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**PEDAGOGY AND RELIGION IN THE  
THIRD MILLENNIUM.  
A FRUITFUL ENCOUNTER**

## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The essay analyses religious experience, which today is far from connoting itself as a rationalistic practice. Especially in the 20th century, the religious has acquired a renewed vitality, more detached from dogma, but more open to faith and the transcendent.

**Material and methods:** The treatment of the subject involved a critical analysis of the scientific literature, both pedagogical and more specialised, with reference to the meanings assumed by religious experience in recent decades. From a methodological point of view, recourse was made to the heuristic method and a historical-pedagogical method was also followed in order to precisely interpret the relationship between the aspiration of contemporary pedagogy to promote a subject that is indeed socialised but in a critical and divergent perspective and the religious dimension.

**Results:** The research has brought to light two fundamental concepts. The first is the desire to bring religiosity back into its formative dimension, thus linking it to the process of the person's development; the second relates to the recovery of the marginalised dimension, with the elimination of what hinders an effective pedagogical-educational reading of man.

**Conclusions:** To conclude, a circularity is re-established between religiosity and development, starting from the incisiveness of religious experience in the development of human beings in the third millennium. Above all, self-centered reasoning loses every fundamentalist presumption, it relates to human realities and responds to the concrete experiences of men thus revealing its essential relevance and importance for better thinking about the complete education of modern man as an intellectual and spiritual being.

**KEYWORDS:** *pedagogy, religiosity, rationality, Education, human experience*

## RELIGION AND RELIGIOUSNESS

In addressing the pedagogical issues of religious experience, there are diverse theoretical pathways that relate to the age-old, never resolved knot of the relationship between pedagogical theory and educational practice. The religious problem is both a pedagogical issue in the strict sense, but also a practical one linked to the concrete daily life of education and training. Therefore, religious experience is to be read within the pedagogical *device*, not without

depriving ourselves of the epistemological gaze, capable of focusing on the relationship between pedagogy and other knowledge. Moreover, the didactic-operational side is also involved, since religious experience is to be seen, neither more nor less, as a school experience on a par with the others (aesthetic, social, moral, expressive, scientific, physical-motor, etc.)

On closer inspection, religious experience problematizes the epistemological device of pedagogy, what suggests its substance (or re-substantiation) in relation to and within the general human educational and training processes and the why it must be specified (or re-specified), (*re-*) *give itself a name*, in relation to and within educational practice.

It is important to note that the religious experience is a problem of contemporary pedagogy, that is, an open educational-formative issue that questions itself in ever new ways, it lives and shares with pedagogy the bundle of nuclei that feed an increasingly complex and tense debate both in the theoretical dimension and in the praxic sphere (Cfr. Bruni, 2020).

For clarification purposes it is important to explain what meaning of *religious experience* is assumed here. It is necessary to justify this assumption by placing the reasoning inside and at the centre of the problems related to education and training, provided that they are relating to today's scenario marked by globalization and migratory flows. Daily the man of the third millennium is called to mediate between their needs as an *individual* and the cultural dialectic, collective unconscious, the plurality of experiences (including religious ones), forms and deformations of the global era. Another important aspect, for its pedagogical implications, is that religion, understood as faith more than dogma (even if there is always a subtle dialectical connection between faith and dogma), has not in the words of Franco Cambi, «disappeared in the time of Technique, in that of complete Secularization, nor in the dominant Aufklärung. It has remained alive both as an experience and as a need. It exists and remains even at very high reflective levels» (Cambi, 2011, p. 9; see Cambi, 2007). Cambi's words are certainly shareable and encourage us to give value to the religious element in pedagogical reflection.

Therefore, today more than ever, religious experience is far from connoting itself as an intellectual activity and rational practice; it does not correspond to a phenomenon of abstract exercises and practices; it does not coincide with

the simple learning of notional elements (see Moscato et alii, 2017). Moreover, following the historical-cultural evolution of the phenomenology of the religious, it seems evident that since the height of Modernity the question has lent itself to more complex, broader, deeper and problematic, more critical and more secular anthropological and formative values.

