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Religious Education in Transition: From Content-Centred to Student-Centred

Carl-Mario Sultana 

Department of Pastoral Theology, Liturgy and Canon Law, Faculty of Theology, University of Malta,
MSD 2080 Msida, Malta; carl.m.sultana@um.edu.mt

Abstract: Catholic Religious Education as a subject in school curricula is an area in which the need for change is constantly felt. This change is driven by the paradigm shift in anthropology brought about by Vatican Council II, which sought to put the human being at the centre. Notwithstanding this shift proposed more than 50 years ago, we are still struggling to handle and implement this change. In practice, this calls for a re-evaluation of the traditional doctrinal methods, which have been associated with teaching Religious Education in the past and seeking to adopt new methods which are more anthropological and depart from where the human being actually stands and seek to answer the existential questions which contemporary human beings pose. The point of departure for such a vision is the etymological meaning of the term ‘education’ from the Latin root *educere*. In practical terms, such a shift from a content-centred to a more student-centred approach entails adopting a constructivist approach and putting into practice the principles of what is referred to as ‘Adaptive Religious Education’, which seeks to educate children in all the six dimensions of the human being simultaneously in a holistic way.

Keywords: religious education; adaptive religious education; constructivist approach; student-centred approach



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1. Introduction

The teaching of Religion as a subject in schools has always been the subject of controversies and of debates in different fora, both ecclesial and educational. Most of these debates centred amongst others on whether Religious Education should form part of the disciplines which are studied in schools by students as a formal curricular subject, whether students have an entitlement to it in virtue of holistic education, and how it should be assessed (Boeve 2016, pp. 136–50; L’Anson and Jasper 2017, pp. 30–32). At the same time, in our contemporary times, much more attention is being given to the way in which Religious Education is taught in schools and whether the approaches and methods used to teach Religious Education are adequate for our contemporary postmodern societies (Erricker 2010, pp. 43–68). This paper adopts the stance of a Catholic Religious Education and seeks to depart from the paradigm shift brought about by Vatican Council II, which through an anthropological shift, placed the human being at the centre of all pastoral activity. In this respect, Catholic Religious Education (CRE) is seen as a pastoral activity through which the faith of students is nourished, thus making CRE a form of education for the faith. This stance is used as the background against which contemporary CRE is analysed with the specific aim of proposing the Constructivist Approach in general and Adaptive Religious Education specifically as tools, amongst the many others, which render CRE more in line with the anthropological paradigm entreated by Vatican Council II.¹

CRE intended in this paper is distinct from Catholic Education. Catholic Education refers to all the different forms of education which are imparted in Catholic Schools through their ethos, through curricular and through extra-curricular activities. For the scope of this paper, CRE will be taken to mean Religious Education as a subject that is taught as an

academic discipline in schools, with all the theological and educational nuances that the combination of the two terms ‘Religious’ and ‘Education’ call for. The context in which CRE is presented in this paper is situated in the context of the Maltese Islands and contexts which have similar legal and constitutional educational provisions. In Malta, it is the Constitution of Malta that states that the official religion of the Republic of Malta is the Roman Catholic Religion and that Religious Education is to be a compulsory subject in all State Schools ([Constitution of Malta 1964](#), art. 2). Still, there is freedom of religion and one can privately and publicly adhere to whatever religion s/he wants ([Constitution of Malta 1964](#), art. 40). The constitutional provision for the teaching of Religious Education in State Schools was further regulated by an Agreement between the Church and the State in 1989. This Agreement outlined the modes in which Catholic Religious Education was to be offered in Maltese Schools and who would be responsible for what ([Repubblica di Malta and La Santa Sede 1989](#)).

In this particular context, the meaning of a confessional religious education characterised as Catholic Religious Education also needs to be qualified. What is meant here by Catholic Religious Education is not an education for the faith, which is identical to catechesis in terms of faith formation. Catholic Religious Education is an education that seeks to situate the Catholic religion in the light of the culture and of the cultural development of the student in the light of holistic education. In this respect, it is distinct from catechesis but complementary to it ([Sultana 2020](#)). The main aim of such a Catholic Religious Education is not to augment the faith of the student, since this is the specific role of catechesis, but to help the student to link the Catholic religion with daily life and endeavours. This also includes studying how other major world religions look at the existential questions of the human being and see how they respond to the deepest cravings of the human being for meaning. Consequently, although the religious education imparted is from the Catholic point of view, it also considers the fact that our contemporary society is no longer homogenous, and alongside themselves, students encounter others who adhere to different beliefs.

