

Religious Education in Malta
Reflections and Suggestions

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Religious Education as a subject in Maltese State, Church and Independent Schools is currently facing a number of challenges which are a result of many social and cultural factors. There are also other aspects which can be considered as positive factors. This Paper focuses exclusively on Religious Education in State Schools, and seeks to highlight both the strengths and the challenges which are being faced at the moment. It focuses more on challenges and seeks to provide tentative solutions to the problems being faced at the moment.

At this point in time, Religious Education is encountering three particular difficulties within State Schools. The first difficulty is limited to the Primary Sector where class teachers teach most of the subjects taught at this level. It is being noted that not all Primary class teachers are convinced, not only of the importance of Religious Education as a school subject, but also on a personal level of the Catholic Religion which they are called to teach. A possible remedy for this is that the MEDE appoints specific teachers who will be trained to act as support teachers where difficulties of this type exist.

A second difficulty is related to some schools in the Secondary Sector. In this case, there are schools which have decided to reduce the number of hours for Religious Education. A case in point is the National Sport School which has reduced Religious Education lessons to one lesson per week with all the difficulty this brings about in trying to cover the entire curriculum. The Malta Visual and Performing Arts School will introduce this system in September 2019. In this respect, if other subjects, and not only Religious Education, are selected to be reduced by reducing a lesson once a month, the negative impact on Religious Education with regards to the curriculum would be less felt.

A third difficulty is related to meetings with parents when these are called by the SMTs to decide whether Religious Education or Ethics should be chosen for their children. While there are a good number of cases where this choice is automatic due to foreigners or the professing of different religions, it has been noted that during these meetings there has been and still is an imbalance. This is due to the fact that only the representatives of Ethics are called to publicise their subject. A possible remedy for this is simply calling also the EO's for Religious Education to be present in these meetings and to voice their interests in an equal manner with the representative of Ethics.

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Modern democratic societies have recognised the importance of educating the human being in a holistic way. This holistic education has been effected by targeting the physical, intellectual, social, moral, psychological, and religious dimensions of the human being. In the particular case of Malta, the education of the religious dimension in the holistic development of the human being has been carried out partially for many years through Religious Education. Religious Education as an academic subject seeks to help students become aware of and acknowledge the innate religious dimension of the human being which in our particular case is augmented with external signs of symbols of this innate religiosity.

Why Religious Education in Schools?

By our very nature, we as human beings are spiritual beings. We seek transcendence. We seek to explain what cannot be explained through natural and scientific ways by reverting to the supernatural. Believers coming from different religious traditions seek transcendence through their particular faith tradition, while non-believers seek transcendence by seeking to be at one with nature and the created world.¹

As Catholics, we believe that we “are created in the image and likeness of God” (Gen 1, 27). This likeness to God is demonstrated amongst other things through the fact that “the human being shares in the light of the divine mind” and so “can with genuine certitude attain to reality itself as knowable.”² This means that the human being is imbued with a natural yearning and capacity to reach out to God. Moreover, we as believers seek to understand ourselves and the world in which we live in the light of the Transcendent God. We seek to know more about God and the supernatural. This puts us in an ever-growing and never-ending search to shed more light on our religious tradition and to see the connection between religion and other areas of life. This is the anthropological foundation of the teaching of Catholic Religious Education in Maltese schools.³

Religious beliefs have always played a central and formative part in the shaping of every human civilisation throughout history. This is even more so for the Catholic faith in Malta which has left not only an impact on the Maltese people, but has also left a visible imprint

¹ Secretariat for Catechesis – Archdiocese of Malta, *Religious Education in Malta. Reflections by the Catholic Community* 2008, online: https://katekezi.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/religious_education_in_malta.pdf, p. 16

² Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et Spes*, 7th December 1965, online: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

