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# CATHOLIC RELIGION TEACHER TRAINING IN A PLURAL, GLOCAL, AND EVOLUTIONARY SCENARIO

[Uniqueness and asset of the  
Blanquerna pedagogical model  
from experience and reflection]

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**Abstract:** Catholic religion teacher training in higher education, beyond its formal presence, is a current reality in many countries in the world, which now produces an important amount of initiatives, pedagogical experiences, and research. In the last decades, the phenomenon of the diverse comprehension of the “religion class” and the “Catholic religion class” at schools (very remarkable in Europe and in other places as well) has led to questions over the teachers’ training curriculum. Particularly, these questions arise from the pluralism of educational models, the *glocal* reality of professional and personal projection, and variations that are apparent within our own models or regions. It is obvious that all of them encompass a new perception of the religious fact, of its value as a universal heritage, its contribution as a factor for personal guidance, and its potential to contribute to the construction of a better world.

In the general framework of the importance, evolution, and diversity of models in university teaching-learning processes, and in particular within the context of the different scenarios for religion teacher initial training in Early Childhood Education and Primary Education, this article presents a description of the uniqueness of the training model for Catholic religion teachers in Blanquerna-Ramon Llull University. There is also a detailed description and reflection about the Blanquerna model, because, through its characterization, a paradigm emerges that reaches a high potential to give a response to the main questions in our current scenario.

**Keywords:** *Initial training, religion teacher, pedagogical model, university curriculum*

## INTRODUCTION

The immediate prospective educational and professional scenario for those university students that are currently doing initial training as Catholic religion teachers is conditioned by three main characteristics, which shape and make up our cultural environment: plural, glocal, and evolutionary.

With *plural*, we are referring to the diversity of paradigms or models to understand the religion class at school, the difference among Catholic religion curricula proposed by the different Episcopal conferences, and the legitimate diversities deriving from the university schools' educational projects.

*Glocal* refers to the different frameworks and realities (near – “local” or far – “global”, both with common tendencies) that new education professionals will face due to the process of real mobility when they finish their studies and enter the labor market and live their first teaching experiences.

Finally, *evolutionary* refers to the change that has occurred in every and whatever existing model. None of the current training models has arrived here without experiencing significant modifications.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Spanish education system model, for example, is paradigmatic in its evolution in the last 70 years, as well as all the perspectives initiated in Europe, as explained later.

In front of this reality, we may wonder what outlook should there be to build and develop initial training itineraries for prospective Catholic religion teachers. Obviously, different responses can be given: (a) An immediate and local proposal; (b) a generalist proposal that trains but also demands for further training; or (c) a proposal in accordance with the closest context but integrating some training that enables students to incorporate other paradigms (a proposal which is both open and integrating).

This paper aims at showing a good example of this third university training response. Firstly, the current training scenario is briefly presented through a look at different realities conditioned by their social and cultural environment: for example, some territorial situations linked to the options of education systems, recommendations by organizations and political officers, lines of work and research from the pedagogy and didactics of religion, or the impact of interreligious and ecumenical dialog on our educational environment.

The second objective is to present the characteristics and uniqueness of the Blanquerna training model for Catholic religion teachers in comparison with other current models, and as a response to the educational challenges posed by our cultural and social environment.

In the conclusion, the opportunity and asset of this Blanquerna model in the current university training context is made explicit. Without aiming at exclusiveness, this model can be a good proposal to respond to the challenges of the contemporary world.

In short, some integrate training dynamism is presented that satisfactorily deals with teacher competences in their initial training process, as it provides prospective teachers with new assessment on the cultural heritage of religions and the sense of the religious experience, thus promoting self-awareness of the evolutionary process of one's own identity as a religion teacher, and it develops a new vision, among others, on teaching religion at school and its contribution to the children's integral education.

Finally, the most significant result of this paper has been to deduce the satisfaction and transformation seen in the education students at the end of their training process. In this respect, a detailed description and reflection of the Blanquerna model is presented, because through its characterization we can see a paradigm that responds to the main questions in the current social and cultural context.

This research has led the research team to a clear conclusion: the re-appreciation of the Blanquerna-URL training model for Catholic religion

teachers. Thus, this work is not only scientific and analytical but also one that consolidates and promotes an environment of good university practice to be used for dialog and transference in similar settings.

## 1. IMPACT AND CHALLENGES OF THE RELIGION-TEACHING PARADIGM AT SCHOOL ON PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS' TRAINING (RELIGION TEACHERS). A VISION FROM A PLURAL, GLOCAL, AND EVOLUTIONARY SCENARIO

Data concerning prospective religion teachers' training are scarce, not relevant and frequently have a secondary place in relation to what could be called the "issue of the religion class" or "teaching religion at school". Schematically, there are four main issues inside this "thematic node" that are connected but different: (a) The *legal and pedagogical model* of teaching religion and foundations, which is remarkably documented; (b) the *issue of the religion teacher's statute* and the different civic academic requirements and/or those established by denominations, which are significantly different among countries and regulations of religious authorities; (c) the *curriculum* of the subject in the different educational stages and the corresponding didactic aspects; (d) the *pedagogical training model* through which the specific teaching-learning process is developed, that is based on an itinerary, method and procedure. This latter aspect is our priority and the core of this paper. We should say that this is not an exhaustive review of the scarce existing references, although this would be a very interesting exercise to develop. Most literature (Berlund, Shan-neik, & Bocking, 2016; Feldmann, 2016; García de Andoaín, 2015; Jackson, 2016; Pajer, 2017; Ortega, 2016; Rothgangel & Jäggle, 2017) shows, however, the modest place of the section on teacher training.

