Chapter 1

Religious Education in Colombian Schools 1991-2015

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By self-transcendence, I understand the fundamental anthropological fact that being human is to always reach out beyond self, towards something which is not just once more itself - towards something or towards someone: towards a meaning [...]. Only to the extent to which a human being transcends itself in such a way as this, does it actualize itself.

Victor Frankl

Introduction

Reflecting on the nature and epistemological foundations of Religious Education in Schools (RES) in Colombia is an urgent task within the teaching and learning process. However, this task must be undertaken according to the logic of the school, and not on the basis of constructs whose significance and structure have not been analyzed, as has been done for years. Indeed, RES has been understood on the basis of different perspectives or of personal religious choices, which have materialized their pedagogical praxis according to approaches framed by religious beliefs and principles, thus linking school contexts to indoctrination processes. For this reason, this project inquires into and presents an educational path that does not aim to be definitive,

but rather to serve as a valid principle for critical reflection on the daily work of teachers.

Religious Education in Schools must be understood, first of all, within the framework and logic of the legal regulations of the Republic of Colombia, which feature an ambiguity that must be discussed on the basis of the nature of Religious Education in Schools. This phenomenon makes it possible to identify the theoretical evolution of its epistemological foundation, by means of certain trends in the country stemming from the Colombian Constitution of 1991 and prevailing to date. Finally, it is important to clarify that these trends are expressed in school praxis, through field work in the classroom.

Regulations: Tension among Legality, Denominationalism, and Religious Education

Colombia is a multi-ethnic country that includes diverse forms of cultural and religious representations arising from pre-Columbian, indigenous, and Afro-descendant traditions. There is also a Protestant component, which begins to take force around 1930, during the Liberal Republic (1930 - 1946) and intermingles with various dimensions of cultural, political, and social life. Today, there is an abundance of Christian communities within the national territory. Thus, Colombian history, although marked by a predominantly Catholic system, cannot disregard the contribution that this religious phenomenon makes to the daily life of the nation's inhabitants.

The above reveals a religious diversity involved in different aspects of social and cultural life, which, however, did not permeate Religious Education. Hence, for a long time, Colombian schools, mostly denominational, have not responded to the needs of a pluralistically religious Colombia. Consequently, the epistemological status, objectives, and main foundations of RES are threatened.

The country's policies and legal regulations are no strangers to these problems. The exercise of religious education -its interests and the realities experienced in the classroom, in the culture, and in the training of religious educators- has been put in terms of dualisms and even contradictions by those who create the laws. This creates a

dissociation of discourse, in which the law and the diverse religious interests reveal tensions rather than clarities. This has a significant impact in the classroom, where teachers are not certain of their roles and RES easily becomes confused with pastoral educational activities or catechesis.

In view of the above, it is essential to explain the Colombian legal and regulatory framework having to do with Religious Education in Schools. This is done on the basis of the Political Constitution of Colombia, which is the roadmap for all citizen-related processes; General Education Law 115 of 1994; and the laws, decrees, and directives which regulate RES in Colombia: Law 133 of 1994, Decree 1278 of 2002, Ministerial Directive 002 of 2004, and Decree 4500 of 2006.

Law 115 of 1994: Between Obligation and Freedom

A review of Colombian legislation regarding RES, it is evident that the Political Constitution, the Magna Carta of Colombian Law provides no clear concept regarding this academic subject or space. Nor is there consensus regarding how it should be assumed by the various educational institutions in the country.

Law 115 of 1994 is the master document governing the entire educational system in Colombia and from which all subsequent clarifications and additions are derived. Religious education is mentioned three times in this document, specifically in Article 23, in sixth place among the mandatory and fundamental areas of education. The same article states that no one can be compelled to receive religious education, and Article 24 affirms it as a right. The ambiguity and the contradiction of the law, within the framework of two consecutive articles, is notorious: why is there a dichotomy regarding RES between an inevitable educational environment and another based on the decision of parents and students? Does the State understand the nature and epistemological foundation of RES?