2. A Shift in the Church

Vatican Council II, being a council of a pastoral rather than of a dogmatic nature, brought a radical paradigm shift in the way in which the Church considered itself and its role. The result of this paradigm shift sought to bring about a radical transformation in the way of being Church in our contemporary times. The pre-Vatican Council II Church was a pyramidal Church characterised by a dichotomy between the *ecclesia docens* (the teaching Church) and the *ecclesia discens* (the learning Church). In this model of being Church, revealed truths were specifically entrusted to the hierarchy who were duty bound to explain and teach these truths to the laity. On their behalf, the laity were considered as the flock who were called to listen to and to follow the teaching of the Church in a passive way ([Alberich 2001](#), pp. 171–72; [Alberich and Vallabaraj 2004](#), pp. 164–66). With Vatican Council II and the newly proposed outlook, this institutional and juridical model started being gradually replaced by a more charismatic ecclesiology, which was characteristic of the proceedings of the Council. In this ecclesiological model, the Church was considered a community that is made up of different ministries and charisms which function distinctly but in harmony with each other through the work of the Holy Spirit. In this model, the laity had an important role to play, and they became protagonists in the Church together with the hierarchy ([Alberich 2001](#), pp. 172–75; [Alberich and Vallabaraj 2004](#), pp. 166–68).

This radical shift in the outlook of the Church was also emulated in education. In this part of the paper, the focus is on the Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum Educationis* (GE). However, it is interesting to note that all the different Constitutions, Decrees, and Declarations of Vatican Council II, to some extent, have something to say about education in terms of the Christian understanding of the human person in relation to the Church and the world ([Marauri Ceballos 2016](#), pp. 100–7). The Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum Educationis* (GE) acknowledges this from the opening paragraphs, which clearly state that the Church “must be concerned with the whole of man’s life, even

the secular part of it insofar as it has a bearing on his heavenly calling” (Vatican Council II 1965). In the rest of the document, GE demonstrates this new outlook of the Church in various ways. Contrary to the pre-Vatican II custom, where the hierarchy was considered as the rightful and sole educators of the people, GE claims that parents are considered as the primary and the most important educators of their children (Vatican Council II 1965, p. 3). Parents are duty bound to educate their children and to see that they are those who are on the frontline where the education of their children is concerned (Vatican Council II 1965, pp. 3, 6; Congregation for Catholic Education 2009, p. 2). Therefore, parents share in the educational mission and task of the Church.

The community, with its particular educational structures, is not ruled out from the education of children. It is here that the school acquires a significant and prominent role. According to GE, schools do not exist to help children and adolescents to develop cognitively only, but through the right education, children are taught to make the right choices and to transmit human values (Vatican Council II 1965, p. 5). Notwithstanding this, the role of the Church is neither diminished nor insignificant. The Church still sees itself as having the responsibility of educating in the faith, but parents, teachers, and schools, who are part of the Church, help in accomplishing this task (Vatican Council II 1965, p. 3; Congregation for Catholic Education 2009, pp. 2, 4).

When all these partners collaborate together for the good of the education of the interlocutors, a more holistic education ensues. This holistic education is in line with the vision outlined in GE, which distanced itself from seeing an education that is stratified between education in the faith and other forms of education (Trenti 2004, p. 93). Moreover, the new vision of education as outlined in GE did no longer consider education in the faith as more important and as above other forms of education. All education was to take care of the holistic development of the child as a human being in pursuit of living a good life in society and of believers who seeks to answer the fundamental and existential questions of life (Vatican Council II 1965, p. 1). This is where CRE comes in.