### 1.1. A PARTICULAR PROBLEM

Competences in most university degrees have to be designed on the logics deriving from epistemology or respective epistemologies, and on the logics from professional requirements. Neither the development level of the professional sector in a particular field nor the geographical situation of the training setting should be –a priori– determining factors of the university curriculum or the training itineraries. For instance, the

theoretical background in the training of industrial engineering should be relatively similar in all universities. There is, then, a certain competence and content “objectivism”. Obviously, we are not talking about methodological aspects, training processes or the practical relation with the professional environment, which also have a major repercussion. This relatively obvious paradigm presents a significant exception in the case of religion teacher training, because two important variables appear that introduce considerable “subjectivism” when determining the outlooks and training processes. Firstly, *the pluralism of models in the concept or identity of the study of the religious fact and religion at school*. Europe, for example, is a kaleidoscope of realities and accents. Indeed, depending on how the religion class is presented, a certain organization of university curriculum will have to be preferentially offered. The second variable is the challenge implied by *the degree of link or connection of religion teacher training with the competence-based arrangement for the basic agents of school education activity*, that is, teachers. Opting for a mainly *specialized* model or for a model of *teacher with a specialization* has obvious consequences on the curriculum. Or in other words, there is a preference for a training narrative closely linked to institutions and the development of education, or religion teacher training is developed close to institutions and the development of questions concerning the advances of different religious sciences and/or theology.

## 1.2. EVIDENCE FOR PLURALISM OF MODELS

A few years ago, Pajer (2012, 2015) already conducted a study reviewing the European reports on the situation of religion teaching at school, and proposed three paradigms that coexist in the educational space of the continent, though they neither are alternative nor appear in a pure state, as some are living in a situation of transition. The first paradigm would be “political-concordant” placing the core on the transmission of doctrinal and moral heritage of a certain Christian denomination (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox) or other religions if that is the case. This centrality or polarization is verified when the civil society is culturally homogeneous or quite homogeneous in their religious tradition. A second model could be called “academic-curricular” where the school –also in public schools– feels completely attracted by the achievement of capacities and functional competences in the framework of the knowledge society,

which logically has to include knowledge on religion and religions linked to educational goals. In this context, there is also a search for a pedagogical methodology in concordance with the processes of educational action at school. Here the dependence on links of the orthodoxy of theological sciences is not so strong. Finally, a third kind or centrality called “ethical-value-centered”, emerging now in Europe –and in an environment that we could synthesize as post-Christian and with a presence of many different cultures, religions, values, etc.– where it could be more interesting, rather than talking about identity belonging, to set out some pre-denominational values or even the search for the ethical contribution from every denomination.

The same author shows that, beyond the internal dynamism of every model, in these paradigms there are at least five factors that cause the accent or the final stance. Indeed, the concept of *religion* is not always the same; neither is the legitimization and role of school religious education; the diversity of agencies or institutions with authority to decide on this topic; the difference in methodological approaches when developing the religious culture (into religion / about religion / from religion); the debate on the agent responsible for religious literacy...

The name given to the religion class itself according to the big five linguistic areas in Europe<sup>2</sup> is incredibly significant to show the necessary specific arrangement of the training curriculum for religion teachers. Thus, we can find the following names:

- *Enseñanza Religiosa Escolar - ERE* (Spanish area of influence).
- *Religionsunterricht* (German area) with the variations: *Bibelunterricht*, *Ethikunterricht* o *Konfessionell-kooperativer*.
- *Religious Education* (English area) with the variations: *Multifaith/Interfaith*, *Christian Education*, *Religious Instruction*.
- *Enseignement du fait religieux* (French area) with the variation: *Enseignement religieux*.
- *Insegnamento della religione cattolica* (Italian area) with the variation: *Insegnamenti della religione*.

<sup>2</sup> F. Pajer also carries out an interesting updated review on the European reality in the section “Miniléxico Europeo Comparado” [Compared European Miniglossary], which has been monthly published in the journal *Religión y escuela* since January 2008.

If reality is so rich and complex, we can obviously deduce the existence of preferential training models corresponding to or following the rationale of every paradigm. We can deduce them a priori as existing processes or *a posteriori*, that is, expecting the initial training that is most coherent with the paradigm happening in every geographic area or education system. In other words, the diversity of paradigms in the comprehension and development of school religious education necessarily involves a diversity of training approaches. And if the former evolves, so does the latter.

### 1.3. AND THE DEMANDS OF STUDYING THE RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON AS WELL

On the other hand, in the context of Europe, the generic assumption about a possible incorporation of studying the religious phenomenon and religions and their consequences into the training process of religion teachers should take into account the important recommendations developed by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. That is, Resolution 885 (1987) on the Jewish contribution to European culture; Recommendation 1162 (1991) on the Contribution of the Islamic civilization; Resolution 1464 (2005) on Women and religion in Europe; Resolution 1510 (2006) on Freedom of expression and respect for religious beliefs; Resolution 1605 (2008) and Recommendation 1831 (2008) on European Muslim communities; Resolution 1743 (2010) and Recommendation 1927 (2010) on Islam, Islamism, and Islamophobia in Europe; Recommendation 1957 (2011) on Violence against Christians in the Middle East; etc. Nevertheless, in our case, the two fundamental documents are Recommendation 1720 (2005) on Education and religion and also Recommendation 1804 (2007) on State, religion, secularity, and human rights. Of special significance and interest is the first one, which among other statements declares:

6. Education is essential for combating ignorance, stereotypes and misunderstanding of religions. Governments should also do more to guarantee freedom of conscience and of religious expression, to foster education on religions, to encourage dialogue with and between religions and to promote the cultural and social expression of religions.

