

Religious Education in Italy and England. Comparative Perspective on School Textbooks and Teaching Practices

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Abstract

This paper is framed within the hypothesis that school textbooks and curricula in general act as a litmus test for identity affiliations [1], [2], [3]. The project makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the history of knowledge of Islam and Christianity in religious education and the practices of textbook use in religious education within and across nations both in the past and the present. This is especially crucial in developing a richer and more nuanced understanding on how the religion (both Islam and Christianity) is understood, represented and taught in key texts used in religious education. How religious education textbooks are seen as contributing to national identity formation, and the processes of racial, cultural and religious assimilation is an important point of focus across the research. The working hypothesis is that religious education textbooks, along with those in, history and geography, are culturally located and socially defining. Increased sensitivity to this has important ramifications on policy and practice in religious education. The paper deals with the religious education (RE) textbooks – primary and secondary – in Italy and England in comparative perspective. Through a comparative perspective we can understand how Christianity and Islam are represented by the textbooks of the two countries. The researcher subjected textbooks and religious education curriculum across the two countries to systematic analysis on that basis.

1. Introduction

Taking into account national differences, the study of coherences and contradictions between textbooks, curricula and educational programmes and policies at the international level, is thus far a field of limited investigation. As a source of representation, such textbooks offer evidence of the construction of race, ethnicity, cultural identity and religion, being circulated amongst the school population in any given national context, which this paper seeks to investigate and compare by providing knowledge of the ways in which religious education has been taught, with a particular focus on the representation of religion and Islamic and Christian culture.

School textbooks are an educational and pedagogical tool of undoubted interest from which it is possible to "read" and interpret, among other variables, identity changes that on a historical level

have characterized the educational and ideological positions in any given national context [4], [5]. They reveal a good deal about how understand ourselves, our identity and history as a society, not least differing ethnic and religious groups it is made up of. Thus, it is essential to research how textbooks sought to contribute to the identity construction of the citizen, acting as a vehicle in forming national values and self-understanding, especially in relation to Islam and Christianity. Taking a diachronic and synchronic perspective upon textbook analysis in different countries, the researcher identified and examined what the favoured representations were at any given point across eras.

2. The educational contexts - Approaches and changes in the teaching of religious education

In order to answer the questions and understand how cultural and religious diversity is integrated into school education, we analyzed school programs for teaching religious matters, as well as official documents, teaching tools, more particularly textbooks, and teaching practices.

How do official documents and school curricula manage to integrate religious and cultural diversity in school?

Do the educational tools comply with what educational policies claim regarding the inclusion of cultural and religious diversity?

Are teachers able to participate in training courses on these topics?

In Italy, the discipline relating to the teaching of religion is called IRC Teaching of the Catholic Religion. This is an optional course that offers a reading of religious reality from a Christian point of view and more particularly from a Catholic point of view. Several authors, including Ciatelli, have underlined the fact that "The objectives of the discipline are secular, because they openly coincide with those of the school. The content, on the other hand, is denominational because it refers to the Catholic faith and is based on the guarantee that the Church itself provides as to the conformity of programs, textbooks and teachers" [6]. The status of the discipline is ratified with the 1929 Agreement

between the Catholic Church and the State, revised in 1984, which integrates the teaching of the Catholic religion as a subject in non-university public schools. Catholic religion occupies a privileged place for reasons linked to history and cultural heritage. In this sense, we underline the co-responsibility of the state and the church in the establishment of this course, different from all the others, for which the church must validate the contents (which must be in accordance with the doctrine of the church), textbooks and even the aptitude of teachers, on the basis of three criteria: good doctrine (objective and complete knowledge of the contents of Christian revelation and of the doctrine of the church), witness to the Christian life (the capacity to live coherently with the professed faith), teaching aptitude (training and teaching competence). In serious cases and at the discretion of the church, the charge may be withdrawn. The IRC is presented as a teaching of a specific religion and not a generic teaching of religion, so denominational reference is intrinsic [6]. However, there are references to other religions, especially to the two other monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam, that follow Christianity before other religions.

In England, the discipline is called Religious Education (RE). Although it is compulsory for all schools to teach this discipline, it is not part of the national curriculum. Religious education is a component of the basic curriculum (but not of the national curriculum) and is compulsory for all pupils in schools run by local authorities aged 5 to 18 unless they are withdrawn from this course by their parents. From the beginning of the 1970s, there was more systematic talk of multi-religious schools [7] and the main reference in this area is Owen Cole's book "Religion in the multi-faith school", which helped teachers to deal with religious diversity in schools. The 1970 report, *The Fourth R*, also recommended studying the issue of foreign students and their needs as part of religious education in schools [8].