The key issue in this regulatory document is the use of the word “spiritual” on three occasions. Article 5, section 1 states the objectives of education. The first is the full development of personality within a process of comprehensive education; the spiritual aspect

is mentioned as a determining factor. Subsequently, in Article 15, regarding preschool education, the comprehensive development of children includes the spiritual aspect; finally, Article 16, subsection h, states that among the specific objectives of the preschool level is “the recognition of the spiritual dimension in order to substantiate performance criteria”.

Thus, it is evident that the nature of Religious Education is the Spiritual Dimension. Although Law 115 is ambiguous and even contradictory, it clearly affirms -in these three references- the need for a comprehensive education in the spiritual aspect, as a dimension of the human person, without at any time making use of faith, catechesis, evangelization, theology, or the religious dimension.

*Law 133 of 1994 and Decree 1278 of 2002:
Professionalization of RES vs. Presence of the
Religious System in the Classroom.*

This law aims to expand Article 19 of the Political Constitution, which refers to freedom of religion and of worship. Initially, the State seems to defend religious freedoms, but Article 2 literally states: “The State is neither atheist, agnostic, or indifferent to the religious feelings of Colombians.” This implies that its goal is to distance itself from one religious system and be plural, while, at the same time, recognizing a multicultural country. However, it is important to note that this was not always the case because, for several decades, including the era of Rafael Núñez, the State professed a religious stance that permeated various aspects of the country’s development.

Curiously, Article 6, paragraph g of this law, contrary to Law 115, states the following regarding the right of each person “to receive and provide religious education and information, whether orally, in writing, or by any another means, to whomever wishes to receive it; to receive that teaching and information or refuse it “. In other words, religious education is not compulsory, but rather voluntary. It is curious to note the equivalence between the terms learning and information, which would seem to consider religion simply as an exercise of transmission rather than of reflection. It is worth mentioning Constitutional Court

Ruling T-662 of 1999 regarding freedom of worship, within a Catholic institution of education, which is based on this law.

In this law, we find that in order to carry out said teaching or transmission exercise it is necessary to have a “Certificate of Competence” from the church or religion to which one belongs. Subsection i states: “... a certificate of competence should be required of those engaged in religious and moral education, issued by the church or denominational group teachers belong to.”

According to the above, we can then say that the role of teachers of Religious Education is to monitor the transmission of the tenets of a religious system, given that the teacher’s competence is not based on degree as such, but on a certificate issued by the church with which the educational institution is associated.

However, Article 3 of Decree 1278 of June 19, 2002, issued eight years after the former, issuing the Statute for the Professionalization of Teachers, reads as follows:

Professionals in education are those who hold a professional degree in education issued by an institution of higher education; professionals with different degrees who are legally qualified to practice the teaching profession in accordance with the provisions of this decree; and teachers who hold a teacher-training certificate.

This means that there is a contradiction in Colombian law with respect to how the professional training of teachers of Religious Education should be understood, given that while the competence or authority to teach is granted by a religious system, in this decree, issued eight years later, this authority is transferred to an institution of higher education.

This contradiction in Decree 1278 of 2002 is stressed in Article 21, which establishes three levels for promotion in the academic hierarchy: Teacher Training Certificate, Bachelor of Arts, and Magister or Doctor. Nowhere in the decree does it state that the teacher should have a certificate of competence. It is not clear whether in order to work as a teacher of Religious Education, it is necessary to have a professional degree in addition to the certificate of competence. Should there be a relationship between the subjects taught to future RES teachers and the different religious creeds? What are the basic contents in RES teacher

training? What are the roles of the university and the churches in the development of the classroom activities of RES teachers? What is the impact of university and church education on the professionalization of RES teachers?

