The pragmatist/postmodern conception: Ireland

In Ireland, even though the *Learn Together* curriculum, taught in Educate Together schools, presents particular nuances, both in its propositional framework and in relation to distinct local practices, that make it difficult to be analysed according to specific modalities of RE teaching, some of its contents stand out as stances of a pragmatist/postmodern approach to religion. The curriculum is divided into four different strands: Moral and Spiritual, Equality and Justice, Belief Systems and Ethics and the Environment. While interconnected by the common objective of exploring different worldviews and equipping pupils with critical skills for ethical decisions, 'Belief Systems' is definitely the main strand dealing with religious matters. It was designed to address the main religions present in Ireland: Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and Buddhism, discussing their origins, doctrines, symbols and celebrations.

Importantly, in exploring each religion's worldviews, as well as their rituals and practices, the students are supposed to develop an appreciation for each of them, looking for similarities and "common links" between these traditions. Thus, despite its aim of fostering critical thinking, the curriculum is rather cautious when it comes to dealing with divergent perspectives, as it assumes that there are overlapping elements and values that bring different traditions together. This trend can be observed throughout the document's explanation of the goals of the 'Belief Systems' strand. In the first strand unit, "Introducing Key Figures in the Major Belief Systems", it sets out that fifth and sixth should: "identify any common features which may exist between religious leaders, e.g. the emergence of different Christian traditions, the problems that arose across these traditions and the move towards closer integration" (Educate Together, 2004, p 36). Similarly, the second strand unit, "Rites and Ceremonies", establishes that children should be enabled to "discuss the similarities and differences across the major belief systems in respect of ritual and ceremony and identify any common links between these rites" (Educate Together, 2004, p. 37). The same is true for the other two strand units, namely, "Celebrations" and "Beliefs and Values", in which students should find commonalities among different religious festivals (Educate Together, 2004: 38), as well as across distinct code and value systems (Educate Together, 2004, p. 39).

The presupposition of "common links" between different religious values and experiences in different traditions points to an understanding of RE practices as a means to promote pre-determined secular goals associated with the general appreciation of cultural diversity, translated into distinct forms of religious expression that, in spite of their differences, can equally contribute to the development of public virtues, as well as strengthen social ties through the creation of new relationships. It is noteworthy that, in contrast to the purport of the *Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum* (1999), which highlights that "the spiritual dimension of life expresses itself in a search for truth and in the quest for a transcendent element within human experience" (United Kingdom, 1999, p. 27), the *Learn Together* curriculum does not associate critical thinking with the quest for truth, as that word is not even mentioned in the document. Although bringing out concepts such as reflective thinking, and critical knowledge, it presents a cautious approach when it comes to religious truth and moral enquiry. In contrast, it tends to assume that certain conceptions of equality and human rights are the pillars upon which every educative endeavour is built. In fact, in an article entitled *The Religious Void in Irish Education* (2016), the CEO of Educate Together,

Paul Rowe, while criticising those religious educationalists that claim that the absence of a strong denominational formation would lead society to a "moral vacuum", points out that:

> Educate Together rejects the fundamental premise that one specific religious or philosophical outlook is necessary for a moral or ethical purpose or for human well-being. The experience of our schools has repeatedly proven the contrary. The Educate Together movement has shown that once a school asserts a strong value system of equality and human rights and builds a school culture (or "ethos") around this, it is perfectly able to engage with the full educational and social needs of pupils and to provide a rich, comprehensive and nourishing school experience (Rowe, 2016).

Thus, notwithstanding its accommodative stance towards the celebration of the cognitive and aesthetic dimensions of the religious phenomena, the *Learn Together* curriculum is ill-equipped to inform RE with the critical attitude necessary for the assessment of different religious perspectives of truth and moral enquiry.

2.2 The pragmatist/postmodern conception: England

In Britain, the multicultural provisions brought forth by the Education Reform Act (1988) did not pass without criticism to what some regarded as an "Anglocentric" approach to its core subjects. This applies not only to history and geography, where most of the bias against the contribution of non-English and non-Western cultures to the idea of Britishness is located, but also for subjects such as arts and music, which usually privilege European writers, painters, and composers. This was the view expressed by the authors of the report *Diversity and Citizenship in the Curriculum: Research Review* (2007), commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). They noted that the National Curriculum tends to promote a sense of Britishness that is "often equated with Englishness (thus excluding other groups such as Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish), 'Whiteness' and also with Christianity" (Maylor et al., 2007, p. 6). Thus, in order to counteract the centralising forces of a monocultural education, the curriculum should be reformed with a view to including minority narratives and global perspectives of the process of identity-construction. On the issue of RE, the report draws attention both to a mismatch between the descriptions taught in the classroom and pupils' religious practices, as well as to the exclusion of some minority faiths, such as traditional African-Caribbean religions.