The new vision outlined in the holistic development of the child meant that education was now to take advantage of the newly emerging pedagogies, of the latest innovations in psychology, and of the novelties in communication techniques that help in the congruous development of the cognitive dimension with all the other dimensions of human development, namely the social, the moral, the psychological, the physical and the religious dimensions (Vatican Council II 1965, p. 1). This trend seeking the holistic development of the child was reiterated and consolidated in subsequent Church documents, such as the *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy 1997, pp. 73–76); the *Circular Letter to the Presidents of Bishop’s Conferences on Religious Education in Schools* (Congregation for Catholic Education 2009, pp. 1, 10); and the *Directory for Catechesis* (Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization 2020, p. 314) which clearly posit that Religious Education must necessarily be holistic in nature. Moreover, the holistic education of children, which entails the collaboration of several partners, namely parents, schools, and teachers with the Church, was also reiterated in Church documents following GE: *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy 1997, p. 76), *Circular Letter to the Presidents of Bishop’s Conferences on Religious Education in Schools* (Congregation for Catholic Education 2009, pp. 1–4); *Directory for Catechesis* (Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization 2020, pp. 317–18).

3. Continuity with Approaches in Use

The vision of the holistic development of the child, which Vatican Council II sought to push forward, was in line with what was already happening in some European countries such as Germany and Austria during that period. In the most influential central European countries, the traditional approach of teaching, which consisted in what is referred to as the Doctrinal Approach, was being put aside in favour of methods that took a more pedagogical stance (Trenti 2004, pp. 92–93). The Doctrinal Approach was adopted from lessons that were given to children in parishes. This approach originally arose as a reaction

to the Protestant Reformation (1517) and consisted of the teaching of the *Catechism* as a book by heart. The aim of teaching the text of the Catechism was to ensure that children and adults could distinguish good from inaccurate teachings. With the introduction of schools, this approach used mainly in adult catechesis was automatically transferred to children in the school classroom (Buchanon 2005, pp. 21–22, 34). Consequently, Religious Education in schools gave a predominant and insistent position to knowledge with little importance to the children's ability to grasp the meaning of the information being given. The method of teaching consisted of little explanation, but the text was learnt through repetition with mnemonics as an aid (Biancardi and Gianetto 2016, pp. 30–57; Buchanon 2005, p. 22).

Education in the faith using the Doctrinal Approach, however, brought about dissatisfaction since knowing the Catechism by heart did not automatically mean that it could be put into practice. On the other hand, innovative methods used in other subjects were leaving better results because they were using the recent developments in psychology as a foundation for teaching academic subjects. Such subjects started using a more student-centred route to teach: moving from the known to the unknown, from the concrete to the abstract, and from the simple to the more difficult. The discontent in Religious Education using the Doctrinal Approach started as back as 1887 in Austria and Germany. This brought about a renewal movement commenced by the DKV—the German Catechists' Association and which ended in the development and adoption of a new method which became known as the Munich Method (Biancardi and Gianetto 2016, pp. 166–70).

The Munich Method emphasised the pedagogy to be used for educating in the faith by introducing the concept of formal grades or teaching steps. The Munich Method was made up of five successive stages: the preparation stage, where the lesson was linked to previous lessons or knowledge; the presentation stage, where the main points of the lesson were shared with the students. This was followed by an explanation stage which then led to synthesis and an application of what had been learnt. It was only during the fourth stage—synthesis—that the text of the Catechism was introduced (Biancardi and Gianetto 2016, pp. 170–91). The Munich Method was adopted as the method for Religious Instruction in 1912 during the Congress of Vienna.

A reaction to the Munich Method came with the evolution of the Kerygmatic Approach, which did not emphasise the pedagogical process of teaching but the contents. The origins of this method can be traced back to the Faculty of Theology of Innsbruck, Austria. The driving forces behind this emerging method in the 1930s were the well-known theologians Karl Rahner, Hugo Rahner, Josef Andreas Jungmann, and Franz Xavier Arnold. Their proposal was that religious instruction should distance itself from the scholastic theology, which was typical of the day, and seek a more kerygmatic proclamation. The paradigm which they proposed as a perfect example of a kerygmatic proclamation was Peter's speech on Pentecost (Acts 2, 14–41). This speech was not made up of dogmatic formulas or scholastic rhetoric but a narration of the experience of the apostles with Jesus (Biancardi and Gianetto 2016, pp. 201–15, 223–27; Buchanon 2005, pp. 23–25). This method was adopted as the method for Religious Instruction during the Congress of Eichstätt in 1960.

