

EMPATHY WITHIN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN ENGLAND: From the Bible-based approach to the multi-faith and phenomenological approach (1944-2020)

Empatia no Ensino Religioso na Inglaterra:
Da abordagem baseada na Bíblia à abordagem multirreligiosa e fenomenológica (1944-2020)

Empatía en la enseñanza religiosa en Inglaterra:
Del enfoque basado en la Biblia al enfoque multirreligioso y fenomenológico (1944-2020)

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Abstract: The transition from the 1960s to the 1970s marked a paradigm change in religious education in England, moving from a confessional, Bible-centred approach to a multi-faith and phenomenological model that came to include non-religious worldviews as well. This transition, influenced by growing multiculturalism, redefined the aims and content of the discipline, giving empathy a more central role. Drawing on Bell's threefold model of religious education syllabuses developed since the 1944 Education Act, this paper examines how empathy has been incorporated into curricula and textbooks. Through the analysis of syllabuses, textbooks, and guides for teachers, it explores how paradigm shifts and objectives of social cohesion shaped the integration of empathic competence.

Keywords: teaching religion; curriculum; religious diversity; religious pluralism.

Resumo: A transição dos anos 1960 para os anos 1970 marcou uma mudança de paradigma no ensino religioso na Inglaterra, passando de uma abordagem confessional e centrada na Bíblia para um modelo multirreligioso e fenomenológico, que passou a incluir também visões de mundo não religiosas. Essa transição, influenciada pelo crescimento do multiculturalismo, redefiniu os objetivos e os conteúdos da disciplina, conferindo à empatia um papel mais central. Com base no modelo tripartido de Bell sobre os programas de ensino religioso elaborados desde o *Education Act* de 1944, este artigo analisa de que modo a empatia foi incorporada aos currículos e aos manuais escolares. Por meio da análise de programas, livros didáticos e guias para professores, investiga-se como as mudanças paradigmáticas e os objetivos de coesão social moldaram a integração da competência empática.

Palavras-chave: ensino religioso; currículo; diversidade religiosa; pluralismo religioso.

Resumen: La transición de los años sesenta a los años setenta marcó un cambio de paradigma en la enseñanza religiosa en Inglaterra, pasando de un enfoque confesional y centrado en la Biblia a un modelo multirreligioso y fenomenológico, que pasó a incluir también cosmovisiones no religiosas. Esta transición, influida por el creciente multiculturalismo, redefinió los objetivos y los contenidos de la disciplina, otorgando a la empatía un papel más central. Partiendo del modelo tripartito de Bell sobre los programas de enseñanza religiosa elaborados desde la *Education Act* de 1944, este artículo examina cómo la empatía se ha incorporado en los currículos y en los manuales escolares. A través del análisis de programas, libros de texto y guías para el profesorado, se explora cómo los cambios de paradigma y los objetivos de cohesión social moldearon la integración de la competencia empática.

Palabras clave: enseñanza religiosa; currículo; diversidad religiosa; pluralismo religioso.

INTRODUCTION

Research in education has consistently shown that empathy plays a central role in shaping learning processes, social relationships, and pedagogical practices. In both teaching and learning, empathy contributes to improved academic outcomes, supports the well-being of pupils and the classroom community, and fosters students' engagement with disciplinary content. It also operates beyond the formal curriculum, influencing what has been defined as the hidden curriculum (Cooper, 2011), and plays a key role in the development of citizenship skills (Pajer, 2017), particularly in relation to the values embedded within specific socio-cultural and national contexts. Furthermore, the role and importance of empathy in education and schools has been explored by various disciplines and approaches such as neuroscience, educational research, and medical and nursing sciences, among others (Trothen, 2016). Empathy can foster the inhibition of aggression and the development of prosocial behaviour, effective leadership, moral reasoning, and the ability to take different perspectives (Trothen, 2016). When it comes to school disciplines and teaching, and in terms of both content and methods, religious education occupies a privileged place regarding the role that empathy assumes in the epistemology and didactic methods of the discipline. If empathy represents a goal to be pursued and a skill, a competence to be developed at school, especially in the age of the competence-based approach, it has probably assumed an even greater centrality within religious education due to the peculiarities of the discipline. For instance, Simone Weil (2009, p. 118) argues, "the study of different religions does not lead to a real knowledge of them unless we transport ourselves for a time by faith to the very centre of whichever one we are studying", and Cornille adds: "any attempt to enter imaginatively into the religious life of another requires some degree of empathy" (2010, p. 107). Religious studies have an established tradition that recognises the importance of empathy in critical thinking about religious diversity. But most authors agree that empathy is a difficult concept to define precisely. Some have attempted to define it as "a process of transposition into the life world of the other in order to grasp the intentions and the mindset of the other" (Cornille, 2010, p. 108) or the ability to perceive the meaning and feelings of another and to communicate those feelings to the other person in a non-judgmental manner. Empathy can be cognitive and affective (Fuller et al., 2021). Cognitive empathy can be defined as the intellectual process of attempting to understand another person's thoughts, feelings or intentions (Kimanen, 2022), or as "the intellectual processes a person uses to ascertain another person's emotional state" (Fuller et al., 2021, p. 335). As Kimanen (2022) states, within the definition of informed empathy, the term informed can be explained based on Heron's model on the modalities of knowledge. According to Heron and Reason (Heron & Reason, 2008) there are four types of knowing:

- a) Propositional knowing (the intellectual form of knowing, ideas and theories expressed through language);
- b) Experiential knowing;
- c) Presentational knowing (images and narratives manifested, for instance, in diverse forms of art);
- d) Practical knowing (skills and competencies).