Despite a legitimate attempt to bring about pluralism in the curriculum, the research relies on a constructivist perspective to highlight the fluid character of national identities and the problems associated with educational policies that aim to inculcate a certain set of controversial political values. Although the report presents a strong case for the reformulation of the History curriculum, in a manner that takes account of the contribution of minorities to the country's development – for instance, the authors cite Peter Fryer to point out that "whilst Asian and Black African and Caribbean people played a significant role in fighting both world wars, this is often not shown in contemporary representations" (Maylor et al., 2007, p. 55) – it does not articulate a deliberative framework of moral perceptions for the purpose of critical thinking. In fact, while assessing current perspectives on citizenship education – which in Britain is still diffused among different curriculum areas, including moral and spiritual education – the report stresses that conceiving public virtues in terms

of national public values is to disregard social struggles for identity-renegotiation. Hence, instead of the promotion of common values and a shared conception of citizenship, the curriculum should emphasise "antiracism and the study of universal human rights", while allowing for the flourishing of multicultural identities in the public life (Maylor et al., 2007, p. 50).

2.3 Assessing the pragmatist/postmodern conception

I would like to evoke Clive Erricker's conception of RE in order to assess pragmatism theories of multicultural education. Erricker (2007) spells out his postmodern philosophy of education through the evocation of Kierkegaard's theology of the absurd and Derrida's theory of language. As for the former, Erricker embraces the notion of God as the Unknown, that is, the one who lies beyond the limits of reason, in a relation of absolute difference, out-reached from any possibility of conceptual grasp. For Erricker, Kierkegaard's approach to faith as absurdity exposes the inconsistency of a rational attempt to define the nature of God through metaphysical reasons. On the other hand, it leads the religious person to acknowledge the proper character of religiosity as a performative attitude (that is, of an action orientated to reach the unknown), which requires interpretation and, especially, decision, from the agent, in processes of meaning-making. In other words, the agent has to make a choice about what she/he wants to believe.

From Derrida, Erricker takes the notion of iterability, which is the re-appropriation of meanings in discourse acts, so as to highlight the constructive character of religious narratives. As individuals redefine the contents of religious doctrines according to their own perceptions and needs, the educator of religion must not try to convey moral teachings and/or promote fixed values. Instead, they should allow pupils to decide on the significance of religious narratives for their own lives through dialogical procedures that draw on a variety of experiences of the religious phenomenon.

However, by denying the capacity of rational actors to evaluate the truth claims of religious propositions, Erricker brings a great deal of pragmatism to his theory. Indeed, as the truth is no longer at stake in the educative process, religion loses its appeal of bringing about a collective sense of justice and solidarity through the articulation of common ethical perceptions. As moral enquiry is deprived of its transcendental character, the critical purpose of normative discourses is eschewed in favour of a utilitarian particularism, where individual will determines validity according to idiosyncratic goals, while at the communitarian level, political compromises regulates conflicts of interest without any perspective of normative resolution.

This pragmatist viewpoint underestimates the role of truth in directing the dialogical process, encapsulating social groups in their particular worldviews and precluding the expansion of cultural horizons. Moreover, by redirecting the moral significance of religious meanings to immanent realities, which no longer refer to the metaphysical realm, this perspective fails to take account of possible solutions to fundamental normative disagreements. Importantly, the conception of truth that I am proposing is based on Jürgen Habermas's (2003) account of communicative rationality. According to this theory, democratic consensuses are constituted by moral claims which are analogous to the truth, to the extent that

individuals can assess their validity in terms of a view of universal justice[2]. While democratic deliberation is always open-ended, individuals cannot avoid giving a "yes" or "no" position to divergent truth and moral claims that may disrupt the agent's worldview.

Hence, bearing in mind that particular vocabularies are defined according to the goals of mutual understanding, a context-transcendental view of a linguistic community that remains open to the possibility of overcoming its own situation should guide every educative enterprise. For Cooke (2001, p. 14), citizens' constant search for new semantic meanings that outruns justification is justified by a metaphysical perception of the recalcitrancy of reality[3]. Accordingly, it is the recalcitrancy of reality what inspires imaginative endeavours for semantic and normative innovation, as a permanent effort carried out by citizens with a view to bringing about a more perfected conception of social justice – in other words, a purely epistemic account of moral validity would not be able to justify the search for context-transcendental reasons through processes of meaning exchange with citizens from different cultural backgrounds. In this sense, the evocation of different historical and religious narratives, rather than an aim in itself, should allow for the intersubjective reconstruction of scientific and moral validity claims. What is more, as the process of language reconstruction is truth-oriented, the outcome of moral deliberative procedures should allow for shifts in perceptions, leading to the reconfiguration of different cultures into a broader, political unity. In other words, in carrying out the assessment of ethical norms and truth conceptions, participants help to shape the public sphere with a republican sense of collective values, through advancing or abandoning their particular cultural or religious moral perspectives in deliberative procedures.

It should be noted, therefore, that both the *Learn Together* curriculum and the *Diversity and Citizenship in the Curriculum* report err in reducing the aims of the ethical curriculum to the mere expression of different worldviews. In pursuing this approach, they eschew ethical questions of truth and moral validity, assuming that a common concern with equality and human rights would bring about social cohesion, despite the emergence of conflicting narratives. Indeed, as L. Philip Barnes points out, in emphasising the idea of common links between religions, and evoking notions of human rights, these documents tend to assume a postmodern perspective, the orientation of which bears some resemblances with some protestant schools of educational thinking of the nineteenth century – especially those associated with Friedrich Schleiermacher's theological framework, which emphasises experiences over conceptual knowledge – that allows for a view of religious diversity as merely linguistic versions of common human phenomena. Since Barnes believes that religious con-

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[2] Habermas's (2003, p. 237–275) theory of truth distinguishes the theoretical domain of validation from the moral domain, stressing that, whereas the former refers to the objective world, the latter lacks any external reference that could determine moral validity. However, given Habermas belief that in modern conditions of pluralism there is a universal imperative for the search of impartial norms of moral judgement, conceptions of normative rightness, which emerge as the outcome of universal discursive procedures aimed at resolving moral conflicts, are, by character, truth-analogous. It is important to note, here, that there is also a distinction between warranted assertibility – what people take to be true – and theoretical and moral truth, as a context-transcendental reference that outruns justification. Habermas espouses a pragmatically-realist account of truth, that is, he acknowledges that the objective world (theoretical truth) and the practical imperative for an impartial and universal morality (normative truth) is what define truth validity in a context-transcendent manner.