Ministerial Directive 002 of 2004 and Decree 4500 of 2006: Final Considerations, Continuing Legal Ambiguity

Although these two Colombian regulations mention several items discussed above, they focus on Evaluation of Religious Education. Initially, Ministerial Directive 002 states that RES should be offered in both public and private institutions. However, religious freedom is continuously emphasized, and part of the introduction clarifies that if there are no RES classes in different religious denominations, this is due to the absence of agreements between the State and the Church or any other religious denomination.

What is never stated is the kind of RES to be provided in public institutions, and there is no explicit option for any religious system. The curious thing about this directive is that it explicitly proposes a coordination with the churches, which should agree on how religious education is taught. In other words, this educational space is seen by the directive as a place for religious proselytism; however, it also states that the teacher should not carry out any proselytism. Thus, the teacher loses all autonomy regarding RES and is limited to whichever religious system. Similarly, the Ministerial Directive clarifies that the evaluation of RES is part of periodic reports and affects the final result of the students' entire academic development.

On the other hand, in Decree 4500 of 2006 there is a brief dissertation on the foundations of RES, which the previous regulations had not mentioned. This decree is no longer based directly on a system, but rather on a comprehensive conception of the person, as stated in Article 3: "Religious education is based on a holistic conception of the person, without disregarding his or her transcendent dimension and considering both academic and formative aspects." Thus, it would seem that religious education is removed from a religious system and from the transmission of a denominational content and placed in the human being

viewed comprehensively as a person. Similarly, it is emphasized that one can choose whether or not to participate in this type of education and teachers should have a certificate of competence in order to teach RES.

Curricular Guidelines 1998: The Spiritual Dimension as the Nature of RES

This document, published by the Ministry of Education, is framed by the government entity's interest in fostering the adequate construction of a curricular context that responds to the stipulations of the General Education Law, as well as in specifying the educational needs of our time, in order to build citizenship skills throughout the national territory. Thus, a joint effort was carried out with institutions of higher education and various national teacher associations. The result was a document that includes a contextualization of Colombian reality, a brief conceptualization regarding achievements and indicators, the foundations of the human aspect grounding the work, and some examples and recommendations, particularly the presentation of the dimensions of human development, as the essence of the comprehensive shaping of the personality of the student.

With respect to the dimensions of comprehensive human development, the document sets forth the importance of school education with regard to the spiritual dimension, which anchors subjectivity, inwardness, and consciousness. These realities having to do with an individual's actions make up the path towards humanization, as a process of personal fulfillment through the search for the profound meaning of the context and its daily implications.

The spiritual dimension of the human being is expressed in the need for and openness to universal values, beliefs, doctrines, rites, and convictions in order to give a comprehensive and profound meaning to one's life experience as well as to the world, history, and culture. These are non-negotiable values and convictions for which one could even be willing to give one's own life. The presence of this dimension is evident in the set of questions regarding the meaning and fundamental purpose of the web of experiences that

characterize the human condition and destiny throughout history. Questions such as, what is the meaning of love, pain, and death? The spiritual dimension is present in the contents of moral, spiritual and religious consciousness. (MEN, 1998, p. 74)

As we can see, the curricular guidelines of the Ministry of National Education (MEN) state that the students' spiritual dimension is a fundamental element in the process of their comprehensive education. Given this scenario, Religious Education is presented as the appropriate academic space for its development, since its purpose is to consolidate the processes of meaning, significance, and holistic understanding of human beings in favor of their humanization. Thus, the spiritual dimension is the basis for the orientation of the pedagogical and didactic actions of Religious Education, so that its nature, identity, and essence will be understood. In other words, the document sees universal values and religious experiences as expressions of the search for ultimate meaning, depth, and actualization of consciousness, subjectivity, inwardness, and meaning of human existence, based on transcendental questions.

Two conclusions can be reached on the basis of these reflections: a) the notorious ambiguity of the legal framework regarding Religious Education in Schools; b) despite this normative contradiction, Law 115 does present the nature of RES as linked to the development of personality and comprehensive formation based on the spiritual dimension. This is ratified by the curricular guidelines of 1998. In what follows, we present the various epistemological perspectives and methodological approaches that have emerged in the daily pedagogical activities of public and private educational institutions. The ambiguity regarding the nature of RES is described, and, at the same time, its proper grounding is sought.