³ The Constitution and Legal foundations of Religious Education can be found in the Constitution of Malta, in the Agreement between the Republic of Malta and the Holy See on Religious Education in State Schools and in the Modes of Regulation of this Agreement. See *Constitution of Malta*, online: <http://justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=8566>; *Accordo tra la Repubblica di Malta e La Santa Sede per meglio ordinare l'istruzione e l'educazione religiosa cattolica nelle scuole statali* and *Modes of Regulation on Catholic Religious Instruction and Education in State Schools*, online: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/archivio/documents/rc_seg-st_19891116_s-sede-malta-educazione_it.html

on the Maltese landscape and culture. It is precisely this aspect that Religious Education seeks to enlighten. Through Religious Education, students have the opportunity to explore their socio-cultural and religious roots:

- by seeking to understand traditions;
- by learning about the rich philosophies which have forged these cultural roots;
- by seeking to understand the reasoning behind moral codes;
- by studying the troubled past and histories from a critical point of view;
- by appreciating inspiring art from a religious point of view; and
- by reading literature in the light of the culture and traditions of Malta.

In short, the turbulent and coloured history of the Maltese Islands cannot be understood well and in all its different nuances without reference to the Catholic Religion.

Erroneous Concepts of Religious Education

Notwithstanding this, we must also keep in mind that in our contemporary secular society, there are various views which are emerging about the teaching of Catholic Religious Education in schools. These flawed conclusions are based on erroneous premises which are clearly the result of misconceptions among the general public about what Religious Education as an academic subject in schools is all about.

For example, some decades ago, Religious Education took either a very doctrinal approach, or a very Scriptural approach since it was more a Bible study session on the Gospel which would be read in churches during the following Sunday. This was the order of the day about 30 or 40 years ago. However, this cannot be said and applied to the situation today. It is a great misconception to think that the Religious Education class in primary and secondary schools is simply, a 30-minute or 40-minute lesson respectively, of saying the rosary, of praying, of reading the Bible or of simply lecturing dogmatically in a teacher-centred approach. This is very far from what actually happens in reality. Nor can we say that Religious Education is a subject which is taught through memorization or through rote-learning. Religious Education in schools is much more than this.

In our contemporary times, where things have changed significantly, Catholic Religious Education is not treated from the pietistic point of view, but it is approached by teachers with the same rigour as any other academic subject. A multi-disciplinary approach is adopted in the sense that Religious Education has been enriched by the Sciences of Education in order to render it a subject which meets more than the minimum required standards for academic rigour. Moreover, contrary to what happened in the past, Catholic Religious Education is presented in such a way that it touches the real life of children and adolescents in a holistic way. This is done both at a Primary and at a Secondary level by helping students explore fundamental and existential questions, not by giving them a pre-fabricated answer or by rote learning, but by helping them to explore and formulate their own responses and opinions to these fundamental questions and other questions raised by the world in which they live. This is done in such a way that no matter what level their faith has achieved, they can still find a plausible answer to their deepest questions. It is in this way that Religious Education helps in providing for a fully rounded and holistic education by not only nourishing the soul but also the mind.

Religious Education, being a subject which is taught akin to other subjects in schools, is bound to develop in a similar way as all other subjects. It is precisely for this reason that like

all other subjects Religious Education has in these last years developed a new syllabus and is now also taking the Learning Outcomes approach.⁴ The *raison d'être* behind the Learning Outcomes approach is to help students to become better informed and to be more critical thinkers who think seriously about their religion, and in the process acquire suitable knowledge, particular attitudes, positive values and human skills. This makes Religious Education a subject which is not simply endured by students as part of compulsory education, but a subject which besides giving knowledge to the students, gives them also practical values, attitudes and skills which they may use in life later on. This endows Religious Education with Richard Dawkins' philosophy that we are to teach children how to think and not what to think.

The new Learning Outcomes approach is precisely an antidote to one of the criticisms which is commonly launched against Religious Education today, where the subject is criticized for taking a rigid doctrinal stance which ultimately leads to indoctrination. It must be stressed that Religious Education and contemporary anthropology, out of their very nature are strictly opposed to any form of indoctrination, which would ultimately lead to fundamentalism. This aspect can never be stressed enough.