[3] Maeve Cooke believes that Habermas embraces this view of the recalcitrancy of reality, which gives his theory a metaphysical purport, even though he insists on the postmetaphysical character of his communicative ethics.

cepts and language condition faith experiences, he favours a conceptual approach to RE, by which pupils access faith contents through specific vocabularies from different religious traditions (Barnes, 2000, p. 324–326). Even though it is not the purpose of this article to establish a priority between concepts and experiences in religious instruction, since – in the philosophy of phenomenology – conceptualisations, through intentionality, are conditioned by the agent's embeddedness in particular cultural and practical horizons[4], it is true that this pragmatist approach underestimates the self-constitutive character of cultural schemes of reason, as different philosophical and cultural schemes cannot help but lead to incompatible moral claims. As Wright (2013, p. 292–294) highlights, ontology precedes epistemology, in the sense that it is through a perspective of learning from reality that new conceptions of rationality are formulated and reconstructed, in response to continuous engagements with the world of experiences. As religions articulate ethical narratives whose contents contribute to shape socio-reality, the validity of their truth claims cannot be dismissed in an aprioristic manner. Instead, the rational attitude of enquiry requires the agent to remain open to the possibilities of alternative epistemic horizons.

Conversely, it is in view of the incompatibility of cultural moral claims that the public school, without disregarding the need for a reflective and critical knowledge, should be aiming primarily at promoting truth enquiry, rather than seeking neutrality towards different narratives. In contemporary democracies, controversial issues regarding the field of bioethics, gender discrimination, and the relationship between individual and collective rights are instances of conflicting views of human rights, which are bound up with distinct ontological and epistemological assumptions. Thus, in the absence of overlapping principles of justice set out by aprioristic moral reasons, a merely narrativist account of moral and political values, detached from a common orientation to the truth of validity claims, could not bring about social cohesion. In seeking to assert disparate ethical claims, different cultural communities would soon realise that there are no common grounds for the realisation of diverse lifestyles in a single political community, and would likely opt for disengagement, rather than participation.

On the extreme side of that option, is Stanley Hauerwas's theological appropriation of a communitarian theory of virtue ethics. Coming himself from a protestant tradition, Hauerwas raises severe criticism of Christian movements that seek an alliance between the Church and the state. Drawing on the work of John Howard Yoder, Hauerwas sees any attempt at controlling the political realm in the name of religion with scepticism, as he believes that the needs of the state, in terms of effectiveness and security, are often incompatible with the required virtues of faith. In particular, he believes that once Christians are in power, they would need to change moral discourses in order to make concessions for those who are not formal members of the Church. As he notes: "servanthood and love of enemy, contentment and monogamy, cannot be expected of everyone. So, a duality develops in ethics between 'evangelical counsels' for the motivated and 'precepts' for everyone else" (Hauerwas, 1988, p. 122). Moreover, Hauerwas is especially concerned that in the impetus for saving secular governments, Christians may have to choose between the gospel's orientation for self-sacrifice and the nation's call for war. For this reason, he opposes state sponsored religious activities, contending that it is not the task of religious citizens to try

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[4] Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975) employed the concept of intentionality to explain how scientific research questions emerge from the needs of the community, which draws the agent´s attention to certain specific problems.

to get access to political power in order to change the ethos of society. Rather, they should concentrate their efforts on developing the virtues necessary for the realisation of their communitarian goals in the Church.

Hauerwas' assumptions overlook the possibilities of mutual learning that the pursuit of religious lifestyles in plural environments could provide for believers. In enclosing a certain conception of the good life, and the virtues associated with it, in a narrativist account of faith virtues, Hauerwas dismisses the capacity for expansion of one's religious conceptual resources, in a way that allows for different understandings of how to apply gospel principles in distinct social contexts. From the perspective of an intersubjective reason, narratives are always in a process of reconstruction, making possible the actualisation of a framework of virtues according to conjunctural goals. Thus, just like Christians have widely abandoned the idea that slavery is a legitimate institution, or at least appropriate for contemporary democracies – a view that many slave owners in the United States used to support with biblical arguments (for example, the fact that St. Paul had sent a slave back to his master, Philemon, combined with a hierarchical view of the duties of spiritual and material service)[5] – they can also question the meaning of Christ's passion in different contexts for the concept of self-sacrifice. Does it mean that Christians must never use violence, even when there are other innocent lives at stake? Or should it be interpreted as a guiding principle for the avoidance of hatred and the practice of forgiveness? By engaging in this learning process, both religious and secular citizens can find common principles of moral action, inclusive by taking into consideration the possibilities of differentiated attitudes in the Church and in plural contexts. They can, for instance, arrive at the conclusion that violence is permissible – or even required – for the purpose of self-defence, but forgiveness should be preferred to retribution, once life threat is ruled out, and whenever national reconciliation requires – as Tutu (1999) has demonstrated with the conception of Ubuntu in South Africa[6].