Religious Education in Schools: Perspectives and Approaches

Despite the ambiguity of the laws having to do with RES, there have been diverse viewpoints Colombian history with respect to its nature

and epistemological foundations, which have been mediated by religious and pedagogical perspectives and approaches specific to the country's context. This makes it possible to identify the theoretical and experiential evolution of RES within the practices and policies of schools. Thus, the intuition of the spiritual dimension and its relationship with human beings, through the daily cultural life of the Colombian people, has been confused with practices specific to some religious systems.

To reflect on the history of Religious Education is a complex task given the lack of information and the hegemony of religious structures that have monopolized the orientation of this academic space. In addition, the lack of knowledge regarding the pre-Columbian era, as a stage for spiritual and experiential training, has skewed the understanding of the nature of RES towards evangelization. In fact, its historical development has been said to start with the Spanish conquest, which not only implies ignorance of the past, but also the subjugation of the wisdom of indigenous peoples, thus condemning them to oblivion, denial, and indifference.

Thus, the cultural expressions experienced by the country's indigenous communities -rich in traditional wisdom regarding the spiritual dimension of human beings and its importance for the community- should be taken into account as the first knowledge concerning Religious Education. Said expressions, which should not be read on the basis of colonizing frameworks such as Western thought, show a wealth of knowledge, an understanding of the world, interpersonal relationships, and a respect for nature, as an expression of the sacred. In contrast, the hegemonic perspective in the understanding of the nature and epistemological foundation of RES is that of catechesis and indoctrination:

Religious Education in Schools (RES) has historically played a role in Colombia that cannot be reduced to classroom learning; instead, it must be understood in a broader sense. In this regard, the influence of Christian thought is undeniable with respect to the social and cultural dynamics that have sometimes facilitated and sometimes hindered the establishment of a nation-state in this country. (Meza, 2011, p. 39)

During the periods of the Conquest, Colonization, Spanish patronage, Independence, and even until the Constitution of 1991, Religious Education in Schools was understood on the basis of Catholic Christian paradigms: evangelization and pastoral work. Indeed, the subject matter was dogma; the method was memorization; and the objective, the grounding of Christian faith. The adult population can attest to this, since their knowledge comes from Father Gaspar Astete's Catechism of Christian Doctrine (1845). The turning point arrives, thanks to the work of the National Constituent Assembly of 1991, which proclaimed a diverse, pluralistic State under the rule of law, with freedom of worship.

This transformation point, embodied in the General Law of Education, called for a reflection on religious education. In this regard, the first person to set forth an apology of Christian thought and its contribution to education was Mario Peresson (2012), who framed RES based on a denominational perspective:

By vocation and mission, the Christian community educates in faith by means of catechesis, religious education in schools (RES), preaching, and every means of spreading the word [...]. Pedagogically, we carry out this evangelizing dimension through testimony and prophecy, particularly by means of an evangelizing curriculum and the proposal of education itineraries in faith and an experiential Religious Education in Schools. (P. 40)

Peresson proclaims a Religious Education synonymous with evangelization, which necessarily converts it into the space for religious and catechetical education. On the basis of the Catholic creed, this education contributes to the processes of Christian initiation of children and youth in educational institutions. It is important to clarify that his purpose is not focused directly on indoctrination, since for Peresson, the curriculum must be inspired in the Christian gospel, but its direct objective is not the consolidation of a church, but rather the kingdom of God. This opens the doors to the entire Christian phenomenon, although it is still skewed by a specific religious system.