An empathy that is *informed* would include the four types of knowing.

Authors in general agree that empathy has three domains: cognitive, affective and behavioural (Trothen, 2016). Empathy involves “feeling what another person is feeling, knowing what another person is feeling, and having the intention to respond compassionately to another person’s distress” (Trothen, 2016, p. 246). Trothen (2016) states that the cognitive process of empathy involves the ability to understand other people’s different perspectives, related to thoughts and emotions, which can be similar to or different from our own. The affective process of empathy implies the sharing of another person’s emotional state. However, to do so, we do not have to experience the same emotional state, but “a transitory degree of that same state.”

Interestingly, Trothen (2016) argues that empathic skills are teachable and valuable to religious studies undergraduate education. He draws on established phenomenological approaches to religious studies that assume the importance of empathy in engaging religious differences and developing a critical understanding of these differences. He argues that empathy is *teachable* especially through experiential exercises such as role-playing, which can assist students in the religious studies classroom to further their capacities to think critically about religious diversity. But first, the key to empathy is the ability to differentiate between one’s self and the other. This involves the differentiation of empathy from sympathy. “Empathy does not mean a fusion with the beliefs of another [...]. Rather it is about the recognition of difference, rooted in self-awareness, and responding compassionately without automatically taking on that same perspective” (Trothen, 2016, p. 246). In this process, critical thinking can be developed thanks to a multi-perspective paradigm, but without *fusing* with these perspectives. In general, studies recognise that through education it is possible to develop and foster the empathic competence. Religious education, concerning different religions and worldviews, can play an important role in the development of empathy. However, the full potential of religious education can be reached only if we overcome a mere descriptive approach based on the teaching of *facts*. To do so, it is necessary to provide followers with *direction* and *meaning* (Trothen, 2016). To conclude this overview on religious education and empathy, Ninian Smart (1986) is one of the main authors who theorised the importance of empathy in the understanding of diversity within religions as a method to be applied in the teaching of religious education. He asserted that “religious education should above all emphasise empathy and understanding [...] Empathy becomes important.

And that means somehow adopting the American Indian proverb: ‘Never judge a man until you have walked a mile in his moccasins’” (Smart, 1986, pp. 211–229).

CONTEXTUALISING RE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the multiculturalism of British society was at the centre of political debates on the integration of cultural and religious diversity in schools. These debates affected the curriculum as a whole, including the discipline of Religious Education (Parker *et al.*, 2012). It is precisely in this period that we witnessed the introduction of a new paradigm in the teaching of RE, from a religious education centred on Christianity and the teaching of biblical precepts, to a multi-religious education based on the six main religions present in the United Kingdom, in addition to non-religious worldviews (Cole, 1975; Copley, 2008; Jackson, 2019). The transition from the “Bible-centred” paradigm to the multi-religious one marks a new centrality for empathy, where it becomes essential to suspend one's own point of view (Cole, 1975) and put oneself in someone else's shoes to try to understand their beliefs and religious rites, as well as the intention and meaning attributed to them. Various publications aimed to help teachers understand and implement this shift. For instance, Owen Cole's book ‘Religion in the multi-faith school’ represented a fundamental tool in helping teachers deal with religious diversity. The 1970 report ‘The Fourth R’ also recommended studying the issue of foreign students and their needs as part of religious education in schools. Grimmitt's book ‘What can I do in RE?’ proposed a pedagogy that differed from that of the churches, which until then had dominated the debate on religious education (Burgess, 1996). In a context where Christianity had dominated accredited programmes for public schools, Grimmitt argued that the role of the state was different to that of the Church in the study and teaching of religion. Following his reflection, three distinct teaching models were introduced within the discipline: teaching in religion, teaching about religion and teaching from religion. While the first model provides for knowledge of the religious fact from the internal references of a specific religion (it is a religious education of a mono-religious nature) the second – teaching about religion – informs neutrally on the different religious traditions. This approach 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, favouring a historical and comparative study of religions. The third model – teaching from religion – takes religion as a source of meaning, which gives direction in students' lives. It starts with students' problems and questions, and then finds answers from religious traditions. This concept is not tied to a specific religious tradition but to all religions that can be used as a source of meaning. Empathic skills have become central to “teaching about”

and “teaching from” religion approaches, as they allow learners to meaningfully engage with worldviews that differ from their own cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, while in the past tolerance was seen as an attribute of the good Christian (placing the emphasis on the sender and his/her need to be the bearer of the values of the Christian religion), with empathy the exchange and dialogue with the other become central, where both parties are involved and mutually enrich each other. The introduction of empathy is therefore linked to a context of religious pluralism, where it is not a given that others share the same beliefs and rites.