Thus, it is the awareness of the limits of reason, along with a transcendental attitude towards the truth, stemming from the acknowledgement that there is something that unifies all individuals in the pursuit of the good life, that binds them together in a common project of moral enquiry. In order to promote continuous engagements capable of producing tangible outcomes, the learning process should be guided by a rational orientation towards the possibilities of moral agreement, as well as by a critical account of religious communal goals and conceptions of justice. Hence, instead of a minimalist view of human rights that disregards the incompatibility of ethical worldviews, or a strict pragmatism that fosters association in communitarian activities as a self-sufficient goal, RE should provide for mutual learning through a universal, critical attitude of moral enquiry. Furthermore, it should allow for the reconstruction of cultural perceptions, so that the outcomes of moral dialogues come to shape national values and constitutional principles in a unifying manner. Therefore, to the

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[5] For more on the religious and intellectual roots of slavery issue and the American Civil War, see John P. Daly (2002) *When Slavery was Called Freedom: Evangelicalism, Proslavery, and the Causes of the Civil War*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky. The author explores both sides' arguments on the legitimacy of slavery, pointing out protestants in the North and in the South shared ideas such as freedom, democracy, and prosperity, though drawing different conclusions from them. In the South, the conception of social gradations of service and the view of the redemptive character of labour, combined with a Calvinist notion of providence and the perception that intervention in the slavery market would be counterproductive, led prospective confederate states to the conviction that they were living in a virtuous society.

[6] Ubuntu is a spiritual conception that emphasises togetherness and that has been influential in shaping public policies in South Africa after the Apartheid.

same extent that two conflicting lifestyles, articulating different religious understandings of the idea of human equality, have been merged into a new constitutional framework after the American Civil War, the option for the logic of forgiveness over retribution may illustrate the capacity of citizens to draw on religious narratives to develop a collective understanding of civic virtues and a republican conception of justice.

3 The tradition-oriented conception

Following Andrew Wright and Elina Hella's (2008, p. 56) categorisation, a confessional education is "any form of RE in which the learners and the curriculum share a common worldview". This applies both for denominational models of RE, and for multidenominational models that aim to explore different forms of religious and non-religions moralities. Importantly, this conception moves away from political liberalism in that it is founded upon a substantive ethical framework of political principles that articulates tradition-constituted reasons through worldviews and cultural perceptions. Indeed, comparing RE in Finland and in the UK, Wright and Hella underscore that both models present a "confessional" approach to the extent that Christianity has a central position in the syllabuses and significantly shapes the national curriculum in topics related to moral and civic education. Moreover, in Finland, just like in the UK, pupils are supposed to learn from religious and non-religious world-views for the purpose of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. However, as Wright and Hella (2008, p. 56) stress: "such confessionalism need not entail the uncritical induction of students into a worldview: since both Christianity and secular liberalism are internally contested worldviews, learning within each framework ought to require critical judgement".

In line with Wright and Hella's thinking, my proposal is for a model of RE in which religious traditions and even secular worldviews can contribute to a process of moral learning, whereby – in contrast with a neutralist framework of public reason – pupils' autonomous thinking in the school is promoted through the communication and evaluation of substantive ethical claims of justice in a critical and pluralistic manner. Nonetheless, in order to avoid confusion with a specific form of RE provided by religious schools, which is usually known as confessional, I will classify as tradition-oriented conception of RE those perspectives that endorse the link between substantive cultural values and educative enterprises, while making a distinction between the denominational model of schooling and an ethical-dialogical RE – with the latter referring to those multidenominational models that promote inter-faith dialogue through the articulation of comprehensive beliefs and experiential knowledge. Although both models can be linked to a tradition-oriented conception of RE, I contend that an ethical-dialogical education is more equipped to meet the requirements of a context-transcendent rationality, as Maeve Cooke has defined.

3.1 The tradition-oriented conception: Ireland

As most of the Irish primary and secondary schooling system is made up of national and voluntary schools under religious patronage, RE is usually provided according to a denominational model that has, as its primary aim, the induction of pupils in a particular faith. RE in Catholic Schools in Ireland follows the guidelines of the Irish Catholic Bishop's

Conference, as available in the document *Grow in Love* (2015). It sets out, as one of the desired outcomes of the educative process, that pupils should "acquire a sensitivity to and knowledge of other Christian traditions (ecumenism)", as well as "a sensitivity to some other religious traditions and a basic knowledge of their principal beliefs, spiritual values and traditions (inter-Religious Education)" (Irish Catholic Bishop's Conference, 2015: 31).

In other Christian schools, the programme *Follow Me* structures RE provisions for children from the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist churches. It promotes knowledge and critical assessment of different religious traditions in a separate strand dedicated to the study of "other faiths", where it underscores that pupils from third to sixth class are expected to "become aware of and sensitive to the beliefs and practices of those of other or no faith(s) who may be part of their school or local communities" (Board of Education, 2018).