A significant example of the changes taking place during this period is represented by the Birmingham Syllabus of 1975, which recommended in addition to the study of Christianity and other major religions, the study of non-religious "stance for living", what we call today "worldviews", like humanism or communism. It can be said that by the mid-1970s the teaching of the main religions was implemented, without controversy on the part of the teachers. Controversies focus more on teaching non-religious worldviews. But as Parker and Freathy stated in (2011), the change in RE's program has been evolutionary and not revolutionary, in continuity with previous thinking and theorizing [9]. However, the most successful book of the 1970s was Grimmitt's "What can I do in RE?" [10]. The author proposed a pedagogy that clearly differed from that

of the churches, which until then had dominated the debate on religious education [11]. In a context where accredited programs for public schools had been dominated by Christianity Grimmitt argued that the role of the state and that of the Church in the study and teaching of religion was different. It is also to him that we owe the distinction of the three models of teaching within the discipline: teaching in religion, about religion and from religion. While the first model provides for knowledge of the religious fact from the internal references of a specific religion, so it's a religious education of a mono religious nature (it is therefore a confessional approach), the second teaching about religion informs in a neutral way on the different religious traditions. This approach therefore foresees the knowledge and understanding by pupils of different religions and their relations with each other as well as the study of the nature and characteristics of religion, as a social phenomenon (historical and comparative study of religions). The third model teaching from religion takes religion as a source of meaning, which gives direction in the life of students. It is not tied to a specific religious tradition, but all religions can be used as a source of meaning. It provides for the development of students' skills in the application, interpretation, and evaluation of what they learn about religion, based on students' knowledge, preconceived ideas and experiences of the religious and non-religious fact. These three models have been widely used internationally to try to categorize the approaches used to teach religion or religions. But today, in the English context, we do not speak separately of these approaches, but rather of an integration of the two models "teaching about and from religion", whereas the first model "teaching in religion" has been exceeded and no longer applies, at least in non-faith community schools.

The most significant change nowadays concerns the proposals put forward in 2018 in the report of the Commission on religious education "Religion and Worldviews: the way forward. A national plan for RE". The commission proposes to redefine the identity of the discipline, starting from the name which should become "Religion and Worldviews" (RandW) instead of RE; a common program and not several local agreed syllabuses, and the abolition of the clause allowing children to be withdrawn from the course, to name only the most significant proposals [12].

What is the meaning attributed to the concept of worldview?

According to the interdisciplinary group on Worldviews, a worldview should normally have six characteristics: an explanation of the world, an answer to the question "where are we going?", an ethical system, a theory of action (how should we

achieve our goals?), a theory of knowledge (how do you know what is right and wrong?), and an account of the origins and construction of one's own ideas.

3. Religious pluralism in the school textbooks and teacher's practices

In this rich and complex landscape, we will see what place is given to religious pluralism, by analysing some central aspects relating to programs, school textbooks and to conclude on challenges in the classroom. Italian textbooks do not go through an approval process, although publishers are required to follow ministerial recommendations. The only exception concerns the school textbooks of IRC, teaching of Catholic religion, which, in continuity with the agreement between the Catholic Church and the State of 1929, revised in 1984, must be approved by the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI). But in England, textbooks conform to Local Agreed Syllabus but not approved by a national organization. There are GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) exam preparation textbooks that are approved by qualified organizations, such as AQA, but teachers are not required to use them.

A first important difference concerns not only the place of the different religions in the textbooks, but also the presence in England of several textbooks dedicated to each religion. For example, there are textbooks that deal only with Islam, or Hinduism or Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and Sikhism, what are called "the big six", the six great religions. There are also textbooks that deal with two religions, as the requirement for preparing for the GCSE exam is to cover at least two religions, usually the first of which is Christianity. In some books, especially those preparing for exams which must cover all the required topics, there is a first section on religions and a second thematic section. From certain themes - such as relationships and family, peace and conflict, crime, human rights, we see how different religions position themselves in relation to these themes. But what is interesting is that even within the framework of a religion there are always several points of view and interpretations that are emphasized. To give examples in the context of Christianity, we speak of the different points of view of Protestantism (especially in the English context), Catholicism, the Orthodox Church, other evangelical and charismatic churches, etc. Beyond these religious points of view, interpretations and practices, it is the discrepancy between individual practices on the one hand, and religious ones on the other, which is underlined, fundamental in a society where there is a predominance of people who do not practice any religion, or who practice personal forms of worship. Quotes from the views of humanists and atheists, among non-religious worldviews are also recurrent. The main objective is to avoid any kind of

generalization by always highlighting the rootedness of precepts and practices in a specific context and the diversity and richness of the contemporary religious landscape, as well as the fundamental influence of non-religious worldview in the lives of the students.