Throughout the twentieth century, the religious aspect acquires a renewed vitality, with a secular connotation which strengthens its understanding and enriches it in the dimension of thought and experience. Certainly more restless, but more consciously understood in its richness. Perhaps more detached from the dogma, but more open to faith and the transcendent, not bound by rigid affiliations. Moreover, a form of religiosity more in line with the human multidimensionality and more in line with the investigation of the phenomena of development. On balance, religiosity emerges strengthened by the re-appropriation of a genuine contact with the person's real life, to the point that religious experience is in many ways identified with the religious person, that is, with an authentically experienced life, with the narration and images that the person himself uses to describe this experience (Cf. Castaldi, 2017, pp. 69-76).

Therefore, religious experience is more intertwined with personal development and maturation, with intellectual and personal dynamics, with the person's developing awareness and with the deepest complex universe, both that of the formal reasoning and the non – rational and unconscious one.

On closer inspection, the religious experience refers to and is grafted onto the *Bildung*, that is to say into the *foundation of the human» where «the intimate and institutive nucleus of the subject lives» (Gennari, 2001, p. 715). It refers directly to the intimate world of man, where his Bildung understood as the formation of the human development, takes place. In many ways, religious experience is made possible to feel in and from the deepest sources, in and from the innermost foundation of human sense and sentiment. Man is formed in his intimacy and from there he projects himself on the existential world where he meets the Other and the Beyond. When one considers the „content of religious experience, that is the relationship between man and religiosity, as a source of knowledge, it is undeniable that each of us, believer or non-believer, always questions himself about God. This is a field of investigation that cannot be approached at all with the rational paradigms of experimentation and*

measurability. This would lead to a dualistic outcome, thus risking returning to secular diatribes, to research itineraries of a monistic or dualistic matrix, even to the reference to the political-ideological matrix of scholastic socialization: materialistic skepticism and atheism, on one side and on the opposite side metaphysical fideism, rationalism of an Enlightenment matrix to a certain extent and abstract transcendentalism diametrically opposed (Cfr. Bonetta, 1986).

In this regard, the attempt to overcome these disjunctive logics by Thomas Aquinas, with his *coincidentia oppositorum* should be remembered or, to refer to a period closer to us, Romano Guardini with the doctrine of the polar opposition (*Gegensatz*). With careful evaluation, this theological path which certainly has strong implications with the educational aspect, but in an indirect way, that is entrusting points of view and approaches to the specificity of pedagogy. As if to say that these are reflections that are offered to pedagogy as material to be recalibrated on the basis of the aims of the formative discourse. In short, it is a theological question to be read with a pedagogical regard.

It is in this sense that questions about religion and religious experience emerge in the form of a search for a sense of the horizon and of religious experience for the development of man and for man-in-development; for the man *reassembled* in the unity of multiple facets.

It should be noted that all absolutizations, formulations related to foundationalism lose their epistemological consistency; on the contrary, researches free from prejudicial and standardized schemes, open to comparison with every contribution of thought, even with what conflicts with the acquired certainties, acquire scientific weight.

It can be said that it is these aspects of religion and religiosity that question pedagogy in revision of its scientific statute, in its true logic, which would make religious dialogue itself impracticable.

Again, the mechanistic logic of scientific reasoning linked to Tradition, especially to the Western one, would even be an error of knowledge of the real and fundamental formative qualities of the human being, to whom one would be denying a substantial part of oneself, precisely that part which is unapproachable and unknowable by rationality. This error is to be considered more serious because, moreover, it is practiced under the aegis of scientific knowledge.

At this point, an inversion of the epistemological method is to be hoped for. This would give the possibility of recognizing real human stature and the possibility of having an authentic religious experience, even in the secular sense, as a condition for humanity to become aware of the limit, which gives substance to its being (and becoming), which gives the sense of a relationship (as a limit-boundary that implies a passage) with all that is beyond, be it the world, the other human, the Other, God (cf. Bellingreri, 2018).

Therefore, man is no longer undervalued, degraded, closed in on himself because beyond there is nothingness, but it is the man who knows he has his own *space*, who feels to exist in front of the world, who also feels himself unique, different, but at the same time inseparable from the whole. Precisely in his being self-conscious and aware of everything, man is forming himself, he is assuming his own form, his own aspect, in a process that is always in progress.

