

## **RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS: A TOOL TO COMBAT INTOLERANCE**

***Antonio Rodrigues Sobrinho Filho<sup>1</sup>***

### **ABSTRACT**

This work originated from discussions regarding Religious Education in schools, aiming to understand the relationship between this discipline in school education and the fight against religious intolerance. The theoretical framework included authors who discuss this topic and guiding documents of Religious Education. Based on the discipline within the BNCC (National Common Core Curriculum), the study presented Religious Education as a tool to combat religious intolerance. Despite being an optional subject, it generates discussions and conflicts regarding the teaching method, often incorrect, of the discipline within the school context. In a secular state, the obligation of institutions to provide such a discipline may be considered a necessity by some and an absurdity by others.

**Keywords:** Religious Education, curriculum, BNCC (National Common Core Curriculum), religious intolerance.

### **INTRODUCTION**

A quality and pluralistic education is guaranteed by the Federal Constitution and also by the Law of Guidelines and Bases (LDB), as stated in Article 206 of the Constitution, sections I, III, and VII, BRAZIL (1998):

Article 206. Education shall be provided based on the following principles: I - Equality of conditions for access and permanence in school; (...) III - Pluralism of ideas and pedagogical approaches, and coexistence of public and private educational institutions; (...) VII - Guarantee of quality standards. (BRAZIL, 1998).

In order to achieve this, the construction of a curriculum or National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC) was necessary. The formulation of this document involves numerous challenges, as the BNCC must ensure a pluralistic education that caters to all individuals without distinction. To address the specificities of education, the document was divided into fields of

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<sup>1</sup> Mestre em Teologia, Especialista em Saúde Pública e Coletiva, Psicopedagogo Clínico e Institucional, Pedagogo, [antoniopedagogoufcg@gmail.com](mailto:antoniopedagogoufcg@gmail.com)

experiences (early childhood education) or knowledge areas, and each age group and discipline (curricular component) was organized according to the competencies and skills that should be acquired and developed in the teaching and learning process.

Based on 10 general competencies, the curriculum is divided into fields of experiences or disciplines, according to age groups, and specific competencies. Among the disciplines included and formulated in the BNCC, there is the subject of Religious Education (RE). This subject has undergone changes throughout history, as it has been the target of both criticism and support. Some consider it an essential discipline in the formation of an individual, while others see it as a means of oppressing and manipulating individuals during their development.

The subject of Religious Education is currently included in the curriculum; however, it is not a mandatory discipline for students. This fact has led to the focus of this work: whether this discipline could be a means of manipulation, conversion, and alienation of students. What is the boundary between the curriculum and respect for the individual? Is a religious discipline possible in a secular state? Can this discipline serve as a tool to combat religious intolerance?

The national constitution, the National Education Plan (PNE), the Law of Guidelines and Bases (LDB), and the National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC) establish a pluralistic education within the discipline of Religious Education. However, there are factors that tend to hinder this process. According to Santos (2015, p.09), "We believe that Religious Education, in theory, is not influenced by any specific religion in its curriculum model, but unfortunately, that is not what happens in the reality of schools." Often, religious education classes are considered dispensable or "inferior" by the school's teaching staff. As a result, these classes are seen as a "step" to be taken when necessary for other subjects. Another significant factor that hampers the progress of the discipline is the lack of preparation by the teacher

or the attempt by the professional to impose their personal beliefs during classes, deviating from the curriculum. In many cases, this leads to the classes becoming a platform for conversion to a particular religion or ideology, "where we usually have a teacher who is not qualified to teach Religious Education, either due to their religious affiliation notably influenced by the institution they work for or due to a lack of training in the field of Religious Studies" (Santos, 2015, p.09).

We can see that points of disagreement regarding the discipline generally revolve around the lack of preparation and teaching methodology in Religious Education classes. In other words, while the curriculum and guidelines establish a pluralistic education, there needs to be care and preparation on the part of the school in the content and lessons offered to students. Even in denominational institutions, the BNCC envisages a pluralistic education, and therefore the institution should seek ways to present diversity without compromising its principles. Furthermore, the discipline should not be mandatory, oppressive, or a means of conversion for individuals.

However, the discipline does foster discussions about different cultures and beliefs, which can be a valuable tool for quality education and a means of reducing religious intolerance. By providing students with the opportunity to learn about the characteristics of various religions without stereotypes, prejudices, and assumptions, which often fuel intolerance, fear of the unknown, and ignorance. According to Rocha and Oliveira (2018), it is impossible to deny the significance of studying the religious phenomenon for understanding the world as a whole, with its contradictions and flows. Difficulties in dealing with religious differences are also part of this context.

In this sense, if applied correctly, the discipline of Religious Education can serve as a bridge to address the doubts that many people have about certain beliefs. It is important to emphasize that such clarification should not be limited to a particular religious group. On the contrary, by addressing

different beliefs and doctrines in an academic manner, education can and should be pluralistic and liberating. It can free individuals from prejudice and ignorance, which are the root causes of intolerance and discrimination.

## **METODOLOGY**

For this research, a method of literature review was employed. Data collection was conducted through scientific articles available in online databases such as the "Scientific Electronic Library Online" (SciELO) and the "Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel" (Capes), as well as relevant books on the topic at hand.

As inclusion criteria for this research, articles found in the aforementioned databases were included on the topics of Religious Education, intolerance, and curriculum, within the period from 2014 to 2021. The following descriptors were used: Religious Education; curriculum and BNCC; religious intolerance and curriculum. Additionally, supplementary materials such as articles and books on Religious Education, newspaper texts, and articles on religious intolerance were included. The criteria for selecting the articles focused on those that addressed the implementation of the Religious Education discipline, curriculum reformulation for the BNCC, and its application within the school environment. Monographs, articles that did not reference the theme of this research, articles in foreign languages, and articles published before 2014 were excluded. Additionally, articles with incomplete or unavailable texts for full access were also excluded.