7. School is a major component of education, of forming a critical spirit in future citizens and therefore of intercultural dialogue. It lays the founda-

tions for tolerant behavior, founded on respect for the dignity of each human being. By teaching children, the history and philosophy of the main religions with restraint and objectivity and with respect for the values of the European Convention on Human Rights, it will effectively combat fanaticism. Understanding the history of political conflicts in the name of religion is essential.

8. Knowledge of religions is an integral part of knowledge of the history of mankind and civilizations. It is altogether distinct from belief in a specific religion and its observance. Even countries where one religion predominates should teach about the origins of all religions rather than favor a single one or encourage proselytizing.

9. In Europe, there are various concurrent situations. Education systems generally – and especially the state schools in so-called secular countries – are not devoting enough resources to teaching about religions, or – particularly in countries where there is a state religion and in denominational schools – are focusing on only one religion. Some countries have prohibited the carrying or wearing of religious symbols in schools. These provisions have been judged as complying with the European Convention on Human Rights.

And particularly this same Recommendation 1720 (2005), section 14, suggests for Education Ministers and officers some proposals that, although not necessarily being confrontational with the approach of a denominational model, decidedly support a different model that we could call “history of religions” and that would necessarily imply new initial training environments.

In Catalonia, the Directorate-General for Religious Affairs, through its Religious Diversity Advisory Board, has collected many of these initiatives and has issued new recommendations and guidance for the educational setting. Particularly, the ideas presented in the document *Religious Diversity in Open Societies. Criteria of Discernment* (2013) are very significant:

6.1. Educational institutions are a medium through which different groups interact. They have a critical role in molding tomorrow’s society, and we regard them as an essential factor in harmonious coexistence between the various religious and spiritual traditions. We thus recommend that they:

1. Report comprehensively on levels of understanding where current religious diversity is concerned.
2. Actively work to do away with negative prejudices and stereotypes.



3. Adapt to diversity, recognizing equal rights; identify religious traditions' shared values; and highlight religions' contribution to the development of democratic societies.
4. Combat the symbolic and religious illiteracy that hinders people's understanding of cultural works.
5. Promote a cooperation and dialogue-based approach to organizing centers so as to prevent or resolve interreligious and intercultural conflicts.
6. Foster diversity among students so that they come to regard it as the norm.

Outside the European scope, the paradigm of “history of religion”, also frequently called “religious culture”, has increased its influence by the experience of the “Ethics and Religious Culture Program” developed for Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (2005) in Quebec.

#### 1.4. IMPACT OF INTERRELIGIOUS AND ECUMENICAL DIALOG

Finally, we have to acknowledge that the significance of education on the interreligious and ecumenical dialog in society and at school has contributed new pedagogical considerations (Closa, 2010). But this does not necessarily mean that these perspectives or accents can only be developed from the option of “religious culture”. Indeed, specialized literature itself insists on a dialog from a particular religious identity or experience open towards others (Aveline, 2010; Caffin & De Sant-Amand, 2000; Meloni & Piñero, 2008). We consider that, in an education system located in a context of religious plurality but with a firm vocation to welcome everyone, of building citizenship, and providing every individual with elements for personal growth, there has to be a model that integrates different supplementary ways of getting to know religion.

Also in the context of Catalonia, and in the perspective of a reflection on the future of society, the Directorate-General for Religious Affairs, through its Religious Diversity Advisory Board, has published the document *El lloc de les tradicions religioses i espirituals en el país que volem. Directrius* (2016) [The place of religious and spiritual traditions in the country that we want. Directives], where the right of parents to educate their children according to their ethical and religious convictions is recognized (Ibarz, 2005), and the education in religious culture is guaranteed for all citizens, as well as the recognition of the right to spiritual attention in the different types of centers.

## 1.5. WHAT BASIC TRAINING SCENARIO?

The second variable or aspect that significantly conditions the training itinerary is the basic *ethos* and *kairos*, from which the initial training for religion teachers is formulated, connected and developed. This means firstly some training as an educator and therefore a social and cultural scenario and a determination of secular sciences as well, which involves a specialization in parallel or later; or a specialization from the very beginning, which could even be conducted from a college of ecclesiastic or theological sciences.

Why is this issue of connection so important? We could claim that the closer to the priority of education, the greater awareness of the school, child development, didactics and methods, interdisciplinary approaches, integration, and inclusion, etc. But this statement has to be considered in the proper way due to a corrective factor that has emerged from the pedagogical interest of the paradigm closer to the denominational and its updating aspect. Thus, this is not an insurmountable gap or an impassable border. Many research works and experiences from the pedagogy and didactics of denominational religious education have collaborated and still collaborate not only for a continuous and deep pedagogical renovation in the field of school religious education, but also, in a context of globalization and easy exchange, they help to establish links and to produce new experiences in all the models. Among others, we can observe the pedagogical renovation of some research models in Germany, following the large article by Amas (2008), largely based on Sajak (2007). These models mainly derive from the research tradition in the Pedagogy of religion in this country – for instance, Freiburg’s Institut für Religions Pädagogik<sup>3</sup> in the Catholic case and the Comenius-Institut<sup>4</sup> for the Evangelical tradition. Next, we will briefly mention four experiences. Firstly, the Guidelines developed by German bishops, who asked for the elaboration of *Religious Literacy* from the current concept of competences in order to propose the consequent levels for Baccalaureate (2004), for Compulsory Secondary Education (2004), and for Primary Education (2006). In another geographical scope and a bit later (2011), as a result of many developments of the traditional programs in Religion and Education, Harvard

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.irp-freiburg.de/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.comenius.de/english/thematic\\_issues/religious-education.php](https://www.comenius.de/english/thematic_issues/religious-education.php)