To complement this outlook, one must acknowledge the fact that the Religious Education syllabus is no longer a mini-course in theology as this is offered in different Faculties of Theology around the world. The syllabus deals with current issues which intrigue the mind of students as normal citizens. Issues such as those relating to equality and LGBTIQ+, capital punishment, euthanasia and abortion are studied from a social and moral point of view to induce in students the respect which is due to all human beings created in the image of God. Since we are living in a multicultural world, the main tenets of other religions and of different Christian denominations are studied in order to give the students a comprehensive view of the phenomenon of religion and of other spiritualities in today's world. The academic study of these issues ultimately helps conviviality in our culturally diverse society.

Religious Education in the Primary Sector

By virtue of the Constitution of Malta, of the Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Malta and of the Modes of Regulation, Catholic Religious Education is taught in State, Church and Independent Schools as from Year 1 to Year 11 (Form 5). The Modes of Regulation make a proviso that Religious Education is allotted at least half an hour daily, or two and a half hours of lesson time weekly.⁵ This has been usually done by allotting the first half an hour of each school day to the teaching of Religion. Overall, this means that in the Primary Sector, Religious Education is allotted 9.5% of schooling hours. However, in 2012, with the publication of the National Curriculum Framework, this has been re-adjusted to 5%, just over half the originally allotted time.⁶

Had one to empirically check whether this is actually taking place, one would not be surprised that this 5% for which students are entitled is not actually being fulfilled in all

⁴ For more information about the *Learning Outcomes Framework*, see <http://www.schoolslearningoutcomes.edu.mt/en/>

⁵ See *Modes of Regulation*, para. 4.

⁶ See *A National Curriculum Framework for All* (2012), online: <https://curriculum.gov.mt/en/Resources/The-NCF/Documents/NCF.pdf>, p.17.

cases. There are two particular reasons for this. The first reason is that the Religious Education lesson is the first to be dropped out of the daily timetable if other activities or outings are planned. Whenever, there are not enough school hours, Religious Education is the first to make way for other subjects which 'must' be taught. So when teachers are faced with situations where they need to do lessons for other subjects, Religious Education is usually the first lesson which slips out of the timetable of the day. The situation in this respect has been more aggravated by the removal of examinations for Religious Education in the Primary Sector without actually consulting the competent Religious Authorities who are responsible for the teaching of Religion in schools. This move gives the impression that at face value the subjects which are examinable are more important and thus cannot be skipped, at the expense of other subjects such as Religious Education.

A second reason for which Religious Education is not being given its due importance is of a totally different nature. In every subject, it is the teacher who is the driving force which makes a subject enjoyable or simply bearable. It is a known fact that in primary schools we have a range of teachers who for different reasons do not feel comfortable teaching Religious Education. As a result, the subject is not given its due importance. This results in reducing Religious Education to teaching mere facts and arid truths which are not linked to the daily life of students. This renders the subject boring and unrelated to the questions which students are naturally asking. Moreover, one also notes with regret that when supply teachers are employed to teach in the Primary Sector, these are engaged to teach Primary classes with little or no training at all, to the detriment of Religious Education and the other subjects.

A way to counteract this second difficulty is to have Support Teachers for Religious Education in the Primary Sector appointed by the Ministry for Education and Employment. Such a measure would help those teachers who for some reason or another find it difficult to teach Religious Education at the Primary Level. We exhort the Ministry for Education and Employment to study this issue seriously with the competent Church Authorities so that this obstacle is overcome as soon as possible to the benefit of all the students.

Notwithstanding this, there have also been positive developments in Religious Education in the Primary Sector. The introduction of Projects in Year 4, Year 5 and Year 6 has helped students to put into practice what they are being taught during Religious Education classes. These projects are centred around giving a helping hand, acknowledging Christian qualities, and modelling their lives on that of Jesus. These Projects have helped students to become more aware that Religious Education is aimed at helping them to live better lives which are in tune with the message of the Gospel and with our contemporary social and cultural context. The fact that during Religious Education classes students are encouraged to discuss their ideas and opinions in class, and that they can work and collaborate together with others through group work, instils in students the ability to work as teams and to respect the opinions and religious beliefs of others, making it even more relevant for citizens who are growing up in a multicultural setting.