GE, in 1965, indeed encouraged experimenting with new approaches and methods of teaching and of educating children (Vatican Council II 1965). Consequently, the adoption of new approaches to Religious Education continued in the years following Vatican Council II (Buchanon 2005, pp. 25–33; Gearon 2014; Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization 2020, p. 316).

4. Religious Education in our Contemporary Times

Throughout history, the teaching of Religion as a subject in schools has mostly been seen as a way to strengthen children in the faith. In this sense, the study of Religion as a school discipline sought to clone the beliefs of parents in the lives of their children. In the past, this formed part of the traditional processes of handing on the faith from parents or guardians to offspring together with other methods of religious socialisation (Scott 1994, pp. 276–80; Gearon 2014, p. 52). Today, these traditional processes of transmission of the

faith are no longer effective and have become mostly dysfunctional due to processes of secularisation and of pluralisation. Therefore, Religious Education as a subject in schools has taken over the task of these traditional methods of religious socialisation while seeking to achieve the same end, that is, the gradual handing on of the faith to the child. However, this type of religious formation as an induction into a religious tradition is running aground today in that the desired results are not being achieved even after numerous years of schooling (Scott 2005b, pp. 81–82). Moreover, Gearon (2014, p. 52) posits that:

Outside of faith settings, contemporary religious education is invariably defined by a separation of religious education from religious life. The problem of modern religious education remains: how to ground the subject when it is no longer grounded in religious life.

It is in virtue of this that we have to move from the teaching of Religion intending to propagate the faith to Religious Education. Religious Education not only seeks to give relevant information about the faith (theological component) but also strives to make the faith intelligible (educational component). This Religious Education seeks to safeguard the interplay between continuity and adaptation to our contemporary society (Scott 2005b, p. 82). Being an academic discipline, Religious Education must meet the academic rigour of school-based educational disciplines. In this respect, there is no space for indoctrination, but it has to teach students how to think, how to reason things out and thus have a critical outlook (Scott 1994, pp. 283–88; Gearon 2014, pp. 58–60). Amongst other things, this can be conducted by studying fundamental texts of a religious nature which provoke students to think (Scott 2005a, pp. 74–75; Gearon 2014, pp. 61–62).

In this perspective, Religious Education evokes a particular type of interaction that is based more on dialogue than on a deductive monologue (Jarmy 2021, pp. 146–47). In the Religious Education class, topics are debated and not simply covered as the syllabus may require. Debates open the door to a particular interaction in class where all students are ready to listen to each other, learn from each other, and help each other to grow by offering them different points of view and different interpretations of the same idea. This innovative approach to Religious Education seeks to help students to be critical of whatever they are learning. It helps them to seek to pose the right questions in order to clarify ideas and concepts. Most of all, while not negating or picking and choosing what one believes, it is in line with the postmodern outlook of the searching human being (Scott 2005a, pp. 70–72). When Religious Education as an academic subject seeks to bring about a change in the understanding of the student, we can truly speak of a process of learning and of education because “it fosters religious literacy, cultivates religious understanding and lessens religious prejudice” (Scott 2005a, p. 73).

While in the past, the philosophy of education was based on a particular anthropological outlook, the contemporary philosophy of education seeks to put the child at the centre of all forms of education. Today, we can speak of a movement from a content-centred approach to a more child-centred approach in education. While in the past, the concept of education was based on the etymology of the Latin verb *educare*, which meant to train and to mould a person, the contemporary concept of education tends to be based more on the etymology of the Latin verb *educere* which means to draw out and to lead out. While the former—*educare*—considered children as empty recipients who had to be filled with the contents imparted during the process of education, the latter—*educere*—considers children as active interlocutors during their education. In this respect, education seeks to enlighten children to discover the hidden potential within themselves (Craft 2017, p. 9). This brings to mind Lev Vygotsky’s notion of situated and collaborative learning and of the zone of proximal development, where he argues that in education, there are two levels: a lower level which can be mastered by the person by him/herself; and an upper level which can be mastered with the help of a teacher. It is this upper level that is targeted during the process of education. With the help of the teacher, who acts as a facilitator, the student can master new levels and discover new insights (Vygotsky 1978, pp. 79–91). Moreover, in the specific case of Religious Education, it is not only the teacher who can help the student to reach

new limits but considering a constructivist student-centred approach, even classmates and other significant people who form part of the educational community of the students such as parents or guardians, and other family members play a significant role. All these may help the student to reach beyond him/herself to new heights.