University's Religious Literacy Project<sup>5</sup> was launched that issued a description of competences or Religious Literacy<sup>6</sup> in the context of that institution. It is also worth mentioning the proposal of educational standards for school Catholic religious education in the general framework of the Baden-Württemberg Land, which has elaborated and incorporated some educational standards for religion that encompass all kinds of schools and denominations arranged into seven dimensions: 1 – Being a person and becoming a person; 2 – World and responsibility; 3 – Hermeneutics: Bible and Tradition; 4 – The question about God; 5 – Jesus, the Christ; 6 – Church, Churches, and the action of God's Spirit; 7 – Religions and worldviews. Humboldt University's interdisciplinary project has taken as central the idea that the generations to come have to learn how to relate with religion as a social and cultural fact, although this fact obviously encompasses totally individual issues. Thus, there are two types of competence: competence of interpretation and competence of participation. Finally, a model of competences for religious education by the Comenius-Institut's group of experts, who propose a threefold basic framework: (a) religious education has to make it possible to understand the existence of religion as a real phenomenon that takes place in four environments: subjective –personal–, objective –particular tradition–, other traditions, and worldviews, as cultural and social efficiency – religion is made known in art, music, literature, etc.; (b) The reciprocal openness of religion and pupils through religious communication with five dimensions: perceptive, cognitive, performative, interactive, and participative; (c) a competence-based model with some specifications that can account for the achievement of such competences.

In conclusion, the diversity of horizons and comprehension models under the generic name “religion class” and, at the same time, the closeness, convergence, and similarity happening in different contexts (university and research centers, many curricular projects, the competence-based model, humanistic education, etc.) make it necessary for any training itinerary for religion teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be arranged guaranteeing an efficient response, faithful to the local and current model, but also contemplating the possible variations deriving from the “different autonomies”, whether administrative, territorial, ecclesial or concerning the

<sup>5</sup> <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/home>

<sup>6</sup> <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/our-approach/what-is-religious-literacy>

educational center. Likewise, it has to be set up with great interaction between contributions from general pedagogical sciences and from pedagogy and didactics of religion.

#### 1.6. FOUNDATIONS FOR AN EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK TO GUIDE RELIGION TEACHER TRAINING

Probably the most significant and relevant document at the European level, considering the profile of co-directors, participants and experts (a total of 35) as well as the institutions involved, is the one titled *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, developed by the ODIHR advisory council of experts on freedom of religion or belief.

Certainly, their perspective is that of the public school – of remarkable interest for our context – but it should not end up being a single or final vision. It is a document that was urged for the need to give response to cultural and religious diversity, to pluralism and to dialog from the respect of Human Rights. In Chapter 4, the document tackles teacher education (OSCE, 2007, pp. 52-62). In the first two sections of this chapter, a series of very interesting criteria and recommendations are presented that set up a context:

- Need for permanent improvement in teacher training programs (a responsibility of administrations, universities, educational centers, and the teachers themselves). In this sense, initial and continuous training is essential for the teaching of religions and beliefs.  
A firm commitment to educational innovation that also includes innovation in the teaching of religions and beliefs.
- Awareness of the different cultural expressions in their national and local cultures and in migrant communities. Recognition that ethnocentric attitudes and stereotypes can damage individuals and communities.
- Need to promote cultural exchange processes among communities. Different studies show that many teachers feel that they are lacking preparation to face the cultural and religious diversity in their classrooms.
- If the religious communities are responsible for this initial training, they should be encouraged to collaborate with other communities of believers, thus promoting interreligious dialog.

- The teaching of religions and beliefs has to encompass a fundamental respect for democratic principles and respect for human rights.
- Teacher education programs for the teaching of religions and beliefs have to be comprehensive and well-supported.

In the same document (OSCE, 2007, pp. 58-59), there is a list of competences that both present and future religion teachers should be able to do:

With the curriculum framework in mind from the previous chapter, present and future teachers should ideally:

- Be capable of teaching about religions and beliefs within a human rights and critical thinking framework. Critical thinking implies that students can be critical of each other's views and opinions, yet respectful of each student's right to adhere to a belief system of his or her choice;
- Have a good command of the relevant subject matter;
- Have pedagogical insight into how to communicate with students and how to motivate them to learn;
- Gain insight into how to make learning about religions and beliefs interesting and relevant for students;
- Gain insight into the most effective ways of teaching about this content in a manner that is respectful and inclusive, as well as combating negative stereotypes of religions and beliefs and their adherents;
- Understand the impact of religions and beliefs on society (both past and present) and culture;
- Be aware of and sensitive to the religious diversity in the communities in which they teach, and be able to connect this to global trends;
- Gain insight into the role of religions and beliefs in people's lives;
- Receive training in the psychology of learning, developmental psychology, and how this relates to pedagogy, especially empathetic pedagogy;
- Know how to create a safe learning environment where all students feel respected and comfortable expressing their opinions and beliefs, and where critical thinking does not lead to personal criticism of certain students due to their religious or non-religious beliefs or opinions;
- Have insight into age-appropriate content and pedagogies;
- Be aware of examples of best practice in teaching about religions and beliefs;
- Gain expertise in a variety of teaching methodologies; and learn how to address any tensions that might arise in the classroom due to the content matter or the activities engaged in by the class;

- Have developed skills to lead students in discussion and debate, and to present multiple perspectives on issues in a fair and balanced way; and
- Gain the analytical and technical skills to research religious diversity material on the Internet, and identify appropriate, high-quality exercises and texts for their classes.

Finally, as an answer to the question ‘Who should teach about religions and beliefs?’, the document contributes some new elements: expertise (professional competence), commitment to human rights and particularly to freedom, and empathetic education.

Many OSCE participating States already have restrictions in place relating to who can teach about religions and beliefs. It is important that governments carefully examine these restrictions and assess the extent to which they are fair and conform to current accepted human rights standards.