These three models have been widely adopted internationally to categorise different approaches in teaching religious education. They were also mentioned in English textbooks, teachers’ guides and syllabuses as a major methodological reference such as the attainment targets of *learning about religion* and *learning from religion*.

In academia, the foundations that led to a full affirmation of the multi-religious approach at a national level were laid by scholars such as Ninian Smart, who established the Department of Religious Studies at Lancaster University in 1965, and by organisations, such as the Shap Working Party in 1969, which aimed to encourage the teaching of world religions (Hayward, 2009; Parker et al., 2012). These measures and initiatives came to completion and gained full recognition with the Educational Reform Act of 1988. The latter, while underlining the centrality of Christianity in the teaching of RE, prescribed the study of the major religions represented in the country:

Any agreed programme [...] will need to reflect the fact that religious traditions in Britain are primarily Christian while taking into account the teachings and practices of the other major religions represented in Britain.¹

The tendency to read the reaffirmed centrality of Christianity in the Education Act of 1988 as a *step backwards* compared to the multicultural policies of the immediately preceding decades should, however, be scaled down in view of a co-existing assimilationist push for the purposes of a desired *racial harmony*, subsequently defined as *community cohesion*:

what has thus far gone unacknowledged in existing historiography is that, in reality, what appeared to be culturally pluralist developments were only partially accommodating of ethnic and religious diversity in public schools, distinct from the previous *religious instruction* and from confessional religious teaching models. They gave some recognition as a palliative, while always emphasising the prominent place of Christianity in British culture (Parker et al., 2012, p. 401).

¹ See Education Reform Act 1988, Chapter 40, p. 6.

Readings that underline a sudden change and a clear break with previous practices must therefore be scaled down in light of general debates on the greater presence of immigrant pupils in classes, a fact most visible in large urban areas. These changes gave rise to various discussions on the necessity or plausibility of providing religious education on the different faiths represented in school, that is, a religious education for all that would educate natives of other faiths and educate newcomers of the majority faith, that is, the Christian one. It was precisely this proposal, among the various ones presented, that found greater recognition, as it could encourage integration, mutual dialogue and *social cohesion* – often still placed as one of the objectives of teaching religious education (Levrau, 2021). Certainly not only was knowledge of the other preparatory to achieving these objectives, but also a certain degree of empathy becomes indispensable (Smart, 1986).

THE LOCAL AGREED SYLLABUS

The almost eighty-year history (1944-2022) of the local agreed syllabus² is characterised by some peculiarities. These include independence from state control and the obligatory nature of a discipline that must be taught, but not learned, due to the clause still in force that establishes the possibility of not making use of this teaching (Priestley, 2009). In this history, some trends can be identified, when new approaches would be ushered in following certain policies or reforms. Bell (1985), for example, identifies three different models based on the analysis of nine local programmes produced between 1944 and 1982:

- a) A confessional and biblical approach (from 1944 to 1965);
- b) A child-centred approach (from 1966 to 1974);
- c) A multi-religious and phenomenological approach (from 1975 to 1982).

The introduction of the multi-religious approach, although attributable to the 1970s, will only be visible in teaching materials from the 1980s and, even more so, from the 1990s. This depends on the fact that the materials produced in a decade are usually re-edited and it is therefore necessary to take into account a more or less extended period of time between the publication of programmes and guidelines on the teaching of religious education and the updating of textbooks on the basis of such documents.

It is possible to understand the transition from one approach to another through the analysis of local syllabuses. This is the case for the ‘West Riding Agreed Syllabus’ published in 1966, which underwent several reprints in a few years, the seventh of which occurred in 1971. Preceding the Education Act of 1988, the syllabus

² In England, there is no national RE programme, but each county approves and updates its own programme on a five-yearly basis.

was based on the educational reform of 1944, in which it was not made explicit which religions to study since it was taken for granted that Christianity was the privileged object of study in the context of religious education, as it was “the only faith that pupils could encounter” (Gillard, 1991). Programmes focused on the Bible at this stage. However, as Priestley stated, the 1966 West Riding Syllabus, although based on Christianity, marked the transition from a Bible-centred approach to one that postulated the centrality of the child. John Locke's opening quote was certainly not accidental: “What pleasure or encouragement can there be for a child to practice reading those parts of a book of which he understands nothing?”³ This particular reference was to the Bible, but for the first time the effectiveness of a method based on the transmission of biblical contents was questioned. This method did not take into account neither the cognitive development of the child based on age, nor the teacher's ability to decline certain messages and contents by adapting them to the specificity of the educational context and to the students involved in the learning process. If Christianity had been the key to accessing the cognitive and emotional sphere of the child, the latter finally became the privileged subject, the centre of every educational action.