As for the Italian textbooks, some of them are centred on Christianity, others on the contrary in which the comparison with other religions is more present, but being approved by the Catholic Church, the content must be consistent with Christian doctrine. Other religions are often read and treated from the Christian and catholic point of view. And even with regard to Christianity, one does not find the plurality of interpretations relating to the different branches of Christianity but mainly that of the Catholic Church. There is also no presence of the non-religious worldviews. As for the program, it should be noted that in Italy there is no longer a program, but non-binding ministerial indications.

Since the 2000s and the law on autonomy (School autonomy L.59 / 97, art.21 e DPR275 / 99, art. 8), educational institutions, although part of the national school system, have acquired administrative, didactic and organizational autonomy. The most important change is the program that is disappearing in its usual form to leave more room for ministerial recommendations. These considerations lead us to ask ourselves a few questions. First of all, could this freedom to build one's own course allow teachers to include more religious pluralism in their course? Is this what really happens in the classroom? From the interviews it emerged that the 75% of teachers use the textbooks and they use it in 60% of their lessons, compared to other teaching tools. By continuing to structure their lessons according to the arguments covered by the textbooks, the teachers perpetuate the old conception of the program and prevent the introduction of new elements, "outside the textbook". This is not always the case, but the weight of the textbooks is undeniable in the construction of the program or in its content. This reflection therefore makes it possible to recognize the importance of analysing textbooks with regard to the question of identity, even more if we consider the changes of the last decades which have made Italy a multicultural society. From the interviews and questionnaires, it emerges also a desire for change (80% of teachers say that a major change in the discipline is needed) and among the expected and desired changes there are:

- Make the discipline compulsory
- More room for other religions
- Change the name, IR instead of IRC (religious education instead of Catholic religious education)
- Allow teachers of other religions to teach

- More hours and compulsory assessment like other disciplines
- Eliminate all traces of confessionalism
- State university course institution.

Indeed, the main obstacles to the establishment of a course based on religious pluralism - while respecting the status of the discipline - seem to be linked to training. Several teachers say they want to include all religions in their curriculum, but they lack in-depth and careful training to do so, especially in secondary schools. This problem of lack of training on religion pluralism is linked to the training courses for teachers, which take place in pontifical universities, since the theological faculty of state universities was abolished with the law of 1872. The teachers recognize that their training is very focused on Christianity and more particularly on Catholicism. In addition, if we consider that it is the local curia which organizes the training courses for the teachers, we can understand how at the level of continuing education it is also difficult to leave the training circuits with Christian dominance, and even when they offer openness to other religions is always from a Christian point of view. These are the teachers who have a richer training path, already in possession of a diploma in other disciplines, or additional masters and even Ph.D., or who have had the opportunity to deepen the study of other religions, which are most inclined to structure their course in a multi-religious way.

Training in this sense is a central element for the inclusion of a plural gaze within the framework of this discipline, while the freedom in the programming of the course is not in itself a sufficient reason for the inclusion of other religions if it is not reinforced by a multi-religious formation and training. As for England there are other important challenges to note. First of all, the possibility of withdrawing the student, which if it made sense when the discipline was confessional, is now considered an anomaly. Another paradox, RE is the only compulsory discipline by law, but it is not part of the national curriculum. The absence of a national program leaves room for a multitude of dispersed local agreed syllabuses, which do not facilitate the achievement of clear and common objectives. In addition, there is the problem of the lack of teachers specializing in the teaching of this discipline, often entrusted to teachers who do not have specific skills or the fact that the discipline is absorbed by others, with as a result, according to a study conducted by the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education, (2018) in more than a quarter of high schools the discipline was not sufficiently treated and sometimes was not treated at all.

4. Conclusion

Despite the challenges that are very present and sometimes common to both contexts, there are great differences between the teaching models of religious education with important consequences in terms of knowledge and understanding of religions and worldviews. Although in general Italian teachers are more qualified (56% of them have a master's degree, 7% a Ph.D., against 19% of English teachers with a master's degree and none of them with a Ph.D, among the interview sample), their mono-religious approach has significant repercussions in terms of the inclusion of religious diversity and even the identification and deconstruction of stereotypes, for example in the school textbook. While 50% of English teachers claim to have identified stereotypes about different religions in the textbooks they used, only 9% of Italian teachers claim the same. This difference is not linked to a better quality of Italian school textbooks, but rather to the mono-religious approach in initial and continuous training, which does not give teachers the opportunity for a real and decentralized confrontation beyond the interpretive categories of Christianity on other religious realities and non-religious worldviews.

To conclude, the data that has emerged on training requires reflection, as it highlights a clear gap between those who have taken courses regularly and those who, on the contrary, have never attended any. Regarding, for example, the topic of interculturality and the deconstruction of stereotypes in textbooks, we find that only teachers who have received training on this subject have succeeded in identifying and deconstructing stereotypes and prejudices. They are more aware of cultural diversity and are therefore more likely to promote it through an offer of plural educational content, culturally decentralized.

5. References

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