This approach was consolidated with the publication of the Standards for RES by the Episcopal Conference of Colombia in 2004

and its subsequent updating in 2012. The latter presents an ecumenical and interreligious proposal based on the principles and criteria of Catholicism:

Our interest is focused, therefore, on facilitating the encounter of children and young people with Jesus Christ and with religion today, through the knowledge and appreciation of the doctrine and teachings of the Catholic religion. (p. 3)

Thus, the intention of the Colombian Episcopate is clear: to present religious education in the context of evangelization within schools. This shows an attempt at interreligious dialogue, based on an attentive stance, but not on transformation. Thus, there are subsequent works that criticize this position, suggesting new paradigms concerning the understanding of the nature and epistemological foundations of RES. Their objective is to open up a field of understanding based on the religious dimension, which they define as a school discipline that “as such, deals with the knowledge of religious reality and the construction of knowledge regarding religious experience” (Meza, 2011, p. 20). These terms allow the religious sciences to enter into the discussion, but the object of study is still not adequate because to speak of a religious dimension means to minimize reflection, to tie the discourse to religious systems.

Therefore, a reflection arises regarding the theology of liberation, a perspective that discusses the importance of the liberation of humankind, in terms of understanding evangelical values valid for many religious discourses:

An emancipatory RES potentiates what various institutions have made explicit in their designs for religious education: to form women and men with strong values inspired by the Gospel (justice, forgiveness, peace, hope, and charity) and, therefore, citizens who realize that to achieve justification, it is necessary to go through justice. There is no salvation without liberation; what is transcendental is achieved by means of immanence. (Meza, 2015, p. 259)

The intended liberation is based on, once again, hetero-structuring paradigms, based on a specific religious system. Although the purpose

is an interfaith and ecumenical opening, the foundation is Catholic thought, which seeks dialogue on the basis of its own categories. That is to say, Christianity is configured as the only filter to develop the competences or particular skills of students with respect to the Religious Education curriculum. Thus, this is a totally denominational proposal clearly based on theology.

Against this background, the discourse regarding diversity and pluralism emerges from the practices having to do with the theology of pluralism. This perspective seeks to interrelate key aspects of the comprehensive education of human beings, such as citizenship, ethics, interculturality, and the pedagogy of humanization in relation to theology:

Motivation regarding the study of RES is based not on claims to truth, but rather on theological scenarios in which mankind has perceived God's acts throughout history and, in the light of this experience, has given meaning to age-old cultures and life stories. Thus, meaningful learning assumes that the student not only has an anthropological understanding of religion, but also an understanding of the conceptual reasoning that has accompanied the systematization and organization of religion in human culture. (Garcia, 2014, p. 39)

Based on meaningful learning and a dialogic methodological orientation, the theology of religious pluralism aims to shatter paradigms of systematic absolutization, to the point that culture remains at the center, as the setting for the holistic understanding of the human being and to reveal the meaning of religious life. This proposal also connects pluralism with social diversity, communities of the believers, critical pedagogy, the pedagogy of love, the historical-cultural approach and dialogic learning. It is presented as a valid option for denominational schools.

This perspective not only condemns the epistemological confusion of evangelizing processes and dogmatic instruction. It also presents the paradigm of pluralism and diversity in seeking to ground interreligious dialogue and civic culture. Its epistemological downside lies in the presentation of the religious dimension as an object of study and

the teleological projection of Religious Education, as an understanding and affirmation of the various religious choices in today's world.

Yet pluralism is not an isolated entity, it is accompanied by multiculturalism, multilingualism, multi-ethnicity, and emerging social contexts, realities that constitute Colombian everyday life as a cultural complex rich in multiplicity. In the words of María Elizabeth Coy (2010): "today, everything is plural, diverse, different" (p. 54). Thus, Religious Education in Schools, built upon religious diversity as an academic setting marked by multidimensionality and multi-intelligence allows for its configuration as a search for meaning, the constitution of consciousness, of the intrapersonal, of what is profound and significant to man. The peculiarity of such RES is that

it deals with such essentially human issues that affect being and the ultimate meaning of life. Because of its strong impact on the substantial core of people, no coercion can be exerted in favor of any denomination; it cannot be imposed on anyone, but neither can it be denied. (Coy, 2010, p. 78)