In some counties, guides were published together with the programmes to support teachers in correctly interpreting them. Among these was the volume ‘Paths to Understanding. A Handbook to Religious Education in Hampshire Schools’ published in 1980, which referred to the Local Agreed Syllabus of 1978. The syllabus was drawn up by Michael Grimmitt on the basis of two approaches theorised by the author, namely the existential one – which defined religious concepts starting from the feelings, actions and experiences of the students – and the dimensional one – which was based on six dimensions of religion, i.e. experiential, mythological, ritual, social, ethical and doctrinal. The transition from the previous child-centred paradigm to the multi-religious approach is visible here, to the extent that we find a full recognition of the multi-religious British fabric and, consequently, a religious teaching that becomes plural, including the main religions professed in the United Kingdom. Through a detailed description of the specific skills for each level of school, on the basis of which the activities and learning units are developed, there is an increase in the presence of multi-religious contents, especially in secondary school. And one of the central skills is empathy, where we read:

One way of understanding a religion is to regard it as the way in which a particular group of people look at the world and make sense of the multitude of experiences which confront them in life. As such it involves actions and beliefs, rituals and intentions. Because religion comprises these elements it is important, if the child is going to understand this phenomenon, for him to have his own sensitivities awakened and developed and for him to be introduced

³ See County Council of the West Riding of Yorkshire (1966, p. IX).

to some of the many modes of religious expression [...] Without the development of this capacity he would be impaired in his ability to stand in the shoes of other people and to appreciate their feelings, motivations and actions (Laxton, 1980, pp. 2–4).

Therefore, empathy finds space and recognition in the transition to the child-centred and multi-religious paradigm, where the recognition of multi-religious diversity constitutes the *conditio sine qua non* for the relationship and understanding of this diversity through empathy. But if for educational policies (of which study programmes are the mirror) multi-religious education was in vogue in the 1980s, could we say the same thing about textbooks?

THE MULTI-FAITH APPROACH IN RE TEXTBOOKS

RE textbooks in England have gradually incorporated the changes required by regulations and exemplified by locally agreed curriculum content. However, this did not happen in an immediate and homogeneous way, but over a rather long period of time and with the coexistence of multiple approaches. The introduction of the multi-religious approach, for example, did not immediately replace the biblical-centric approach found in textbooks since the 1970s. For this, we had to wait at least a decade. The prevalence of one approach in each historical situation has therefore not marked the overcoming of previous models in the production of teaching aids. Rather, we note their coexistence, which takes the form of the production of heterogeneous teaching materials. Starting from the 1980s, however, the debates on multi-confessional education inaugurated in the previous decade also became visible in textbooks, in which a definitive overcoming of the biblical approach can be seen. The paradigm that postulates the centrality of the student, however, continues to coexist and integrate with the multi-religious approach. The coexistence and integration of *teaching about religion* and *teaching from religion* characterize textbooks of this period to the present day.

It is from 2000 though, that a significant change can be seen in RE textbooks. Even though we still find ourselves within the multi-religious and phenomenological approach, we note a more marked importance of intra-religious diversity, previously only recognised in Christianity. In addition to the coexistence of multiple religions and non-religious worldviews, the diversity inherent in each belief and worldview is made explicit. This approach therefore, in addition to being multi-religious, becomes multi-confessional, to the extent that it underlines the divergences, contradictions and diversity of views within each denomination, as well as each religion. These differences are made explicit regarding sensitive and controversial topics such as family, marriage and divorce. The ‘GCSE AQA handbook A. Religious Studies for the grade 9’, for example, states that:

The different Christian churches have different attitudes towards divorce. The Roman Catholic Church says it is impossible to divorce. However, a marriage can be annulled under certain circumstances. The Church of England says divorce is possible and accepts that some marriages fail. Divorced people can remarry in church if they find a minister willing to marry them. Some church members disagree with this. Nonconformist churches (e.g., Baptist and Methodist) typically remarry divorcees, but individual ministers may refuse to do so if it goes against their conscience” (Anderson *et al.*, 2017, p. 38).

The second aspect that has been consolidated in textbooks of recent years is the difference between religious precepts and practices. What a religion recognises as legitimate and true does not always coincide with what the faithful do in practice. Making this aspect explicit is fundamental to understanding religions as social phenomena anchored to a constantly evolving context and above all practiced by men and women with different histories, backgrounds, visions and values.

This does not mean that the universally shared precepts of the various religions are not described, but that they are differentiated from the practices. This brings us to the last element structurally present in today's textbooks: the contextualisation of religions and non-religious worldviews.

If in the past, textbooks represented religions starting from a descriptive approach disconnected from a specific context, in contemporary textbooks religions are always anchored firstly to the British context, but also to the rest of the world. Through concrete examples regarding the fundamental role of culture within religions, the authors show how religions do not exist outside of a cultural context that reproduces, interprets and modifies them, while reaffirming some universally shared principles. This approach, which we could define as globalised, emphasises dynamism, change and diversity, as well as the complex interactions between local and global. It is therefore no longer adequate to describe the religions and have knowledge of the precepts, rites and religious beliefs – although it is always an essential first step – but to understand them in their *embodied*, contextualised and dynamic versions.