This tension between National Curriculum guidelines and religious ethos has also affected those schools under Catholic patronage, as can be observed from the negative reaction of the Church to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) proposal for an 'Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics' programme in 2015. In a consultation report, the NCCA acknowledged the need for a differentiated RE and Ethics education that would explore the nuances of theistic and non-theistic worldviews in a critical, and pluralist manner. Even though the document considered many possibilities when addressing topics and questions related to ERBE both in a separate subject and throughout the main Curriculum – particularly in areas such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) – the NCCA stressed the need for patrons to allow for a reflective attitude towards religious and non-religious perspectives "based on a more pluralist epistemology which explores different faiths and beliefs without promoting one faith perspective above another" (Republic of Ireland, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2015, p. 29). Some teachers and Bishops representative of Catholic denominational schools expressed concerns about the feasibility of such a programme, contending that it would confuse pupils by delivering mixed messages regarding the authenticity of their faith.

Currently, the best approximation of this conception of RE, which has already been brought into existence, can be found in Community National Schools run by Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Their curriculum, *Goodness Me, Goodness You* (GMGY) emphasises the constructivist dimension of the process of learning and promotes a critical view of RE through inter-religious dialogues, as designated by the strand 'Beliefs and Religion'. Accordingly, it encourages "the sharing of personal belief experience (religious and secular) in order to enable children to learn 'about' and 'from' religion" (Education and Training Boards, 2016, p. 14). While addressing religious and non-religious traditions in a pluralistic fashion, the curriculum takes into consideration pupils' background knowledge and culture, exploring a variety of spiritual concepts and perspectives through cooperative tasks that involve parents and faith communities.

3.2 The tradition-oriented conception: England

In England, every state-funded school – voluntary aided, voluntary controlled, or academies (free schools that received state funds through particular contractual links with government) – must follow the National Curriculum. The Education Act of 2002 establishes that, in its

general approach, the curriculum "promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, and prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life".

In voluntary-aided schools, the character of the RE syllabus and daily collective act of worship is determined by the governors. They are also responsible for employing the staff and define admission policies. In voluntary-controlled schools, those prerogatives belong to the LEA. As a result of a long historical process of development in these faith communities, most of state-funded faith schools in England are Christian or Jewish. However, there are a dozen Islamic-maintained schools, and a handful of Sikh and Hindu voluntary schools as well. As with the Catholic and the main Protestant Churches in Ireland, most of these faith schools dedicate parts of the RE syllabus to the study of other religious traditions.

In voluntary-controlled schools and community schools, RE syllabus of each LEA reflects the official policy regarding the communitarian aspects of the educative process, which stems from an experiential conception of learning. For instance, the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus (United Kingdom. Birmingham City Council, 2007) explores local features of the development of the Christian faith, while also taking into account children's diverse family backgrounds in the classroom so as to include other religions traditions in the RE programme in view of their representation in the local community. Throughout the document, the role of the parents, churches and communal associations in the religious and ethical formation of pupils is emphasised, along with an empathetic view of the capacity for mutual understanding between adepts of different faiths.

In Cornwall, the justification of the priority of Christianity over other faith traditions is explained in view of the fact that it articulates moral perceptions and provides a set of meanings that informs society's way of life: "Christianity shapes the lives of all citizens of the United Kingdom irrespective of their individual beliefs. Christianity shapes our year, our language and our culture. It continues to inform our moral perspectives" (United Kingdom. Cornwall Council, 2014, p. 12). In considering the development of other faith traditions, it draws special attention to particular features of local groups and their historical development, promoting an attitude of ethical enquiry based on communal experiences. For example, whilst acknowledging that Buddhism is the largest non-Christian tradition in Cornwall, the document points out that the majority of those who identify themselves with that faith were not born into the Buddhist tradition. As a consequence, teachers and pupils should be questioning why that religion became so popular, besides looking into the links of Cornish Buddhism with other versions of that tradition as found in Asian contexts.

It is also worth bringing into perspective the Hampshire, Portsmouth, Southampton and the Isle of Wight's Agreed Syllabus, which was also adopted by the City of Westminster' LEA, in London. It emphasises conceptual enquiry in approaching religious and spiritual themes, with a view to equipping children with evaluative skills through the articulation of pupils' experiential knowledge. The syllabus mentions five key steps upon which RE is founded: (1) Communicate and Apply: where children draw on their experiences to present and discuss concepts such as community, celebration and worship – from a general apprehension to more particular manifestations in different religious traditions; (2) Enquire and Contextualise: where pupils identify differences in interpretation and begin to pose questions on meaning and significance; and (3) Evaluate: where they are encouraged to make judgements about the validity of those concepts to a meaningful way of life. As with the others, an empathetic attitude of learning is promoted by the Hampshire syllabus, whereby

pupils are supposed to gain understanding about a distinct tradition by placing themselves in each other's position. More specifically, though, it stresses that, in the Evaluate stage, children should be capable of carrying out two different procedures of assessment: one that attempts to make judgements according to the interlocutors' own standards in their religious tradition, and another in which pupils ask themselves how those concepts and experiences can shed light on their own spiritual journey of enquiry (United Kingdom. Hampshire County Council, et al., 2016).