Religious Education in the Secondary Sector

Religious Education in the Secondary Sector is not primarily aimed at giving a mass of new knowledge to the student, since this would have been already encountered in some way in the Primary School years. The Secondary School offers the student the possibility of becoming an avid researcher of the truth in all spheres of life. This is achieved by helping the student to take a critical and at the same time reflective outlook at whatever s/he encounters in the process of Religious Education and the other academic subjects studied at school.

This does not mean that Religious Education should part with its duty of developing the spiritual aspect of the human being in terms of connectedness with the God, with the Self, with others and with nature. This search for the spiritual may sometimes be at risk because some Religious Education teachers actually lack this spiritual connectedness in their personal daily lives. If Religious Education teachers do not feel the importance of the spiritual aspect in their lives, it would be very difficult for them to see the importance of the spiritual aspect of Religious Education in the lives of the students that they teach.

It is never enough to emphasize the importance that teachers should be trained to explore and to personalize the rationale of Religious Education in our contemporary open and free society. The fact that in the past decades, Catholic Religious Education was never challenged by any other outlook or Tradition in Maltese culture may have contributed to make it look as if it has a monopoly over other Religious Traditions, faiths, beliefs and even non-belief. This has contributed to the adoption of a methodology or methodologies which were fixed and conservative rather than dynamic and responding to the needs of the students. This may have contributed to making the subject less popular with students, since it took the form of a monologue rather than a dialogue with talk partners. Today, such methodologies are no longer admissible.

The methodologies used in teaching Religious Education today should be in consonance with:

1. the aspiration of helping the student to develop the desire for inquiry and insight;
2. the expectation that personal insights are there to be discovered and revealed;
3. the determination to unlock such covert insights;
4. the thoughtfulness to comprehend these insights fully; and
5. the desire to make the insights and ideas uncovered by others their own.

Such methodologies are in line with the theories and the research in the fields of Education in the Secondary Sector, together with social developments, and changes in the composition and in the lives of families living in Malta today. It is in this way that Religious Education promotes the personal experiences of the students, inflames their imagination and develops their capacity to think critically on their own. If Religious Education teachers do not take on the challenge to renew the methodology used to teach Religious Education in our contemporary schools, the risk is that Religious Education will be gradually set aside and its place will be immediately taken over by other subjects considered more important.

Removing Religious Education from the Secondary School curriculum would thus mean that at such a delicate time in the life of the adolescent, and in such an educational forum the

student will be deprived of the ability of thinking about what is transcendent, and thus of the human being's capacity to go beyond the world of physical persons and objects. Religious Education contributes to the development of the young person's literacy through a wide range of texts. Such texts and other resources used in the process of human and religious development are a true challenge to the human psyche and will help the student to develop in a balanced and harmonious way. Students in Secondary Schools are to be challenged cognitively and affectively through an activity-based approach. This makes them active agents in the formation of their personal identity and in the construction of their own world. The ability to express existential questions and the most intimate queries through various forms (words, story, art, song, ritual and prayer) has a very strong impact on different levels (knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes) which on their part influence the different human dimensions of the individual.

As promoters of Religious Educators in State Schools, we are deeply concerned about the way in which Religious Education is being treated as a subject at The National Sport School. At this particular school, the Religious Education lessons for Year 9, Year 10 and Year 11⁷ have been truncated to one lesson per week so that students can have more time for sport activities. This means that teachers are being constricted to adopt a much more teacher-centred approach in order to cover the entire syllabus. This is done at the expense of rendering the lesson a lecture and much more difficult to follow since time for discussions and other activities is very limited. At times, it has also transpired that the Religious Education teacher meets a particular class after 3 weeks since weekly scheduled lessons were missed due to other activities, holidays or outings. Such a situation is putting more pressure on students who have to study and cover material by themselves through homework. Moreover, we are seriously asking whether the students are getting what they are entitled for in such a situation. This situation is raising even more questions since it seems that this is not an isolated incidence of the way in which Religious Education is treated in certain schools. We have come to the knowledge that as from next year, this situation is going to be emulated at the Malta Visual and Performing Arts School in Hamrun, where the school SMT has decided that as from next academic year, Religious Education will be reduced to one lesson per week. We ask the competent authorities from the Ministry for Education and Employment to tackle and rectify this situation as soon as possible, so that Religious Education is given its entitled place and tenure to the benefit of the students.