This change visible in the most recent textbooks is certainly in line with the contemporary debate on religious literacy (Moore, 2007; Melloni, 2014; Gallagher, 2009), which postulates that religious literacy involves the ability to discern and analyse the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously educated person will possess:

- a) A basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of many of the world's

religious traditions as they arose and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts;

- b) The ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and space.⁴

In the definition of religious literacy, we insist on the importance of understanding religions and religious influences in context and how they are inextricably intertwined with all dimensions of human experience. In this sense, the inadequacy of understanding religions that is limited to learning ritual practices or knowledge of sacred texts is underlined.

The transition from a biblical-centric paradigm to a multi-religious one has certainly encouraged and allowed a plural and more complex understanding of the religious phenomenon in the dialectic between local and global, giving space, voice and visibility to multiple faiths and denominations. In this context, the empathic competence is crucial, as it can raise students' awareness of inter- and intra-religious dialogue and implement the overcoming of stereotypes and prejudices (Lucenti, 2023). This change is visible in textbooks where not only do we find intra- and inter-religious diversity at the centre of the teaching units, but also cultural decentralization exercises in which the student is asked to put himself in the shoes of the other by imagining the emotions linked to the experience lived and drawing parallels with similar experiences lived in one's own cultural context.

We are going to analyse the presence of empathy in local agreed syllabuses and textbooks with a focus on peace education.

EMPATHY, PEACE AND INTER/INTRA-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN LOCAL AGREED SYLLABUSES AND RE TEXTBOOKS

The importance of empathy in locally agreed syllabuses has increased with the shift towards multi-faith approaches, which require a deeper understanding of diverse religious and non-religious worldviews. However, as we have previously stressed, such recognition in curriculums will not always coincide with the application of the multi-faith teaching in textbooks. We note instead, at least until the end of the 1980s, the presence of several textbooks whose focus is Christianity and in which the space for the development of empathic competence remains limited and circumscribed. An example of this is the textbook 'The Kingdom of Heaven' for secondary school, published in 1982, which focuses exclusively on Christianity, as do the other two volumes of the same series.

⁴ See American Academy of Religion (n.d.).

From the late 1980s and early 1990s, multi-faith religious education began to be present in a structural way, also in textbooks. But how was all this put into practice in teaching? How were the teachers supported in designing activities capable of fostering the development of empathic competence? In addition to the local agreed syllabus and the school textbooks themselves, the guides for teachers represent a valid support for teaching. To this end, two guides are paradigmatic of the change that has taken place in the teaching of RE over the last few decades. The first was published in 1983 and the second in 1990.

The first focuses only on Christianity, justifying this choice on the basis of the possible risk of *relativizing* other religions and providing a bewildering amount of material. The guide contains detailed explanations of some biblical passages, with theological explanations and constant reference to the biblical text without any reference to other religions. Furthermore, the second part consists of prepacked and 'correct' answers to the questions in the workbook. In short, we are far from the child-centred approach or from the empathic understanding of other points of view, as the experience of the child and the class group is not taken into consideration.

The second guide, 'New methods in R.E. teaching. An experiential approach', uses a different strategy, as it clearly provides the teacher with a new method, called the *experiential approach*. It is immediately evident how the empathic approach forms the basis of the method described from the first lines we read: "one of our main objectives is to help pupils to become aware that their own way of seeing the world is only one among many possible perspectives; thus, assisting the development of the skills of empathy" (Hammond et al., 1990, p. 6). Here, too, we have the view that religion cannot really be understood except through an experience from within.

The authors, using a parallelism, say that just as a novel cannot be appreciated without the reader entering the story, without becoming part of it, in the same way religion needs to be entered into to be properly appreciated. There is clearly talk of a phenomenological approach and of the understanding of the intentions of religious people, where the simple phenomenon of faith may seem remote and insignificant in the eyes of the pupil. The goal is to see and appreciate how the world looks and feels to other people and that one's perspective is only one among many. The inner intention, what matters to the religious believer, should be grasped; otherwise, students will have no real understanding of religion. "They will be rather like Victorian anthropologists, perhaps observing with real curiosity the habits, beliefs and artefacts of strange tribes, but separated by an experiential *apartheid* from genuine understanding" (Hammond et al., 1990, p. 10). In this sense, publicly available phenomena are not enough. The second chapter is entitled 'Seeing through another's eyes' and one of the paragraphs is called 'learning to empathise'. The criticism here is precisely against those who accuse religious educators of attempting to indoctrinate their pupils, because what we see is the reverse of indoctrination, since it

demonstrates that there is more than one perspective. It enlarges (rather than diminishes) freedom.