An individual’s personal religious (or non-religious) beliefs cannot be sufficient reason to exclude that person from teaching about religions and beliefs. The most important considerations in this regard relate to professional expertise, as well as to basic attitudes towards or commitment to human rights in general and freedom of religion or belief in particular, rather than religious affiliation or conviction. An understanding of empathetic education principles will also make teachers more effective when teaching about various religions and belief systems, since empathetic education attempts to arrive at a deeper understanding of others’ experiences and beliefs. (OSCE, 2007, p. 59).

For our consideration, there are two suggestive ideas – professional expertise and empathetic education – which are very important for probably being the most inclusive ones, as they necessarily include –from an attitudinal and holistic perspective– all the aforementioned educational ideals and particularly a deep closeness with other people’s experiences and beliefs. These expressions coined in the Toledo document are very close to the Blanquerna training model, as we will see next.

### 1.7. AND ALL OF THIS IN A PLURAL, EVOLUTIONARY SCENARIO, WITH GLOCAL PROFESSIONAL PROJECTION. SHOULD WE INCORPORATE SOME NEW BASIC AND TRANSVERSAL COMPETENCES AD HOC?

If we place the core of the curricular process and its horizon –as it should obviously be– on the learner and their future, rather than on structures conditioned by the immediate school curriculum, by the particular configuration of the university institution, competences, and real possibilities of its teachers, etc., there are three recent phenomena to be taken into account. Indeed, as mentioned before, there is a pluralism of models, the glocal professional projection and the evolution of the different models to understand the “religion class”. Special reference is required to the meaning of the expression glocal (Berlund, Shanneik, & Bocking, 2016), which involves some common tendencies from the global reality that were shown in the previous analysis. In particular, we point at: the importance of knowledge and respect for the religious phenomenon, religions and their cultural heritage; the progressive value of spiritual reality in the person’s life; capacity for dialog and listening; construction of the personal identity; perception of the ethical demand and moral behavior deriving from a certain worldview option; critical attitude in front of phenomena of fundamentalism and religious violence; capacity for specific didactics of religion. This requires the initial training of religion teachers in any university in the world to incorporate a capacity and fundamental hermeneutics to make it possible to quickly understand, adapt, and develop different models from those in initial training. We could talk about some ad hoc basic and transversal competences for every religion teacher that consider the possible professional locations deriving from globalization and the constant evolution and redefining of the different models and legal frameworks. Alternatively, a global model that approaches and/or guarantees the main capacities.

## 2. CATHOLIC RELIGION TEACHER TRAINING AT BLANQUERNA

### 2.1. THE MAIN ITINERARIES OR MODELS OF INITIAL TRAINING FOR CATHOLIC RELIGION TEACHERS IN SPAIN

The initial training for Catholic religion teachers in Spain and in the framework of the European Higher Education Area is regulated by dif-



ferent directives issued by the Spanish Episcopal conference, such as the one dated on 29 February 2012,<sup>7</sup> and also by some regulations described in their official website.<sup>8</sup> The implementation of such regulations, obviously, is not completely homogeneous, and in the university system there are different situations and itineraries (Jarabo & Navarro, 2016) that could be summarized into four major training models or types:

- (1) *The a-posteriori model.* The DECA<sup>9</sup> is achieved after having finished the degree course in Early Childhood Education or in Primary Education. This involves a not small number of candidates that, due to different reasons, did not take the corresponding credits during their degree course. Once they are already working as teachers, and in order to meet some need in their center, consolidate their job position, or get more education and/or curriculum, they take this itinerary. The advantage is that they already have the general training and some professional experience, as well. The drawback could be the difficulty of incorporating it into the rest of their training and the educational paradigm that the in-service teacher has already incorporated.
- (2) *The optional model (total or partial itinerary).* It is usually a segregated, partial, and optional model, which is basically what the public university offers. The students that take this option are a few, usually very certain about their vocation a priori, but with huge difficulties to explore a true faith-culture dialog in their studies. In many public colleges, they do not even complete all the credits needed to obtain the DECA, which implies that candidates have to go to Higher Institutes of Religious Sciences in order to complete them.
- (3) *The specialization, mention and/or private certificate model promoted by some Catholic universities.* This option requires a prior profile of significant conviction, represents a minority, and has a positive impact on the quality of training, but it is exclusively set up in a denominational context. Usually choosing this

<sup>7</sup> New degrees and requirements to obtain the Ecclesiastic Declaration of Academic Competence (DECA in Spanish) in accordance with Royal Decree 1619/2011.

<sup>8</sup> <https://conferenciaepiscopal.es/comisiones/educacion-y-cultura/>

<sup>9</sup> DECA: Ecclesiastic Declaration of Academic Competence. This diploma allows holders to teach religion in Early Childhood Education and in Primary Education.



option makes it impossible to follow other itineraries or specializations.

- (4) *The integrate model, of dialog and growth at the heart of the teacher training experience.* Without being exclusive, this is the model adopted by Blanquerna-Ramon Lull University, which involves an integrate concept of dialog (Gallifa, 2018b) at the core of the training process of teacher training students.

## 2.2. THE GENERAL SCENARIO OF RAMON LLULL UNIVERSITY AND THE BLANQUERNA ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL FOR RELIGION TEACHER TRAINING

Blanquerna<sup>10</sup> is a diocesan institution from Barcelona, co-founder of Ramon Llull University,<sup>11</sup> created on 1st March 1990, currently consisting of eleven higher education and research institutions with long tradition and great prestige in Catalonia. This university is characterized by its federal structure, the Christian inspiration of its project and values, person-focused quality training, and international vocation. This institution currently involves a community of more than 6,500 students (graduate and postgraduate courses). Since 1948, Blanquerna has developed a significant task concerning teacher training in Catalonia (Riera, 1998). Undoubtedly, the most consolidated degree courses are those connected to the training of prospective teachers, that is, the degrees in Early Childhood Education and Primary Education. An important number of students<sup>12</sup> takes the itinerary to obtain the Ecclesiastical Declaration of Academic Competence (DECA) that will give them access to working as Catholic religion teachers. Thus, this is the framework of a Christian-inspired university and the particular context of the training itinerary for religion teachers.