This contemporary philosophy of education is also applicable to Religious Education since this needs to be considered as a school discipline in the true and proper meaning of the term, with all the benefits and the scientific rigour required by academic disciplines. Considering Religious Education as an academic discipline is in line with the vision of the Church for Religious Education ([Congregation for Catholic Education 2009](#), pp. 17–18; [Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization 2020](#), p. 315). Considering Religious Education as an academic discipline that seeks to help students discover the hidden knowledge within them opens us to a myriad of approaches and techniques that can help in rendering the subject truly scholarly. Amongst these, we find the Constructivist Approach and Adaptive Religious Education as a technique that is in line with the Constructivist Approach.

5. The Constructivist Approach

Considering Religious Education not simply as the transmission of contents of a religious nature to students but as a way in which students are empowered to discover the treasures hidden deep within them finds one of its strongest allies in the Constructivist Approach. The constructivist approach, which is akin to a student-centred approach, is directly opposed to the Doctrinal Approach, which was typical of Religious Instruction in the past. While in the teacher-centred or content-centred approach, the teacher dispenses facts and knowledge, and the student listens and seeks to memorise in a passive way,² in the Constructivist Approach, students are the focus of attention whilst not neglecting the nature of the contents which need to be passed on ([Grennon Brooks and Brooks 2001](#), pp. 15–22).

The Constructivist Approach is not a pedagogy in itself, but it is an approach to education that seeks to demonstrate how learning is possible ([McLeod 2019](#)). One may rightly ask about what is specific to the Constructivist Approach which makes it so suitable for contemporary Religious Education. The answer to such a query is that the Constructivist Approach, with all its positive aspects, fits perfectly with the anthropological outlook put forward by Vatican Council II. The anthropological outlook was the fundamental process used by the Conciliar Fathers during the Council to read the signs of the times and to seek to re-connect with the contemporary human being. The anthropological outlook is opposed to the deductive Doctrinal (philosophical) Approach, which was mostly in use at that time. In fact, the anthropological outlook takes an inductive approach by starting from where the human being actually stands, with all the preoccupations and questions raised by the human being. These are then studied in the light of the faith in order to be able to shed some guiding light on them. When this is achieved, a return journey to the daily life of the human being is made in order to use the inspiration and guidance achieved through the faith as a light for one's path ([Morante 2002](#), pp. 203–4). This is exactly what contemporary CRE seeks to do: to shed light on the existential questions of the human being. The Constructivist Approach, therefore, helps educators to truly start from the human being and to put the child at the centre of all educational endeavours.

The fundamental structure on which the constructivist approach is built is the concept of scaffolding. As scaffolding is used to sustain builders to reach new heights while constructing a building, so is scaffolding a necessary component in the constructivist approach to help the teacher to reach new heights. Scaffolding in the constructivist approach also serves as an incentive for students to feel safe and to reach just beyond their limits ([Wheeler n.d.](#)), and so deepen their learning ([Erricker 2010](#), p. 65). This recalls Vygotsky's theory of socially constructed learning ([Vygotsky 2012](#), pp. 82–153).

Applied to CRE, constructivism opens the door to a myriad of methods and techniques, which render it a more intelligible and engaging academic subject. This is primarily due to

the fact that it posits a hands-on approach, with students themselves engaging in a personal journey of enquiry for knowledge and for learning rather than receiving instructions and knowledge from the teacher. Learning is procured through a collaborative and cooperative activity both with the teacher and with peers (Comoglio 2019, pp. 62–63). In fact, the constructivist approach gives equal dignity to all the stakeholders in the classroom who are seeking to learn from each other (Colasanti 2004, p. 130). Most of the knowledge acquired in this way is therefore linked to the personal experiences of the students; it is not theoretical knowledge that may be irrelevant to their daily lives (Erricker 2010, p. 65). In this respect, CRE acquires a more experiential outlook (Buchanon 2005, pp. 25–27; Gearon 2014, pp. 64–66), which is made up of moments of imagination, personal reflection, and individual inferences, where students are not fed with the knowledge of a religious nature in a quasi-indoctrinating way, but through facilitation by the teacher, they get to their own understanding of this knowledge (Lamon n.d.).