It is on this process that pedagogy, that adopts the analysis of the complex *experience of being* reflects, indeed focused on the subject, but on the subject who, however, feeds on his cognitive impulses outside of himself in his anthropic and environmental reality, a reality that *has an importance that surpasses the weight of its being*. Therefore, it is the person who transforms his world and transforms himself thus realizing himself as a response to the call of the Creator, it is this person who can make an *Umbruch*, a «leap into a religious dimension» and to use Guardini's words again (1939, pp. 94-107), until reaching, beyond himself, God. It follows that pedagogy as a science cannot neglect the questions about distinctly human processes, including religiosity, religious awareness, knowledge and the relationship with the transcendent. Even more so, if these aspects live and are embodied in man's depths, where not only the logical-formal intellectual faculties operate, but where the rich world of the non-rational, the non-logical, the unconscious is released, with its „reasons, as a noble and highly responsible source of motivations, real desires, creative vitality, ethical tensions. And these are, we know, the real drives on which most of the choices and decisions depend and which stand as agents of real and authentic human development and transformation (cf. Cambi, 2007; Bruni, 2008, 2019a; Potestio, Togni, 2011). In short, it is a world to which pedagogy should certainly pay much more attention.

## HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The path of humanization that man is called to undertake in order to realize his authentic human reality is closely linked to religiosity and religious experience; to all intents and purposes, these are intimately correlated with one's *Bildung*. On the other hand, the phenomenology of experiences and their meanings in personal existences is very rich. This indicates a dynamism that the Catholic world, in the Church of Pope Francis and in the laity, is promoting, thus promising a new and creative season.

It is not out of place to recall that Pestalozzi (1872) indicated, as the objective of the educational process, the development of human spiritual forces, entrusting to religion and the divine «the final task of completing the education of men» (p. 159). For the Swiss pedagogue, God reigned in the radical plan for the moral recovery of society, in the profound reform of education, in the conception of human nature, in the religious *Weltanschauung* free of any formality. In his conception, God acts as a «force of nature», present in man as a formative source that he knows exactly as he knows himself. What Pestalozzi desired is a religiosity that belongs to man and from which man himself can draw through moving from his own interiority; therefore, no external act, nor mechanical action, nor precept, nor ritualism but only an immersion in his own interior consciousness can allow man to approach the original source of his humanity, to develop himself towards and in the humanity, to meet God and make Him dwell in his personal life experience.

To remain in the German and Central European context, it is good to refer to the highest moment of pedagogical awareness, when the *Bildung* in its theoretical ascent reaches the apex of its elaboration. In the development of man, a founding unity which made of him, of the *Mensch*, a harmonious and unitary being with the world coexisted. *Bildung* was imbued with this original I-world nexus, conceived precisely in reference to the double value inscribed in its identity, already in its etymological root. It is no coincidence that *Bilden* as «form» and *Bild* as «image of God» summarized the idea of formation as an inescapable human experience; here there is an aesthetic-organicist conception which sees man as someone who sculpts himself like an artist sculpts his model art of clay and how nature shapes its products;

moreover, according to the theological perspective, man forms and is formed as a construction because he was originally created by God and, therefore, logically aligned with God's will to make himself in turn capable of creating (cf. Bruni, 2008, pp. 66-70).

Therefore, *Bildung* is opposed both to *Zucht* (breeding) and to *Erziehung* (education), restoring meaning to human experience and existence which are man's relationship with the world, with history, with culture, with God.

It can therefore be affirmed that the educational and then pedagogical model of post-modernity or late modernity has extinguished the reconciliation of the two aspects that have characterized the ideal of *Bildung*, romantic, Schillerian, all centered on the co-efficiency of ethical and aesthetic experience, on the enhancement of the multidimensional unity of man, on the correspondence between his vital needs and the historical and social context.

For pedagogical theorizing, the consequences can be traced to a sort of epistemological pessimism which is necessarily accompanied by the practice of the many *silences* (see Bruni, 2016). We must therefore think of the foundation of a scientific model exclusively justified by the logic of *corrective* reason and by the primacy of the normative in Western educational thought, as a constant that has marginalized everything that was outside the norm, that was unpredictable, uncontrollable and measurable (see Bruni, 2019b).

Furthermore we must consider the interpretation of the recipient of the model, thought as linked to the need to justify the model itself, i.e. as a rational being who knows and is formed by relying on logical thinking, who grants nothing and nothing can grant the *spirit*, confirming the more than ever pervasive Western logocentrism.

This type of pedagogy, this training model, this anthropology have absolutized, albeit differently over time, to the detriment of his non-rational part of being, the *best part of man* as the only designated to ensure full knowledge, peace of mind, certainty (even material), self-mastery, self-control.