The DECA curriculum in Blanquerna-URL –following the integrate model– has an important structural characteristic that makes it particularly peculiar: the official content to obtain the DECA is rearranged in

<sup>10</sup> Founded in 1948, <http://www.blanquerna.edu>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.url.edu>

<sup>12</sup> Every academic year, the DECA itinerary is taken by at least 65% and at most 80% of students in the degree courses in Early Childhood Education and Primary Education, according to data corresponding to the last twelve years.

subjects from the four academic years, with the first two of them being obligatory and the other two being optional. The obligatory part develops the anthropological, phenomenological, and cultural foundations for the religious phenomenon in general and Christianity in particular. Thus, whether students continue in the DECA itinerary or not, this is a guarantee that every Education student has some basic and fundamental knowledge on religion and Christianity. The optional subjects develop the competences and content linked to theological knowledge and didactics of religion at school. In total, this itinerary represents 28 ECTS credits. This methodology is designed to make students capable for reflective (Perrenoud, 2010; Schön, 1987, 1991), integrating, and innovative practice of Catholic religion teaching at school.

The curricular structure is as follows:

- *Person, Culture, Religion, and Values*. Compulsory subject, 1<sup>st</sup> year (6 ECTS credits).  
Content about philosophical anthropology, phenomenology of religion, and ethics.
- *Christianity and Culture*. Compulsory subject, 2<sup>nd</sup> year (6 ECTS credits).  
Content about Abrahamic religions, the Bible, Jesus of Nazareth, and Christianity and history.
- *Theology and Didactics of Catholic Religion 1*. Optional subject, 3<sup>rd</sup> year (6 ECTS credits).  
Content about Religion and school, the Bible, Christology, Ecclesiology, and Fundamental Theory.
- *Theology and Didactics of Catholic Religion 2*. Optional subject, 4<sup>th</sup> year (6 ECTS credits).  
Content about Pedagogy and Didactics of Catholic religion.
- *Ethical Profile*. Compulsory subject, 4<sup>th</sup> year, included in the *Practicum* (4 ECTS credits).  
A reflection on the ethical dimension and ethical commitment, as well as about professional responsibility.

This model was designed on the occasion of the Bologna Plan. This means that the educational experience has lasted now for more than ten academic years. Moreover, the general option in the Spanish university system of four-year degree courses has allowed us to incorporate and develop the current structure of this itinerary.

### 2.3. ESSENTIAL DIMENSIONS OF THE TRAINING MODEL IMPLEMENTED AT BLANQUERNA THAT ALSO HAVE IMPACT ON THE DECA ITINERARY

A complementary element to the uniqueness of this organizational model is the Blanquerna training model in general (Gallifa, 2018a; Riera, 1998) and for religion teachers in particular, as it develops a set of characteristics that makes it original. In the previous section, we mentioned one of them, the *structure*, but this is just one of them. Another one is the fact of presenting an itinerary focused firstly on “*being*” a teacher, rather than focusing on being a “specialist” or “specialization”. The *methodology* and *good didactic practice* represent a third fundamental element.

The principles of *personalized education* that the Blanquerna method applies throughout all our courses and curricula require to develop an *integrate education* of the person. The theoretical background for this educational approach was developed particularly by Garcia Hoz (1967). The pedagogue Mariàngels Riera, in her book *Las raíces de Blanquerna* (1998, p. 123), remembers how this author already pointed at the fundamental guidelines of personalized education based on the constituent elements included in the “concept of person”: *uniqueness*, *autonomy*, and *openness* (Garcia Hoz, 1967, p. 14).

The Blanquerna university training model, particularly apparent in the education of early childhood and primary education teachers, has taken on this commitment for the integral education of prospective teachers since its origins in the *Escuela de Magisterio del Sagrado Corazón* (1948). The point was not so much to provide students with skills and pedagogical resources, but to shape them in a specific concept of *person*, of a clearly Christian nature, which would allow us to cultivate an anthropological vocation based on preserving human dignity, freedom and autonomy, as well as an integrating and dialoguing capacity to help us build human fraternity (Freire, 1993).

In summary, this integrating model implies a constant dialog and growth at the heart of the teacher training experience. This is why we can talk about some dimensions that transversally shape this Blanquerna model and are clearly apparent in the training of future religion teachers too. These dimensions describe the essential of this “being a person” and can be summarized as follows:

- (a) *Holistic and vocational dimension*, an educationally-developed integrating process.

Indeed, this first dimension refers to the centrality of the human person and its identity<sup>13</sup> as the fundamental aspect of training. Its vision is complex (Morin, 2001) and plural, its perspective is global (Berlund, Shanneik, & Bocking, 2016). However, the training process follows the logics of progressive configuration: the call to be a person; the vocation as educator; the profession of religion teacher. This is a process of progressive consolidation of these three inseparable realities that are linked to the construction of one's own identity as a cohesive and particular element, and that progressively shape a wider and better vision of totality.

- (b) *Revealing –arousing– and exploratory dimension*.