In the Constructivist Approach, the classroom environment is open, dynamic, trusting, and respectful, and it gives adequate space for both objective and subjective learning. In this type of classroom environment, the teacher's role is to provide structure to the teaching activity taking place and to facilitate the students' acquisition of knowledge by helping them to explore the hidden innate potential for knowledge (*educere*) that they possess (Lamon n.d.). The database of knowledge that teachers seek to give to their students is not edified by instructing children in the faith through content dissemination, but it is the student who has to construct this for him/herself through the orientation given by the teacher (Erricker 2010, p. 64). Students can achieve this with the help of many didactic aids, amongst which we find the formal presentation of particular themes, discussions, slideshow presentations, and video clips which enable the exploration of themes from multiple perspectives. This allows CRE classes to be approached and delivered through multiple yet at the same time complementary teaching and learning styles (L'Anson and Jasper 2017, pp. 144–54). This evokes Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, in which he argues that every individual has a frame of mind which is geared at a particular way of thinking and learning, and the more we diversify in our teaching and learning styles, the more will our teaching be effective (Gardner 2011, pp. 3–11, 77–292).

By way of conclusion, we can state that the Constructive Approach applied to CRE emphasises the construction of knowledge and not the simple reproduction of information about the faith. Moreover, the construction of knowledge is aimed at practicality and applicability and seeks to solve newly emerging problems in life through the promotion of higher-order thinking skills, and not simply to reproduce what one has learnt by heart. Using the Constructivist Approach for teaching CRE emulates the complexity of the contemporary world, thus doing justice to students who will have to face real life situations in the future (Concept to Classroom n.d.). In this scenario, errors are not seen as a negative thing but as an opportunity to grow and refine one's thinking skills (Grennon Brooks and Brooks 2001, p. 82).

Notwithstanding all the positive implications of the Constructive Approach, unfortunately, we still may have several instances where the Doctrinal Approach is still preferred to the student-centred approach, to the detriment of the students themselves and to CRE. The major reasons for this are two-fold. The first is a question of time since it is a known fact that adopting a constructivist approach employs more time. The second reason is that some teachers still feel more confident using the Doctrinal Approach, which they think yields better results.

6. Adaptive Religious Education

Adaptive Religious Education (ARE) is a technique that seeks to put the student at the centre of CRE. In this respect, it can be considered as exploiting the Constructivist Approach. CRE seeks to make human beings more humane by discovering the riches which lie hidden within through the process of education. This process of human development is greatly aided by the insights gained through God's pedagogy. In fact, the foundations of ARE lie

in God's pedagogy. God's pedagogy refers to our human understanding of the way in which God gently called and formed his chosen people to be able to listen, understand, and give heed to his words (Hodgson 1999, pp. 11–49). Throughout the ages, God treated his people in such a way that they were gradually led to his discovery and to discover his love in a plan of salvation. Throughout the ages, God spoke to his people using a myriad of languages that they could understand. God never spoke to his people in languages that were unintelligible to them or could have gone unnoticed. God's pedagogy in history can be divided into three phases: the Old Testament pedagogy; Christ as God's ultimate word; and the time of the Church (Congregation for the Clergy 1997, pp. 36–45, 141–93).

The Old Testament is made up of a progressive pedagogy that took advantage of the Kairos in which God would speak using a particular language and method, according to the phase in the formation and education of his chosen people. The Old Testament sheds light on the multiple faces of God, with the first being that of a saviour and of a liberator from the bondage of human slavery. This was followed by many others, amongst which we find God as a creator, God as a merciful father, God as a teacher and as a wise person, God as a creative and insightful teacher who transforms daily events into lessons of wisdom, as a God who patiently waits for his people to grow up and mature. During the different periods of the formation and education of his people, God also used third parties whose aim was to help the people to listen to, decipher, and to comprehend his message. It is in this light that we have to understand God's messengers, such as the Prophets, the Judges, and even the Monarchy. These messengers were sent by God to guide and teach his chosen people (Congregation for the Clergy 1997, p. 139; Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization 2020, pp. 157–58).