On balance, in pedagogical theory and practice what Kant called *cancer of reason*» has been censored, i.e. the passions-emotions-desires considered sources of blinding and therefore an obstacle to the integral formation of man. No less suppressed was the search for more authentic human and relationships horizons. To conclude, the recourse to the most intimate agents of the human being,



*disowned in their cognitive possibilities, in their potential for elevation as earthly being „into a divine creature to meet the Other who cannot be reached by cold rational effort but thanks to the cultivation of the most authentic dimensions of the human being, has been denied.*

## **A MORE EXTENSIVE RATIONALITY**

In the course of this discourse, two fundamental concepts have emerged. The first is the desire to bring religiosity back into its formative dimension, thus linking it to the process of human development. The second is related to the recovery of the marginalized dimension, with the elimination of what hinders an effective pedagogical-educational view of man.

These two concepts are in full contrast to modern scientific discourse. They move the instance of the application of scientific of self-referential reason from the centre to the periphery thus raising questions about the most adequate reading of human reality and its dimensions-manifestations (cf. Habermas, 1992; 2006).

At this point, if education is continuous historical creativity, it is appropriate to try to indicate a possible inclusion of the religious dimension in the pedagogical discourse: this would involve espousing a non-nominalistic methodological alternative; *alternative* both to the pure scientific option (which appeals to *concreteness* and relies on the guarantee of empirical observation) and to the pure speculative option (mostly ideological and detached from historical concreteness).

A valid, mature pedagogical research proceeds by reconsidering the dimensions of human formativeness and places its own theoretical premises under analysis. Therefore, it recovers the invisible, the unseen, along the path of innovation of rationality, of logos, as an instance that gives pedagogy scientific discourse and practice. In short, it is rationality itself that needs to be critically rethought, in light of a more mature and complete training path.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's question *What kind of rationality is suited to the Christian faith?* comes to mind. A very profound question, which touches upon a fundamental problem of a theological nature, but at the same time incorporates a crucial problem of pedagogy. Indeed, in the question Ratzinger

(2007) explicitly states the purpose of his reasoning: he wants to refer to man's lived experience and wants to go beyond ideal and, therefore, unreal paradigms and models. We then have to ask ourselves whether this bibliographic reference from 2007 can be attributed to Pope Benedict XVI instead of Ratzinger. Perhaps it is a claim, of pedagogy, to present itself as a science of man's formation, in that it should look at the *total* man in the unity of his multidimensionality.

We can therefore address the hope of appealing to a more *enlarged* reason, as an epistemological instance and as an investigative tool, when it questions human possibility and when it aims to reduce the many risks of living in such a complex and turbulent period that is undergoing rapid and epochal changes.

To use Ratzinger's words again, it is not a *going back to before the Enlightenment* (ibid., p. 28; cf. Benedict XVI, 2017, 2023), but it is a desire to go forward in search of a logos (as a word and as an acted word, as a theory and as a practice) which welcomes the vastness of its potential in the face of human and social complexity, which rejects the drives towards reductionism of its real value and doesn't permit to be stopped by the certainty of what is already understood, validated and acquired.

All this is sufficient to indicate the path on which pedagogy will be able to walk without stumbling, rehabilitating the multiple dimensions and experiences of living today. Therefore, in this path, religiosity represents a creative human dimension also able to create. Pedagogy welcomes the creative principle as an inexhaustible source of human relationship, as an event that brings us closer and not as a determined and deterministic theory; therefore, religiosity is to be seen as a possibility of an encounter between true and real faces and not as an idea. It is, therefore, a real possibility, it is actuality and *simple* belief, a possibility for «those who are able to see with their hearts» (Mt 11:25). On closer inspection, it is connected with the inner life of everyone and with their relationships with others. It has both a subjective and an ethical-social value since it implies a passage with three exits. Firstly as a descent within oneself into the deepest and most personal interiority. Secondly as an ascent towards transcendent Otherness; or thirdly as a lateral or frontal exit in contact with others. In everything there is full human realization, openings for responsibility and freedom, thus confirming all its human and pedagogical potential.

To conclude, a circularity is re-established between religiosity and development, starting from the incisiveness of religious experience in the development of human beings in the third millennium. Above all, self-centered reasoning loses every fundamentalist presumption, it relates to human realities and responds to the concrete experiences of men thus revealing its essential relevance and importance for better thinking about the complete education of modern man as an intellectual and spiritual being.

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