Usually, Education degree students arrive with interests very focused on knowledge of children, classroom methodologies, or the reality of schools. The training process of all these prospective teachers, and therefore also of religion teachers, proposes a substantially different initial perspective: And you, who are you? That is, the itinerary has an anthropological and self-reflective beginning that implies some exploration and discovery of human reality and the person, of the question for sense, the elements of personal and cultural identity, spirituality, the peculiar aspect of the religious and the specificity of faith, as well as the rationality of faith. In summary, students are first immersed into an unexpected or unimagined itinerary that leads them to a succession of revelations and meetings. In this field, the pedagogy of the question (Freire, 2018) is key. Working on the question means to be loyal to what man is, that is, looking at man from his nature and entirety. According to Sesboüé (2000, p. 8): “*An answer that does not correspond to any question is not an answer, it is just a vain purpose.*”

<sup>13</sup> From the following authors: Torralba (1997); Ferry (1997); Habermas (1989); Dubar (2001, 2002, 2007), promoter of the relational perspective on the professional identity; Morin (2001); Knowles (2004), who shows how the teaching identity is closely linked to the personal biography; Bauman (2005); Day (2006), professor at the University of Nottingham who has studied in depth the topic of teacher identity; Bolívar (2006, 2007), main scholar of the construction of teacher identity in the Spanish context.

(c) *Dialogical, relational, and intersubjective dimension.*

Dialog (Flecha, 1997; Freire, 2002) is the fundamental element. The point is, firstly, to exercise dialog with oneself in order to foster dialog in the classroom as dynamics for the construction of identity and knowledge. Dialog, also, with different sets of knowledge. And at the same time this dialog is taken outside the classroom via the contact with the exterior world, by promoting the personal meeting with professionals or people of reference linked to the activities of the year and also through the virtual relationship with significant entities and organizations. This dimension consequently involves a systematic reflection about dialog and its different connotations concerning the school and religion: intercultural, interreligious, and ecumenical dialog. In summary, every subject's experience of growth has the meeting with others as the fundamental reference, and different subjects "summoned" and "moved" by common interests.

(d) *Content-systematization and organic dimension.*

Frequently, it is the students themselves who become aware of the extent implied by the knowledge about the religious fact and specific content concerning Catholic theology and its pedagogy. In front of this extension and possible dispersion, the training process is based on three options: (a) guaranteeing the basic knowledge that appears in the school curriculum; (b) developing some good knowledge on the biblical narrative; and (c) giving them the capacity for cognitive arrangement (organization) in order to be able to locate and relate the big questions of every topic both in the present and in the future. This capacity for arrangement is fundamental both to manage the wide amount of information and knowledge and for the necessary continuous training.

(e) *Experiential dimension.*

This training process tends to enhance a reflection on anthropological, educational, ethical, spiritual, or religious experiences. To do this, some initial learning is recommended through narratives about characters of reference. The link between this itinerary and the seminar<sup>14</sup> –class with 12-15 students throughout the entire

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<sup>14</sup> The Seminar is a distinctive feature of the Blanquerna method. These are small groups, of 12 to 15 students, who under the supervision of a tutor put acquired knowledge into practice, reproduce situations from the professional world, reflect, work in

degree course-, writing an educational autobiography, the practicum, as well as some specific activities that include a critical vision on reality and the personal attitudes are fundamental elements that promote the shift from living to experiencing (Dewey, 1938, 1944; Perrenoud, 1999; Van Manen, 1991, 2002, 2016).

(f) *Utopian dimension.*

The analytical praxis through the different subjects does not erase the past but highlights the vision of the present and the future from a perspective that integrates and values positive aspects and opportunities. From this, a progressive utopian vision<sup>15</sup> (of education, the school, the profession, etc.) springs that encourages personal and institutional commitment and involvement. Only through this utopian perspective (Gadotti & Torres, 2001, p. 62) can transformations have horizons.

Therefore, the Blanquerna university training model is apparent in the training model for religion teachers and has the following values or assets:

- *Deeply rooted in the humanities subjects* that are part of the students' compulsory curriculum.
- *Open.* DECA is offered to all the students as an itinerary that has previously worked on elements of cultural heritage but needs some theoretical and didactical supplement of elements deriving from the denominationalism of the subject.
- Respectful of the entire religious scope and, particularly, *sensitive to religious diversity*, becoming a source of questions and personal interpellation, and also an opportunity to get introduced into the knowledge of the Christian tradition.
- *Frontier-like*, or "Galilee model",<sup>16</sup> addressed at students with different personal stances, integrated in the context of the general curriculum, linked to the dynamics of the working seminar.

teams, etc. These classes are taught throughout all the degree years, and in the Faculty, they represent a workload of four hours a week.

<sup>15</sup> *Irrenunciabls utópicos en educación. Propuestas e interrogantes* [Utopian inalienables in education. Proposals and questions]. (1989). Cuadernos de Cristianismo y Justicia, 28 by Jesús Renau is an interesting contribution in this respect.

<sup>16</sup> A term known among Catholic religion teachers that refers to the multicultural context of Galilee in the first century, where Judaism and paganism coexisted.

- *Dialog-based*, with the aim of promoting respectful dialog between the diverse content of faith and cultural reality. This factor is important because this dialog places the religion subject at the core of the education system, which potentially prevents the fact that, once they start to work professionally, the introduction to dialog begins or is simply left to improvisation.
- With *founded pedagogical conviction*, prior to the specific professional conviction (religion teacher) or of faith. In the framework of Education degree courses, the priority of the Blanquerna model is to train *good teachers* in both senses, who ask themselves about their professional conviction as religion teachers and about their own faith. Therefore, teaching the religious fact and teaching religion at school from a denominational perspective is mainly justified from educational and pedagogical categories and later with another type of argument.
- Very innovative didactic proposal that, at the end of their studies, encourages students to feel as enthusiastic for the potential of religion teaching as for that of other subjects or even more, so that their learning through the didactics of religion can often help them to incorporate this teaching-learning experience into other school scenarios.
- It promotes the sense of the teaching activity in the framework of professional and existential sense, looking for the progressive integration of experiences (understood as reflection about experience from knowledge) in order to shape their own life project.
- In summary, it includes the fundamental notes from the document *Orientaciones Pastorales sobre la enseñanza religiosa escolar* [Pastoral guidelines on school religious teaching] by the Episcopal Commission of Teaching and Catechesis (1979), thus becoming a cultural, denominational, school subject open to all student profiles. It also includes contributions from more recent documents such as *Educating to Intercultural Dialog in Catholic Schools* by the Congregation for Catholic Education (2013).