Consequently, the nature, the epistemological foundation, the method, and the purpose of Religious Education in Schools should be integrated holistically in the comprehensive formation of the personality of the students, based on the deployment, development, and power of the spiritual dimension and intelligence. The latter should be understood as the comprehensive, holistic, and human faculty that guides human beings toward the meaning of life, toward the opening to the absolute, toward mystery, toward humanization, towards diversity, and toward plurality. All of this allows us to differentiate it sharply from evangelization in any sense:

Religious education in schools is the task of educational institutions and, in principle, it should not be denominational, even though institutions can provide this option in their Institutional Educational Projects (IEP). Instead, those responsible for education in faith are the family as the original environment of religious teaching and learning, insofar as parents are the first teachers of their children's faith, as well as the parish as the space in which the community is built. (Corpas, 2012, p. 96)

These approaches and perspectives, generated through the various historical vicissitudes that have created theoretical developments regarding the discourse of religious education based on reflection, have been the driving force of classroom praxis, within school logics. The materialization of these theoretical trends in pedagogical practices is presented below.

Pedagogical Experiences in the Classroom

To reflect on the classroom is to reflect on the setting of education. It should not be understood as a closed magisterial space, typical of the traditional model of “banking” education, nor as a specific geographical or architectural location, and, least of all, as a context for the supremacy of the teacher and of knowledge with respect to the value of the students. On the contrary, the classroom should be conceived of as an appropriate environment for the development of teaching and learning processes:

The classroom is more than a space for cognitive exchanges; it is a space for building attitudes and subjective experiences created by both students and teachers and mediated by affection as the fundamental component of knowing, acting and interrelating. (González and González, 2000, p. 56)

The classroom is thus shaped as a space for personal interrelationships that revolve around the comprehensive education of the students, based on the pedagogical proposal of the teacher in charge. The teacher’s fundamental task is to guide the young people immersed in this context toward the understanding of new knowledge. Such knowledge should not be reduced to complex cognitive frameworks; on the contrary, it should be projected towards the grounding of the personality of the students, through the exchange of attitudinal experiences that facilitate the development and experience of the teaching and learning processes.

One of the key components of this comprehensive education setting is Religious Education, an academic space mentioned in the General Education Law, but framed in various ambiguities and contradictions, as discussed above. A first attempt at conceptualization

could stem from its etymological composition: religious education is the formation of personality in terms of educability. In other words, it is the pedagogical and didactic combination of various teaching and learning processes concerning the instruction, comprehension, interpretation, and transformation of the student's identity, based on a concrete object: religion:

The set of beliefs, celebrations, and ethical-moral norms through which the intellectual being recognizes, in symbolic code, the connection with the divine in two aspects, namely, the subjective and the objectified or externalized in diverse social and individual forms. (Guerra, 1999, p. 29)

Defined in this way within the school, Religious Education opens the door to countless interpretations. For example, when framed by etymology, the nature, and the epistemological foundation of RES are reduced to the religious dimension, evangelization, and catechesis. That is to say, it is reduced to the doctrinal processes of the current religious systems, which, when transferred to the classroom, alter the true meaning of this academic space, given that the meaning of shaping personality formation migrates toward a structuring and socialization of religious denominations, due to the foundation of the spiritual dimension.

This drawback is evident today. Schools are tied to erroneous understandings of the essence of RES, so much so that it is possible to list different approaches to pedagogical work undertaken by Religious Education in the school environment. Two trends are especially notorious: a) a purely denominational perspective with doctrinal purposes, which has a greater presence in the private educational sector and which is generally connected to the standards of the Episcopal Conference (2012). Here, RES is confused with educational pastoral activities; and b) a non-denominational secular perspective, more strongly present in the public sector. The pedagogical practices of both contexts show a biased understanding of the nature and epistemological foundation of RES, given that the two extremes are strongly associated with extremist predispositions, whether mediated by evangelization or by the consideration of the uselessness of this academic space with respect to education in schools.