Some approaches to get there are the raising and deepening of personal awareness of the spiritual and the sharing and recognising of very different and sometimes contrary religious perspectives on reality. And the methods used are not just talking, writing or drawing, but using active involvement, meditative reflection, physical exploration and multi-sensory experiences. What has changed in the time that spans from the edition of the first guide in 1983 to this second guide in the 90s? The latter certainly represents the culmination of the famous Working Paper 36 of 1971 and of the work begun by Ninian Smart, on a teaching not only multi-religious, but which applies the phenomenological and non-dogmatic method followed by the subsequent theorised experiential and interpretative approach. The primary purpose of such an approach is to understand the inner intentions of religious people. The study of religion must transcend the purely informative (Copley, 2008, p. 101). But as Copley (2008, p. 103) tells us “it is hard to over-emphasise the influence of the approach embodied in Working Paper 36 on RE in the next two decades”.

From this moment on, the statement in the syllabuses that the function of RE was to bring children and adults into an encounter with God was considered archaic. Nevertheless, the full application inaugurated by Working Paper 36 and by the work of Smart and team would come to a close within twenty years, in the 90s, as the aforementioned guide is an example. And this brought important consequences for the empathic approach, understood as the “opening of cognitive horizons”, suspension of judgment and relativity of one's point of view, where empathy represented the basis for a true understanding of the believer's intentions (Smart, 1986). This turning point was accompanied over time by the awareness of inter-religious and intra-religious diversity and beyond the religious phenomenon, where even non-religious worldviews find space as systems of understanding reality.

In order to encourage peace and dialogue, one of the skills most desired by programmes and teaching aids is undoubtedly the empathic one. Peace education requires the acceptance of others not only in terms of a detached *tolerance*, but of an emotional and cognitive sharing of the experiences, desires, expectations and beliefs of others, of an *empathic identification* in the other, from within, as we have previously stated concerning the experiential approach (Lucenti, 2023; Lucenti & Hirsch, 2022).

If the presence of empathy in RE programmes is structural and linked to skills and objectives, within teaching units it is promoted through a plurality of themes. Among these, conflict resolution and peace occupy a significant role. The potentially controversial nature that the religious can assume in certain aspects of society and in the different interpretation of the various denominations is recognised, as are

religions on issues defined as controversial, *sensitive* or *socially alive*⁵. Cohabiting peacefully in a society implies knowledge of the other also from a religious point of view and this is certainly one of the objectives of teaching religion in school. How, then, do we talk about peace and conflict management in English curricula and textbooks?

In Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton’s programme, the word *peace* is mentioned 44 times, in that of Cornwall 40 times (Cornwall Council, 2020), and 12 times in the Durham (Durham County Council, 2020) agreed syllabus.

Table 1 – Examples of Units about Peace in an RE syllabus

| The RE Agreed Syllabus, 2018–2023 Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Unit: making connections | <i>Sacred words</i> beyond religions? Talk to the children about whether some words are special, but not religious. Do words like <i>peace</i> , <i>love</i> , <i>co-operation</i> and <i>kindness</i> need religion to make them special, or are they important to every human, including those who are not religious? Link this discussion to the work described above. |
| Unit L2.9: How do festivals and worship show what matters to a Muslim? | Based on the Arabic root <i>slm</i> , which means <i>peace</i> . <i>Islam</i> means “the peace that comes from being in harmony with God”, and <i>Muslim</i> means “one who willingly submits to God”. |
| Unit U2.5: How do Christians decide how to live? What would Jesus do? | Turning enemies into friends: Jesus talks about turning the other cheek, not using violence. Find out about <i>Christian Peacemaker Teams</i> , who stand between warring forces to stop violence (cpt.org/work). Look at the work of Desmond Tutu and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or stories from the Forgiveness Project, or Taizé. Can pupils work out what it is that helps people to forgive? Is there anything we can learn from these examples? |
| Unit 3.13: What makes a person inspirational to others? (This unit takes a <i>case study</i> approach. Students prepare a presentation) | Students will choose, investigate and present a case study of one or more inspirational leaders, exploring their religion, belief and convictions and the impact they have had on today’s world. Examples from Judaism, Islam, Christianity and Hindu traditions might include: Marc Chagall and Elie Wiesel (Jewish people), Malala Yousafzai and Dr Hany El Banna (Muslims), Sister Teresa Forcades and Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr (Christians) and Mahatma Gandhi and Pandurang Shastri Athavale (Hindus). Students can be encouraged to look more widely than this too. The Nobel Peace Prize list of winners is a good place to begin research. |

⁵ Reference is mainly made to Francophone literature on *thèmes sensibles* or *questions socialement vives* (QSV), see: Chauvigné C. & Fabre M. (2021). Questions socially living: those possible approaches in the school environment? *Carrefours de l'éducation* 2021/2 (52), pp. 5-31; Hirsch, S. (2016). Quelle place accorder aux thèmes sensibles dans l'enseignement d'Éthique et culture religieuse au Québec? *Zeitschrift für Religionskunde | Revue de didactique des sciences des religions*, 2, 78-87.