Regarding non-state schools, in 2014, Ofsted published a report, following the inspection of some maintained faith schools, in which it highlighted their importance to the promotion of their denominational ethos through a specific routine of prayers, celebrations, and holidays. In Muslim schools, for example, there are usually five prayer-times distributed throughout the school day, while physical education can be restricted during Ramadan. In one Hindu school, Sanskrit classes were provided along with the National Curriculum, and all food provided was vegetarian (United Kingdom, Ofsted, 2014, Sects. 68, 72). Yet, the document expressed concern about the fact that some Muslim schools "may well attempt to be creative and try to teach the skills within the National Curriculum within a variety of contexts". In this regard, the report stressed that "inspectors may need to ask the school how the curriculum is organised such that the necessary skills and subjects within the National Curriculum are taught" (United Kingdom, Ofsted, 2014, Sect. 33). In particular, it drew attention to the fact that in those schools "art and music can be restricted but they are still required to teach these subjects as part of the National Curriculum" (United Kingdom, Ofsted, 2014, Sect. 42).

In 2015, Ofsted carried out an inspection in 22 independent faith schools and found that at least ten of them failed to meet the standards of the curriculum, while four failed to demonstrate that they promote fundamental British values. Regarding the former, Ofsted stressed that those schools were not providing a sufficiently broad curriculum whereby pupils could develop their aesthetic and creative skills. For the latter, it was pointed out that the narrowness of the curriculum deprived pupils of opportunities to understand other religious traditions and beliefs. Moreover, gender issues surfaced in some Muslim schools as Ofsted found that men and women were set apart for the performance of ordinary tasks, while managers "were not protecting pupils from reading inappropriate literature about extremist, sexist or partisan views" (United Kingdom, Ofsted, 2015, p. 15–16). The report also raised concern about the fact that many children did not have a basic knowledge of British history, politics and institutions, with very few being able to name any political parties.

3.3 Assessing the tradition-oriented conception

As I have highlighted before, both the Irish and the English educational systems acknowledge the relevance of the religious dimension of human development and the links between spiritual and moral education. This particular emphasis, attributed to the relationship between spiritual education and community values, both at the local and at the national level, represents a significant departure from the neutralist approach. However, as the variety of experiences of RE in both countries reveals, there can be different ways of structuring the school curriculum which may either help or hinder intercultural learnings and dialogical criticism.

The Irish schooling system, as currently established, is predominantly denominational in character, and the provision of RE is mainly under the responsibility of particular churches and religious organisations. According to the national Constitution, this arrangement is supposed to support freedom of conscience and religion, by allowing parents to rear their children in the faith of their choice. What is more, it points towards a general acknowledgement of the importance of RE for citizens – with the opt out clause being an exception to the norm – though structured according to different denominational perspectives.

Whereas in Ireland denominational schooling comprises around 90% of the primary and secondary sectors, in England this model is confined to voluntary-aided schools, independent schools, and faith academies, which provide denominational teaching for one third of children. In fact, independent schools make up only 1% of the total number of schools in the country, catering for around 7% of pupils, while faith-maintained schools provide RE for around 25% of the children. The remaining two-thirds of English pupils attend maintained schools of no religious character which, however, offer RE classes according to the orientation of each LEA.

As has been pointed out by Mawhinney (2007) and Fischer (2016), the Irish educational system is inadequate in terms of democratic pluralism in view of its reliance on denominational schools to attend the needs of public schooling, which results in discriminatory policies of enrolment and ethos enforcement. Insofar as parents of children with different religious or secular orientation are not given fair opportunities of choice and have their children exposed to a monological process of faith induction, liberal criticism to current state policies is valid to a certain point, since – even though Ireland may not be in breach of European human rights laws – they fail to meet the requirements of communicative rationality.

This does not imply, though, that the former prevents every possibility of critical assessment of different religious and non-religious worldviews. As the evidence above shows, both the Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland have been concerned with providing pupils with the capacity to assess truth and moral claims from different religions, which is why some sections of their curriculum were entirely dedicated to the study of other faith traditions. As Terence MacLaughlin (1990) has argued, a religious rearing that does not preclude questioning and considerations about different perceptions of reality and does not impinge on the requirements of liberal autonomy. Once it is acknowledged that the very process of child upbringing involves the imparting of particular teachings and moral values, as well as the induction in some practices and activities that contribute to providing children with a familiar environment of comfort and security, it becomes clear that a denominational schooling does not, per se, violate children's basic rights[7].

However, whenever faith formation is at stake, two issues should be taken into account from the point view of a reflective, dialogical rationality. Firstly, the distribution of denominational and non-denominational schools in a particular region or country, so that parental rights regarding their children's specific upbringing are secured. Indeed, bearing in mind the compulsory nature of primary education, the state must ensure that schools can cater for all children in the local community, with due regard to their parents' religious and non-religious

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[7] McLaughlin (1990: 75–87) draws attention to the psychological aspects of the process of child-rearing, observing that, both at the conceptual (teaching that), and at the practical level (teaching how and teaching to), parents need to take a firm stance on what they believe is true and right for their children to believe and do – even though allowing for questioning – rather than leave them in a confused state of insecurity with hesitant and ambiguous statements.

background. By prioritising geographical factors over religious belonging in the access to public education, the state can guarantee fair opportunities for democratic participation in an educative environment where, even though religious traditions and ethical values are not set aside, all pupils can engage in truth and moral enquiry both at the cognitive and at the communal level of practice.