Ethics and Religious Education

Ethics as an academic subject has been recently introduced into the curriculum of the Primary Sector of Maltese State Schools. This was a positive development considering that Malta is daily becoming more pluralistic and multicultural. The introduction of Ethics as a subject in schools has provided students who are coming from different religious backgrounds with the entitlement of school hours to which they are legally eligible. However, although at first glance, this seemed to be a fantastic solution to the issue of entitlement, today, after experiencing this for some years and in hindsight, one can clearly notes that the situation is not as clear and as just as one expects. The reason for this is that the introduction of Ethics classes in the Primary sector, as indeed in the Secondary Sector is

⁷ Year 10 and Year 11 are the years when students are preparing for the SEC examination! In the coming years, Year 9, will also form part of this preparation.

blurred by circumstances which one cannot not consider as putting the subject of Religious Education at an unfair disadvantage.

This is mostly evident when parents are called in for information meetings at schools. During such meetings, parents are informed about the choice they have to make for their children: whether they are to enter for Religious Education classes or to opt out and subscribe to Ethics classes. In these last years, this has been carried out in a very unjust way by inviting only the proponents of Ethics classes to make their point, to the detriment of Religious Education. If both subjects are to be treated with equity, the Ministry for Education and Employment should see that the Education Officers of both subjects are invited to make their point in an equitable way, thus presenting a more balanced picture to parents. It is only in this way that justice can be done to both subjects when these are presented to parents. To date this complaint which has been flagged with Educational Authorities has not been heeded to. However, with satisfaction we note that in the letters which have been lately sent to parents to choose either Religious Education or Ethics, both subjects were introduced equally.

The Training and the On-Going Formation of Teachers

In our contemporary time, one can never be satisfied with the education and with the training one has received upon deciding to pursue a particular vocation or career. This is more applicable to individuals who seek to pursue an education vocation as Religious Education teachers. Religious Education teachers need to constantly understand that education is a science which is mastered both through formal education and through on-going formation. This is more so in the light of the constant changes in the society we are living in and which they are called to incorporate and integrate in their teaching.

One of the aims of education is not only the gathering of information which is pertinent to life but also social progression. If education is truly aimed at social progression, it cannot do without constant and on-going training and formation. It is there that Religious Education becomes a vital part of the holistic development of the human being. Religious Education offers a more complex view of life than simply the last word on social or moral issues. Indeed, it will be detrimental to give a too specifically Catholic Religious Education which is exclusive of other religions and Christian denominations because this does not in fact prepare children holistically for the reality of daily life beyond the school confines. If we are not to betray our students, we have to educate them for the multicultural society which they will encounter in their daily endeavours.

The relative competent authorities from the Ministry for Education and Employment have throughout the years not only made the relative arrangements for the on-going professional formation of teachers, but they have also never hesitated to provide the best human resources for such training. This is a point which must be acknowledged with gratitude.

Conclusion

Although Religious Education may seem a controversial subject for some individuals who fail to understand the necessity of educating the student in a holistic way, we still feel the need to educate the religious and the spiritual dimension of the human being. This helps the student to transcend what is immediate and to seek fulfilment beyond the physical world of

objects. Religious Education helps students to come in contact with fundamental and existential questions, for which the technological and scientific world cannot provide an adequate answer. It is through a subject such as Religious Education that students come in contact with their real selves as finite, yet having the capacity to transcend the material and physical world.

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