Distorting the nature of Religious Education and its epistemological foundation is not an exclusively school-related problem; it is also present in the training of university professors. The study plans of most Colombian universities offering this undergraduate degree reveal an orientation based on and directed toward pastoral- theological education. That is, the instruction, comprehension, interpretation, and projection of the religious element in the classroom is carried out on the basis of the mission of Christianity, a religion characterized by this dogmatic systematization.

It is therefore necessary to expand the horizon of understanding of Religious Education in Schools, so that religion itself is not its object of study nor indoctrination its purpose. It is necessary to view this academic space on the basis of reflection on the religious attitude, described by Lucas as the “set of experiences or particular way of assuming existence [...]”; it is not a question of amorphous and disembodied purely private experiences, but rather of facts which connote elements or aspects that contribute to shape and determine them “(1999, p. 15). The main concern should be the formation of the spiritual dimension, as the total alterity that prepares the individual to seek comprehension of the absolute, based on the inquiry into the profound meaning of the realities that go beyond everyday life.

Furthermore, Colombia is not a univocal context; on the contrary, it is diverse and plural. Its national territory is a multifaceted conglomerate of cultural expressions, the result of historical processes, which include, holistically, the everyday life of those who share the inheritance and cultural legacy of their ancestors. In fact, today Colombia is made up of over 80 ethnic groups, as a result of inter-cultural processes involving indigenous peoples, African communities, and foreign colonizers.

The country is recognized as multicultural and multilingual, given the existence of 87 indigenous ethnic groups, 3 differentiated groups of Afro-Colombian people, and the ROM or gypsy people. 64 Amerindian languages are spoken, including Bande, the language of the native people of the Archipelago of San Andres, Providence and Santa Catalina, Palenquero, a Creole language spoken by the communities of San Basilio de Palenque, the first free

town in America, declared a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and Romany or Romanes - a ROM language (DANE, 2007, p. 9)

This pluralism should be understood as the foundation for everyday pedagogy in the classroom, not only in the territories inhabited by each ethnic group, but throughout the geographical extension of the nation. On the basis of this assumption, the Congress of the Republic enacted Law 1516 of 2012, which values the protection and promotion of the country's diverse cultural expressions. Thus, it joined UNESCO's Member States in their call for the protection of cultural diversity, set forth in the Convention adopted in Paris on October 20, 2005, where cultural diversity is defined as:

the manifold ways in which the cultures of groups and societies find expression. [...] Cultural diversity is made manifest not only through the varied ways in which the cultural heritage of humanity is expressed, augmented and transmitted through the variety of cultural expressions, but also through diverse modes of artistic creation, production, dissemination, distribution and enjoyment, whatever the means and technologies used (UNESCO, 2005, p. 4)

Being aware of this cultural heritage and its intrinsic relationship to the religious phenomenon in Colombia, Religious Education is also called upon to protect the knowledge and appreciation of the country's intrinsic cultural and religious diversity, in all of its spheres of action. This identity must be based on the understanding of the intercultural processes that have characterized the history of Colombia. To ignore this is to deny both the ancestral past, rich in teachings, and the spirituality of human beings, a setting full of valid reasons, on the basis of different present day perspectives and approaches.

Although the intercultural aspect does not comprise the entire working horizon of Religious Education, it should not be ignored. It is a valid starting point for the praxis of this academic space. Therefore, the task of educational institutions should be to recognize pluralism as a paradigm of non-exclusivist comprehension, given that "the

pluralistic structure of the Colombian State accepts the multiplicity of life forms, systems for comprehending the world, and different ways of being and acting -values, beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge-” (Gutiérrez, 2011, p. 89). This critical stance would not entail a reduction in the history of ideas or in the cultural practices of our ancestors and our contemporaries; rather it opens up a space for the religious phenomenon as it occurs in the specific contexts of daily human life.