On the other hand, ETB National Community Schools provide RE according to a model that is broadly in line with this conception of multidenominational education. Primarily, it draws on pupils' own religious background by encouraging them to involve their parents and religious communities in exercises that aim to explore conceptual meanings and spiritual experiences together with their teachers and classmates. In this sense, it does not address spiritual questions from a void, and allows for some degree of subsidiarity in the treatment of religion with respect to parental orientation. Besides this, the GMGY curriculum promotes learning as an open-ended process, as it does not confine itself to a delimited set of contents and topics to be covered in the classroom. Rather, it encourages teachers and students to listen to pupils' own experiences in order to re-evaluate their knowledge of different religious and non-religious worldviews.

In England, the development of RE teaching in voluntary controlled and community schools offers great potential for mutual learning and dialogical criticism through the articulation of substantive ethical perceptions from each pupil's faith experience. As the Birmingham and Cornwall syllabuses illustrate, by focusing on particular social and historical features of religious practice in their respective areas, RE allows for valuable insights into the reasons, values and concepts that different religious traditions attribute to spiritual practices and commitments, therefore permitting the contextual appreciation of teleological meanings and truth claims from those faith communities. Emphasis on the background of pupils and the encouragement of family involvement also ensures that spiritual learning and development begin from within the schemes of rationality of particular belief-systems, while including new perceptions and valuations in due course.

In this vein, the Hampshire Agreed Syllabus is outstanding in its potential for encouraging the virtues of intercultural learning. With its approach of 'RE as a process of conceptual enquiry', it aims to explore children's understanding of religious values, meanings and propositional claims, while promoting mutual criticism through an empathetic attitude of dialogue. The teacher is supposed to stimulate pupils to share their views on the many ways they conceive and experience familiar concepts – such as community, ritual and, law – as well as distinctive ones – for instance, Umma, Eucharist, and Torah. At the contextualising step, children take cognisance of stories, case studies, and testimonies that may open up their intellectual horizons to a different framework of meanings. In the end, during the evaluative stage, the teacher encourages pupils to look beyond their original contexts to see how those concepts and practices can shed light on their own schemes of perception. What this process entails is the expansion of vocabularies through the association of meanings and modes of use according to specific worldviews.

With regard to denominational schools, it should be noted that an ethical-dialogical approach to RE requires them to take into account religious claims from distinct faiths communities. Thus, besides their own RE classes, which are primarily aimed at socialising (in the Rortyan sense) pupils into a particular spiritual tradition, they should also provide opportunities for inter-faith dialogue. Indeed, since faith narratives are constituted in reference to other alternative ways of conceiving worldly and spiritual realities, there is no

reason to assume that religious communities do not have to respond to different spiritual claims to the same extent that they have to take into account scientific schemes of rationality. Thus, just like pupils need to be capable of evaluating Newton's theory and Einstein's theory in terms of their overall validity, so should they make their own assessments regarding the truth of faith beliefs. And even though the observer may suspend judgement at the first moment, so as to gain an insight into a different scheme of reasons, once they are familiar with their canons of rationality, they might conclude that one tradition is more fit than another for providing answers and solutions for practical or theoretical problems that an introspective analysis into each of them might bring to the fore.

Here, in agreement with Jackson (2015), it is worth noting that this approach does not constitute a new paradigm of RE, as Liam Gearon has asserted, since comparing different canons of faith traditions is something most religions or religious people do, either by means of formal theological instruction or as a reflective attitude performed with a view to justifying individual beliefs – in a Habermasian sense. However, the problem of incommensurability between different religious traditions, in terms of evaluative standards, still remains, to the extent that some faiths are more oriented towards experience, for instance, while others emphasise syllogistic reasoning. As I have pointed out before, every rational agent brings forward truth and moral claims in order to justify their actions, since they are based on beliefs, which are inevitably dealt with by the individual's mind in terms of a "yes" or "no" position. Thus, even an experience-oriented approach to religion is ultimately a rational stance. Nevertheless, as Carr (2003) contends in his criticism to a constructivist, non-confessional account of RE, multidenominational models may be flawed for overlooking the specific ways by which different people and religious traditions articulate their spiritual goals and formulate answers to lifeworld problems in accordance with particular canons of spirituality. Carr holds that it is only through the induction of pupils into specific traditions of spirituality that it is possible for them to acquire the substantive knowledge and practical skills necessary for any enterprise of spiritual enquiry.

Even though I am in broad agreement with Carr when it comes to the need for articulating substantive ethical contents in RE, it is my view that an ethical-dialogical approach can in fact welcome the affirmation of particular faith claims, without precluding comparison in multidenominational environments. Since schools that adopt this model encourage religious instruction and celebrations, there is an overlap between socialisation in tradition and individuation from tradition. On this issue, it is worth mentioning the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. In the *The Idea of an Educated Public* (1987), he observes that the decline of the Scottish Enlightenment in the seventeenth century was due, in part, to the incapacity of the philosophy of common sense, championed by Thomas Reid, to respond to new intellectual challenges brought forth by other liberal philosophies: "Brown cast doubt on whether Hume had really been answered by Reid; Hamilton tried to blend Reid and Kant. As the philosophy of common sense became more complex in its response to a variety of questionings, it ceased to be able to articulate a common educated mind" (MacIntyre, 1987, p. 26). However, in *Whose Justice, Which Rationality* (1988) MacIntyre points out not only that knowledge of different traditions can make mutual learning possible in an epistemological crisis, but also that an epistemological crisis can be provoked by dialectical encounters with distinct traditions. Thus, such an exposure to distinct canons of rationality may contribute to enlightening the mind of the rational agent about the inconsistences and flaws of their own original tradition, precipitating a revision of their intellectual foundations. Take,