God's progressive formation of his people found its culmination in Jesus Christ, who is God's ultimate word. Both the words and actions of Jesus shed light on his pedagogy: he invited all the people to follow him, especially the poor and the lowly; he proclaimed the Kingdom of God through words and deeds; he was kind and delicate with everyone, but at the same time he was very strong in his demands; he invited all to follow him in a lifestyle that frees the human being from the bondage of evil and promotes life to the full; he carefully and patiently formed his disciples and sent them out on missions (Congregation for the Clergy 1997, p. 140; Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization 2020, pp. 159–63).

God's progressive pedagogy is still unfolding today under the guidance of the Holy Spirit during the time of the Church. As Church, we are called to continue uncovering and showing God's infinite love for his people (Congregation for the Clergy 1997, pp. 141–42; Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization 2020, pp. 164–66). This can be conducted in a myriad of ways, amongst which we find CRE. We, as Church, do not possess any revealed pedagogy for the faith. Had we been in possession of a revealed pedagogy for the faith, this would have helped us a lot in our endeavours since all we would be called to do is to apply it to our particular context. Notwithstanding this, the pedagogy of God in the Old Testament and the pedagogy of Christ in the New Testament do present us with innumerable hints which can help us in our educational endeavours. We are called to educate using the same guiding lines which God's pedagogy gives us as hints for effective education for the faith. However, Theology cannot do this all by itself. CRE is, by its very nature, intrinsically interdisciplinary. Whilst Theology remains a scientific field in itself, we need the help of the Sciences of Education for a fecund CRE, which is truly beneficial to students (Erricker 2010, pp. 43, 195–215; Gellel 2006, p. 1094; 2011, pp. 100–1).

Drawing from the way in which God has always sought to communicate revealed truths with his chosen People, ARE is based on four foundational principles:

1. Respect for the human person;
2. A tension and, at the same time, complementarity between the individual and the community;
3. The use of differentiated methods;
4. A progressive formation of the self (Gellel 2006, pp. 1103–106; 2011, pp. 103–4).

The primary value in all CRE is the dignity and the value of the human being. It is the uniqueness of each and every individual that calls all educators to consider the human being in a holistic way with all his/her particular traits and characteristics, including one's preferred learning styles. In this sense, the traditional way of teaching religion in the form of teaching doctrine and the Magisterium in a deductive way leaves much to be desired (Jarmy 2021, pp. 143–45). On the other hand, ARE seeks to delve deeper into understanding the richness of the uniqueness of each student (Gellel 2006, pp. 1103–104). This requires the teacher to think outside the box and to seek to adapt all knowledge to the particular needs of the students using a number of differentiated teaching methods, which put the student at the centre of the teaching process (Gellel 2011, p. 103). At times, this involves considering a leap forward into unknown territory. "If, following Spinoza, we do not know in advance of what a particular being is capable, a key purpose of education becomes the fashioning of events and encounters that lead students out from their point of departure through open engagement and exploration" (L'Anson and Jasper 2017, p. 149).

Adapting one's classroom to the variety of individual needs of the students requires that the teacher knows the students quite well in advance. There are three particular benefits to getting to know the students well from the very beginning:³

1. The students are given the message that their individuality and uniqueness are important and that the teacher values this positively and not as a hindrance to teaching.
2. Feeling accepted as they are, the students commit themselves and strive to work even through difficult moments since they actively seek to work for a teacher who values their individuality and uniqueness.
3. The teacher has access to an opening into the individuality of each and every student. This is an opening that is an ever-growing insight into the student as an individual learner and seeker (Tomlinson and Imbeau 2010, pp. 78–79).

Although ARE seeks to take advantage of human uniqueness, nonetheless, we must keep in mind that human beings are relational beings. They seek to be connected and in relation with themselves, with God, with others, and with the created world (Hay and Nye 2006, pp. 131–59). This means that if CRE is seeking to respect the student in a holistic way, this has to be conducted in the context of the community. In this light, the classroom should be the preferred teaching and learning environment (Gellel 2006, p. 1104). Therefore "learning within a community is preferred to individualized learning" (Gellel 2006, p. 1104).