Moreover, studies of religion contribute to the foundation of Religious Education from this new horizon of understanding. It is important to clarify that we are choosing the term *studies* instead of *sciences*, according to the nature of each. While “science” is a concept deeply rooted in positivism and in Western thinking, the concept of “study” is broader. This idea is consistent with the expression of spiritual diversity, which cannot be based on a Western colonizing language that tries to understand everything on the basis of univocal and mechanistic paradigms.

Having made this clarification, studies of religion constitute the epistemological foundation of Religious Education, because they provide a logical structure and a horizon of understanding of the spiritual dimension. Indeed, its correct understanding is intrinsically rooted in the understanding of human beings and the processes of humanization (Anthropology of Religion). It is also rooted in the concern regarding socialization and its social materialization in the community (Sociology of Religion); in the inquiry into the behavior and mental processes of human beings (Psychology of Religion); in the systematic study of concrete religious phenomena (Phenomenology of Religion); and in the rational reflection on the religious structure (Philosophy of Religion). In addition to these studies, one might also consider the intuition and research regarding the spiritual dimension and intelligence, the comparative history of religions, and even the interpretation of signs and symbols by the Semiotics of Religion.

Dialogues and Dissertations

On the basis of the legal framework, the critiques of the approaches conceived thus far, and the classroom praxis resulting from these

perspectives, the nature of Religious Education must be framed in the processes aimed at the comprehensive formation of personality, based on the spiritual dimension, so that it can be understood as:

An area that, from the perspective of its academic knowledge, attempts to answer one of the fundamental human questions: What is the meaning of life?, with respect to a transcendent being (the Mystery, the Absolute, God). This meaning is understandable if the educational community questions itself about its academic contribution in order to answer the question: How human can we become or are we thanks to religious education? Even more so, when what is at stake in any educational proposal is to provide meanings which are materialized in the model of person and society that it helps to shape. (MEN, 2012, p. 22)

Religious Education -in the context of the classroom, within the practices and policies of public and private, denominational and non-denominational schools- should be conceived of as a pedagogical scenario of comprehensive education that orients its teaching activities toward the understanding of diversity and pluralism. This, in order to protect the multiplicity of expressions and religious experiences that underlie the projection of the spiritual dimension, as the possibility of openness to total alterity and to the search for meaning and significance of the totality. Such is the case of the Colegio Mayor del Quiroga, which in its area plan for RES and Morality states:

This Religious and Moral Education Area Plan originated from a proposal for a general and comprehensive study of religions with a non-denominational, non-religious experience approach that does not defend any specific religion or any agnostic or atheistic positions. Likewise, we are working with three approaches: spirituality and transcendentality, religion and thought, history and evolution of religions. (P. 3)

Thus, the suitable classroom for Religious Education must be one that promotes intercultural processes for the education and development of the spiritual dimension, in the specific context of the comprehensive formation of the personality. This should not be carried out from a

purely cognitive perspective, but rather on an experiential one, in which ethnography becomes relevant in terms of observation and experience. In other words, this means projecting RES onto the daily life of students and the grounding of a spiritual intelligence. With this new scenario before us, we can now ask:

Are the standards approved by the Colombian Episcopal Conference in accordance with the needs that are evident in society? Are all the teachers that participate in RES properly trained? Does their teaching shape people who can account for their faith? Does RES favor the formation of people capable of critical thought and of commitment to society? (Mendoza and Velandia, 2013, p. 86)

These questions give rise to the chapters presented below, in which we discuss Religious Education in Schools from the perspective of its epistemological foundations, focused on different studies of religion (Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, Phenomenology and Philosophy), in settings for existential reflection, which strengthen the discourse of this academic space in Colombian schools. All of this is aimed at the processes of comprehensive formation of the personality through the spiritual dimension (Nature of Religious Education), as ordained by Law 115 of 1994. Thus, we provide adequate tools and pedagogical resources for the work of teachers with respect to this area of elementary, secondary, and middle vocational education.

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