for instance, the debates on the role of the Active Intellect, brought forward by Avicenna, through Islamic translations of Aristotle, during the Middle Ages. They led to the revision of the Augustinian view that true knowledge derives only from God. While Latin Augustinian theologians such as William of Auvergne took the Avicennian idea of a separate Active Intellect to its extreme and proclaimed that only God could illuminate the soul, Jean de la Rochelle and Alexander of Hales admitted the possibility of an inner Active Intellect, capable of grasping the knowledge of the natural world, without the need for divine inspiration. Before bringing the two traditions into its final synthesis – by claiming that there was an inner Active Intellect that processes natural knowledge, while divine inspiration is needed for the investigation of otherworldly things – Thomas Aquinas had engaged in this controversy as part of a broad academic public, composed of Islamic and Western philosophers that debated Augustinian and Aristotelian texts as a community of rational enquiry[8]. This illustration demonstrates that, even from internal evaluative standards, traditions can renew themselves through mutual interaction.

But how does this explanation help us to understand the normative imperatives of a denominational model of RE? Firstly, it should be pointed out that Irish policies on the requirements of the National Curriculum are in this sense commendable, as it forces religious schools to follow a common framework of educational subjects which imbues pupils with resourceful vocabularies and practical skills accumulated throughout the history of their political community. In this sense, a general Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics programme can be valid even for denominational schools. However, the NCCA's proposal of a specific subject, or cross-curricular area of development, which sets out to present religious contents "without promoting one faith perspective above another", raises questions about its underlying philosophy. Is it meant to promote a neutralist or postmodern conception of religion that presupposes a common framework of political principles in the public sphere, while endorsing a relativistic epistemology in the private realm? Or does it actually allow for cross-cultural learning to the extent that pupils are supposed to place themselves in each other's position? If the former, then the Catholic Church is right in pointing out the incompatibility of the project with their own belief system and educational goals, and the proposal fails to bring about a dialogical attitude of truth enquiry for the reasons I have highlighted before. If the latter, it should be noted that reflectivity can only be fully realised in terms of substantive criticism, whereby the inconsistences and flaws of one tradition can be overcome by the acquisition of new conceptual knowledge, which, after evaluative processes, should lead social groups to arrive at a unifying ethical system.

Finally, since every process of ethical enquiry starts from a particular level of historical knowledge, which is synthesised into a cultural tradition, independent schools, such as those inspected by Ofsted in 2014 and 2015, should not be exempted from engaging with their societies' main traditional canons, which include scientific, moral and religious worldviews. In this sense, regarding the issue of gender relations, it is important to note that there is a minimal threshold for normative principles that allow for discursive practices to take place: if, one on hand, citizens may emphasise interdependence between roles, while putting into question notions of sameness, or even raise criticism about the sexualisation of women in sports or the work environment; on the other, legal norms that deny female citizens access to education, basic rights or possibilities for self-expression should not be allowed. This is

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[8] For more on this, see Gilson (1986).

because normative frameworks that preclude instruction and communication prevent the very process whereby truth claims arise and individual flourishing is achieved.

4 Conclusions

Chart I: Conceptions and models of religious education.

Conception	Teaching and Learning: a) Nature of Knowledge b) Content of Knowledge c) Ethical Position	School Model
Neutralist Liberal	a) Cognitive b) Broad Ranging c) Impartial	Non-Denominational
Pragmatist/Postmodern	a) Experiential b) Culture-Oriented c) Egalitarian, Immanent-Critical	Egalitarian Multidenominational
Tradition-Oriented	a) Experiential, Truth-Oriented b) Substantive Ethics c) Confessional	Denominational
	a) Experiential, Truth-Oriented b) Substantive Ethics c) Discursive, Dialogical	Ethical-Dialogical Multidenominational

Throughout this article, I have challenged the idea that an impartial, neutralist conception of RE is possible, or even desirable, by pointing out the links between the object of science and the rational subject, arguing that the observer is constrained by their own historical narratives and epistemic conceptions in the process of selecting and evaluate evidences. Afterwards, I demonstrated that multidenominational models of RE that preclude a critical appreciation of substantive truth and moral claims articulated by religious belief systems, fail to acknowledge the moral potential of their conceptual stock of meanings for bringing about emancipatory shifts in perception. Although the aim of RE is not to make pupils arrive at any particular conclusion about the value of faith contents at the school, it fosters the process whereby citizens develop critical capacities to make their own choices in their own time.

In order to fulfil its purpose of providing for a democratic space of ethical enquiry, RE in common schools should be oriented by a perspective of dialogical enquiry into the truth claims of different traditions. It also has to take account of social narratives and personal experiences in the classroom, as well as of the background knowledge of pupils. Importantly, this model is especially recommended for state, multidenominational schools; it may be part of the mandatory curriculum, and should not interfere with, but rather encourage, private religious instruction. A common school that welcomes all members of a local community, accommodating their specific cultural and religious needs, and propitiating an environment of democratic deliberation, meets the requirements of rational accountability without violating the integrity of the moral agent through a reductionist account of the educative process that leaves out the experiential dimension of knowledge.

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