Applying ARE to CRE implies that one should strive to use differentiated methods as much as possible. The use of differentiated methods can prove to be very tricky and challenging. It also calls for careful planning and assessment of the learning that is taking place in the classroom (Stronge 2007, p. 70). Notwithstanding this, in the end, it produces the best results since the different methods adopted can target the students' different and preferred learning styles (Gellel 2006, p. 1105). A specific aid that helps in differentiated learning is the use of the symbol system. In general, we have a three-fold symbol system. In this system, all didactic aids and resources can be classified under a tri-part scheme: visual, verbal, and concrete. Verbal resources are those which are limited to sound only, especially speaking; visual resources exploit the human eye and vision; concrete resources revert especially to the senses of touch and smell. One is not limited to using these three aspects of the symbol system in an individual way. One may combine two or even three together to create a more attractive resource. However, when speaking about differentiation, there are other variables that are at play, such as the classroom environment, the type of resource book which is used, and the teaching method. All these are at play in creating a truly differentiated CRE class using ARE (Gellel 2011, pp. 106–8).

The most important thing in a CRE class is that students are exposed to different symbols through different teaching techniques so that their particular learning style is matched in at least one part of the lesson. This helps students to engage more with what is happening in class, and this makes it easier for them to learn. "Students are most engaged and achieve most successfully when instruction is appropriately suited to their achievement levels and needs" (Stronge 2007, p. 71). This can be achieved in practice by dividing a lesson

into smaller steps which are then delivered using a variety of didactic techniques, which in their turn make use of a different symbol every time (Gellel 2011, p. 108). A successful teacher must be able to present the academic subject as a challenge for the majority of the students in the class, but at the same time, not make it too difficult for them to be successful in grasping what is being discussed. Research has also indicated that teachers who use and adapt their teaching to the different learning styles of the students are more effective as class and subject teachers. This calls the teacher to embark on an ongoing evaluation of what is going to be covered and discussed in class so that it constantly and continually seeks to be in line with and in tune with the needs of the students (Stronge 2007, p. 70). This also stands for CRE.

When this is conducted, one hopes to achieve a stage where the progressive formation of students starts to become evident. This is the final fundamental aspect on which ARE is built and which it seeks to achieve. The differentiated techniques with which ARE seeks to tap into the uniqueness of each student ultimately seek to help the students to progressively mature through the formation. Students can mature progressively when they are challenged to move a step further in the right direction from where they actually stand. The whole concept behind ARE is to challenge students to find innovative solutions to new and ever-growing complex issues by adapting to new situations which present themselves. This leads to a realistic progressive formation of students who learn to apply knowledge to new and slightly altered situations which have never been encountered before and which require the putting together of knowledge acquired at different moments and using different methods (Gellel 2006, pp. 1105–106).

7. Conclusions

Religious Education has had a turbulent past due to its constant striving to retain a substantial and influential position in the academic realm. To some extent, this has been achieved in some countries, and Religious Education has secured a place within the curricula of compulsory schooling. However, we cannot just be at peace knowing that Religious Education is part of the curriculum. We constantly need to tap into the effect that Religious Education is leaving on students or otherwise. This has called for conversion and for a constant transition by Religious Education to make it more relevant to the lives of the students by being up-to-date with the latest developments in the pedagogical and educational field.

The Constructivist Approach and ARE as a technique have been presented as two ways in which CRE can be relevant to students in our contemporary times. In this respect, the use of ARE, amongst others, constitutes the future of Religious Education because it does not simply seek to give knowledge to the students, but it actively chooses to adapt itself to the needs and to the learning styles of the students. In this way, CRE will be distancing itself from the Doctrinal Approach used in the past to more student-centred and constructive techniques, which are typical of today's education and acceptable to students, to the educational community and to contemporary society at large.

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Notes

- ¹ The Constructivist Approach and Adaptive Religious Education mentioned here are not to be seen as exclusive of all the other different approaches and methods that can be used in CRE but parallel to them. They have been chosen here while respecting the contents that need to be transmitted to interlocutors, at the same time allowing a lot of space for creativity and for student-centredness.

- ² This brings to mind the pre-Vatican II ecclesial model in the form of a pyramid and the roles of each and every sector within this hierarchical grid.
- ³ Tomlinson and Imbeau give several tools in a teacher's toolkit of how one can get to know the students better in very creative ways. See (Tomlinson and Imbeau 2010, pp. 151–74).

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