#### 2.4. CONDUCTED RESEARCH, IN PROCESS, AND PENDING ASPECTS OF THIS MODEL

The empathy with the Blanquerna model (Gallifa, 2018a; Riera, 1998) shown by experts, teachers and students themselves has resulted in a progressive motivation, apparent in different reflection and research



projects. Indeed, the authors of this paper, supervised by research experts from the same faculty, have carried out three main analyses, two of them already finished and presented, and a third one about to be published.

A first paper consisted in a first approach (Ibarz, Cols, Jarabo & Navarro, 2015) about the students' perception of their experienced process. It is based on field research carried out for three academic years from surveys answered by Early Childhood Education and Primary Education degree students in the DECA itinerary. The main aim –besides the field research– was to present some first conclusions about training experiences in higher education in communication settings.

A second paper (Cols & Ibarz, 2017) gives a leading role to students, as they have to give testimony of their initial training process through their narratives. The sample and selection of testimonies is not more than fifty but contributes a very significant qualitative perspective about what the fact of learning to be Catholic religion teachers has implied for these university students.

A third project<sup>17</sup> –almost finished and about to be published– consists in the analysis of the answers from the first field research with the priority aim of presenting conclusions from different perspectives that enrich and light shed on different environments: university-curricular, pedagogical-training, professional-school, ecclesial, etc.

There are other possibilities –the three about to be explored and developed– that are also on the horizon and that may be the object of research projects in the future. We refer, firstly, to a comparative paper together with the universities that share with us the Campus of International Excellence (CIE, regional level), that is, Deusto University and University of Comillas, about the answers to those questionnaires concerning the students' training experience. A second possibility could be to study the vision, attitude, and stance of teachers from other areas of knowledge concerning the training model and the religious phenomenon in general. Finally, a third exploration might collect an evaluation of situations and assessments about the professional experience in the scenario of the religion class and about the consideration of the same training model as experienced some years before by alumni who are now education professionals and have been working as religion teachers for at least three years.

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<sup>17</sup> Article that will deal with the field research carried out for three academic years with Blanquerna-Ramon Llull University students who were preparing to get the DECA to be Catholic religion teachers.



### 3. CONCLUSIONS

As a conclusion, we firstly want to highlight the importance of offering some good training to prospective Catholic religion teachers, both for the mission and role that they will have as such in schools in the future, and to point at the uniqueness of a training itinerary for prospective teachers from a professional and vocational perspective when they have just started to live and feel the commitment and responsibility of the educating task. The integral education in its 21<sup>st</sup>-century connotation, excellent preparation as teachers, and self-awareness of the learning process, are key to face a future with many changes and transformations.

Secondly, we can conclude that the Blanquerna model has not elaborated some hypothetical basic and transversal competences ad hoc so far, which give specific response to the demands of a plural, glocal, and evolutionary scenario. Instead, this model, from its global nature and characteristics, seems well oriented to meet these demands. At least it seems to be hugely sensitive to common tendencies.

Thirdly, there is evidence that teacher training corresponding to a particular model, to an initial training approach in accordance with the pedagogical paradigm of our geographical area, is valued again. The model called *Blanquerna* is an integrated model, of dialog, of growth at the heart of the training experience in teacher training studies. This approach has some peculiarities such as the structure, the educational nature used, and the method and good practice proposed. These characteristic elements allow us to develop dimensions transversally, which entail a series of values that guarantee that, throughout their training process, student progress, live a testimony of teaching skills, and through a coherent itinerary or path live some experiences that help them build and think through their religious identity and as teachers, and therefore they can express it openly. That is, students receive a good personal and professional preparation.

Fourthly, we can also conclude that students receive some appropriate knowledge that belongs to content from the cultural environment and to content from the theological, phenomenological, anthropological, and pedagogical-didactic area; they are provided with the appropriate atmosphere to develop a process through which students can be nurtured and can grow personally and professionally. In summary, there is the need to offer them proposals with sense presented from an attitude of listening and knowledge of these students, who voluntarily want to achieve the

academic competence to be Catholic religion teachers. Students need their time to take in the content and think about it didactically; particularly, those students with whom there is a vital gap. Comprehension may lead to confidence and modify the concept that in-training teachers have about their future work or task. This implies a great resulting capacity to assume and give response to situations differentiated by territory, legislation, or the local model. This capacity to integrate and be professionally integrated into other models (not necessarily) different from those of origin has a close relation with the process developed and their self-awareness, which in most cases involves a deep modification of schemes and initial expectations. This learning and this awareness, together with sound training, are key to give response to new scenarios.

Finally, we have to highlight the recommendations issued by different European and non-EU organizations, as they propose that religious training has to be present in school educational projects, that is, the presentation of the religious fact should not be missing in schools as the fact that shapes identities and reveals the spiritual education. In this sense, we can see how the model of religious teaching in the denominational school is legitimate and is –and has to continue being– in constant pedagogical and didactical renovation. And with the consequent demand for some training of excellence for Catholic religion teachers and perhaps teachers with qualified training to give response to other comprehensions about the sense and the curriculum of religion at schools.

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