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| The RE Agreed Syllabus, 2018–2023 Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton | |
| Unit 3.19: Sharing one world: are religions part of the problem or the solution? | <p>If religions preach peace, why do they often fight? Consider with pupils the inclusive and loving intentions of religions, in texts and in contemporary life. What examples of religious action have challenged prejudices about race, religion, gender and homophobia? But also, what examples have reinforced these prejudices? What stops people sharing one world fairly?</p> <p>Research and reflect on the attempts by religious groups or individuals to build <i>bridges</i>. This should include local community and interfaith activities.</p> |

Peace as a way to overcome conflict and build positive relationships in the name of social cohesion is therefore clearly present in the thematic units proposed by the English syllabus (Table 1). It is prefigured as an intrinsic characteristic of religions and worldviews, but also as a goal to be pursued, not always in line with the religious practices themselves. In this sense, the objective is to focus on religion as a changing concept (as the fruit of human interpretation) and on peace as a goal and centre of gravity from which religions have often deviated (for instance, in periods in which the social climate was *colder* and the interpretation of sacred texts more intransigent) but to which religions and non-religious worldviews universally aspire. In this horizon of meaning, it is therefore possible to place men and women peacemakers as an example to follow, including the Nobel Peace Prize winners. Furthermore, the use of the word peace in other languages, such as the Arabic root of the word “Islam”, highlights more forcefully how peace is a universal value and encourages empathy through identification with the positive intentions of other religions, which aspire universally to the construction of a peaceful society. The theme of peace, as it bypasses and crosses every geographical or religious border, is transversal and could educate students to understand the complexity of the application of religion in contemporary reality, making connections with other themes related to it, such as justice, reconciliation, identity, communion, good and evil, and war (Lucenti, 2023, 2025).

Even in the most recent textbooks, which, as we have previously argued, give ample space to both inter- and intra-religious diversity, the theme of empathic understanding of the other and of peace offers a privileged point of view to address issues that concern not only religious precepts and their various interpretations, but also people’s values and their impact on everyone’s experience.

The multi-religious and *multi-denomination* approach introduces useful elements for the development of an empathic predisposition. Through the comprehension of the intentions behind the religious rites and beliefs of others (and not just those beliefs), the student is thus led to understand, but also “feel” a greater closeness as he recognizes the universal attempt to answer the questions behind every

vision of the world (Kimanen, 2022). As well as establishing the existence of different visions of the world, it also describes different points of view and beliefs within the same vision of the world or religion itself. For example, instead of *Muslims believe*, or *Christians believe*, it uses *some Muslims*, *some Christians*, *most Christians* or *most Muslims*, or *many Muslims*, etc., legitimising different points of view and giving space to all diversity. This awareness favours and promotes the decentralization essential for the development of empathic competence, as only by suspending judgment and one's own point of view and recognizing that there are many other interpretations of reality, is it possible to put oneself in other people's shoes.

But, as we stated in the first paragraph of this paper on empathy within religious education, simple knowledge, while it represents an essential first step towards empathy, is not sufficient, which is why the historical-comparative approach (teaching about religion) alone has been defined as sterile for the development of religious literacy.

The teaching from religion approach therefore seems more appropriate and an essential complement for the development of empathic competence. Starting from the student's experience, from his own questions, appears essential for a profound understanding of the *intentions* behind the beliefs and practices of religious and non-religious people. In this sense, some textbooks develop certain topics starting from elements close and familiar to the student's life, such as Harry Potter, cited to investigate the construction of identity (Large & Brown, 2004, p. 9).

Both textbooks that are dedicated to a single religion and those that are more thematic deal with the relationship between religion, peace and conflict.

The textbook 'Religious Studies A. Islam' dedicates a chapter to this theme, combating the prejudice rooted within the West (Moosavi, 2015; Peach, 2005) of some association between Islam and violence: "the main message of Islam is that of peace and harmony. There is an emphasis on peace in the Quran" (Fleming et al., 2016, p. 110). Regarding terrorism we read that:

even if a person who commits terrorist acts may claim to do so in the name of a religion, for example Christianity or Islam, no religious tradition promotes terrorism. On July 7, 2005, there were four suicide bombings in London that killed 52 people and injured more than 700. Although the terrorists involved in the July 2005 attacks claimed to be followers of Islam, most Muslims, including their religious and community leaders, have condemned the attacks, often sharing platforms with leaders of other faiths to show their solidarity against terrorism. There is no justification for terrorist acts in the teachings of Islam (Fleming et al., 2016, pp. 112–113).

This statement highlights the exploitation of the discourse on religion which can lead to dangerous shortcuts that associate Islam with violence. In this way the student is led to reflect on the complexity of religions and on the multiple points of view within the same religion, in which the objective is to deconstruct prejudices through empathy towards those who are unfairly discriminated against due to improper and erroneous generalisations. The approach of the ‘This is RE!’ textbook series is among the most interesting, as the authors address the student directly (starting from the titles of chapters and paragraphs), in order to involve the student and stimulate him to reflect through key questions such as: “does suffering make it impossible to believe in God? Who am I? How and why do people worship?” Quotations from sacred texts are always accompanied by connections with the present and with facts and representations that can involve the student and arouse his interest. Furthermore, the quotes are taken not only from texts, but also from direct testimonies, published mainly on the web or in newspaper articles. The textbook therefore acts as a boundary tool, which goes beyond the paper limit and feeds on multimedia contents, becoming a sort of *collage*, an inter-narrative and multimedia synthesis. It does not exhaust the research within the physical limit of the text but represents a *window* for further research, which requires the consultation and use of various media. The prevention of prejudices and stereotypes is promoted through the multiple and different points of view presented and by an image of religion as *alive*, linked to the present, not in its essentialised version. If the thematic approach sacrifices content aimed at promoting in-depth knowledge of religions or of the history of religions, at the same time it achieves the objectives of the teaching from religion approach, that is, using religion as a source of meaning to lead and accompany the student to reflect on the contemporary implications of faith, starting from his own experience and that of others.

Making sense of one's own existence and that of others starting from the reference to the religious means conceptualising terms such as *justice* in a different way from what would be done outside this context, where justice here means “bringing peace and reconciliation”, or “being a bridge-builder and forgiver” (Large, 2002, pp. 52–53). However, the textbooks do not idealise religions as bearers and builders of peace, but as ambivalent social phenomena, which depending on the interpretation have often hindered and compromised this pacifist ideal. The ‘GCSE AQA A. Religious Studies’ textbook for the grade 9 dedicates a thematic unit to peace and conflict, eschewing any generalisation or simplification when it states that:

atheists and humanists, who do not believe in God, have criticised religion for causing conflict and would not support a war started for religious reasons, but neither would many religious people. Some atheists and humanists identify themselves as pacifists, and do not accept the use of conflict at all (Anderson *et al.* 2017, p. 64).

The recurring use of terms such as *some*, *many*, *few* etc., has the aim of showing how even within the same denomination there are no unanimous positions, but different visions and different points of view. The theme of war and peace, in this sense, is no exception, as history has well taught.

FINAL REMARKS

If in the programmes and textbooks that precede the introduction of the multi-religious approach in England the theme of empathy and peace were of a Christian nature, the introduction of the study of the main religions practiced in the United Kingdom and non-religious worldviews has *cleared* these themes. It has made them not only *universal* – belonging to all religions and worldviews – but also methodologically functional to the deconstruction of a naïve representation of religion, counterproductive to a real understanding of the religious fact and the consequent development of religious literacy. Explaining the internal contradictions of religions and denominations, the different interpretations, the discrepancies between precepts and practices, between believers and observers, local and global, represents the epistemological and didactic innovation introduced in recent decades, in line with academic reflections on the teaching of this discipline (Copley, 2008; Parker et al., 2012). If one of the objectives of RE is “to investigate what allows different people and communities to live together while respecting the well-being of all”,⁶ such peaceful coexistence will be possible if RE gives voice, visibility and legitimacy to religious diversity and non-religious worldviews, and if it explains the conflict intrinsically linked to sensitive issues such as ethical and religious ones, starting from various points of view. Promoting a culture of peace, in this sense, implies the recognition not only of the pacifist ideal inherent in religions and non-religious worldviews, but also of an exercise in democracy in which a sort of *cultural decentralisation* takes place. These skills that religious education implements are fundamental to the development of empathic competence. And in fact, the shift from the monoreligious approach to the multi-religious one has allowed empathy to take on a new centrality, where diversity and the need to deal with it in a constructive way is placed at the centre of this discipline.

Indeed, Religious Education can become a privileged space in which it is possible not only to give space to this diversity, but also to negotiate complex, plural and never definitive knowledge.

In 2018 the Commission on Religious Education (in the ‘Religion and Worldviews: the way forward. A national plan for RE’ report) promised to redefine the identity of the discipline. The most significant proposals include the name, which

⁶ See Worcestershire County Council (2015, p. 9).

should become 'Religion and Worldviews - R&W' instead of RE, as well as a plan to unify a common programme and do away with several local agreed syllabuses, and to abolish the clause allowing children to be withdrawn from the course. If the current proposal intends to sanction an overcoming of the *religio-centric* vision, empathy represents an effective key in interpreting and decoding new paradigms of the inclusion of all types of diversity, not just religious diversity. This can happen through cultural decentralization and understanding the intentions and meanings that lie behind the rites of believers and non-believers. But as we have seen, the role of worldviews in religious education in England does not arise from a vacuum, but from a historical path where the progressive openness towards diversity has gone hand in hand with a new centrality accorded to empathy.

To put it as Ute Frevert (2011) does, if empathy has had a stellar career, this is certainly true within religious education. We have witnessed the transition from a biblio-centred and Christian-centred approach to the introduction of the six main religions practiced in England and of non-religious worldviews. We have also seen epistemological and methodological change, where the simple historical-comparative approach has been integrated with the phenomenological, experiential, interpretative, and teaching from religion approaches, on the basis of different definitions depending on the period and the different authors. In every approach, empathy has been placed among the primary objectives of the discipline and skills to be developed, where the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes is a prerequisite for a real understanding of the religious phenomenon and worldviews in general. It has become essential to engage pupils in a systematic enquiry into significant human questions, where the questions, the path and the possible answers are always plural.

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