Upon analyzing the literature, 80 (eighty) bibliographic references were pre-selected specifically between the years 2014 and 2021. As an evaluation criterion, only 11 (eleven) articles remained in the research. In addition to the base articles, official documents provided by the Ministry of Education (MEC) on the National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC) were included, along with supporting materials. All sources were properly referenced at the end of the work.

## **RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE BNCC (NATIONAL COMMON CORE CURRICULUM)**

The BNCC is a normative document developed to define the organic and progressive set of essential knowledge. It was created to ensure the right to learning and development in accordance with the National Education Plan (PNE). "The presidential sanction of the National Education Plan (Law No. 13,005, June 25, 2014) marked the beginning of the race to develop the BNCC" (CUNHA, 2016, p. 06). It serves as a reference for curriculum development, pedagogical and political projects, and teaching methods in the classroom.

The document aims to integrate education into a single path across the entire national territory, seeking to align public educational policies and other parameters for both public and private schools. "The BNCC integrates the national policy for Basic Education and will contribute to the alignment of other policies and actions" (BRASIL, 2018, p. 08), establishing the 10 general competencies of basic education that are interrelated. It seeks to shape individuals by affirming values and stimulating actions that contribute to a just, pluralistic society that preserves nature.

The 10 general competencies are:

1. Knowledge: Understanding and using physical, social, and digital knowledge to build a just society that values learning and knowledge.
2. Critical thinking: Encouraging critical and scientific thinking as well as curiosity for questioning and formulating problem solutions.
3. Cultural repertoire: Valuing, participating in, and producing various cultural expressions, both local and global.
4. Communication: Using different languages to communicate, express, and create meanings that lead to mutual understanding.

5. Digital culture: Understanding, using, and creating technologies critically and ethically to communicate, produce information, and generate knowledge.
6. Work and life project: Understanding the world of work based on experiences and knowledge, making choices aligned with one's life project, citizenship with freedom, autonomy, and responsibility.
7. Argumentation: Arguing, discussing, negotiating, and defending ideas based on facts, data, and reliable information while respecting human rights, socio-environmental awareness, responsible consumption, and ethics.
8. Self-awareness and self-care: Knowing oneself, understanding oneself in human diversity with its particularities and similarities, appreciating oneself, and understanding one's own emotions and the emotions of others with criticality and emotional intelligence, i.e., being able to manage them.
9. Empathy and cooperation: Practicing empathy, cooperation, asserting oneself, and respecting others through dialogue and conflict resolution with respect for rights, diversity, and without any prejudice.
10. Responsibility and citizenship: Acting and making decisions for personal and collective good, with ethical and democratic principles, inclusivity, sustainability, and solidarity.

Based on the general competencies, each discipline or field of experience, according to the age group, is broken down in the BNCC, organized into competencies and skills that should be acquired in each discipline. The discipline of Religious Education, present in the BNCC, encompasses religions, their symbols, rituals, etc., within thematic units, which are the gathering of content sets on the same theme within the unit. Among the thematic units, we have "Identities and Otherness" for students to value, recognize, and embrace the particularity and diversity of the human being,

"through the identification and respect for similarities and differences between the self (subjectivity) and others (otherness), the understanding of symbols and meanings, and the relationship between immanence and transcendence" (BRASIL, 2018, p. 440).

An example is "(EF02ER02) Identify customs, beliefs, and diverse ways of living in various living environments," in which EF (Elementary School), 02 (corresponding age group or grade level, 2nd grade), ER (curricular component, Religious Education), 02 (sequential skill order). In this code, the objectives and skills to be acquired by students are to recognize customs, beliefs, etc., within their circle of coexistence or community. The thematic unit promotes discussion and the search for answers about the individual, from the perspective of the sacred, within each belief and religion, approached comprehensively in the curriculum, "In the search for answers, human beings conferred a sacred value to objects, things, people, forces of nature, or supernatural beings, transcending concrete reality" (BRASIL, 2018, p. 440).

"Religious manifestations," through symbols, languages, myths, and rituals, the unit examines the diverse expressions, their characteristics, rituals, spaces, customs, festivals, ceremonies, and traditions. It aims to provide knowledge, appreciation, and respect for various religious manifestations, their leadership, and their presence within society. An example of a present skill is the code "(EF03ER01) Identify and respect the different spaces and religious territories of different religious traditions and movements." During the teaching and learning process, individuals should become acquainted with and identify religious movements, their territories, and traditions, respecting and understanding each of them. By promoting such experiences, the curriculum reaffirms knowledge and respect for all beliefs.

"Religious Beliefs and Philosophies of Life," in this thematic unit, the foundational aspects of different religious traditions/movements and philosophies of life are addressed. According to Brazil (2018, p. 441), in this



unit, individuals are prompted to question their existence, knowledge, beliefs, religious doctrines, traditions, principles, and ethical values with the aim of promoting a healthy discussion about life, existence, and transcendent questions. The emphasis is primarily on myths, as stated, "Myths are another foundational element of religious traditions. They represent an attempt to explain how and why life, nature, and the cosmos were created" (Brazil, 2018, p. 441). The term "myth" can be understood in a derogatory manner; however, it refers to beliefs, both mythological and religious, among others. By emphasizing myths, the curriculum provides an approach that encompasses various philosophical perspectives and different faiths.

The curriculum aims to present religious beliefs and philosophically discuss their implications for individual life, addressing the intrinsic questions of human existence according to each belief. Additionally, it recognizes the historical preservation of society, as it is largely influenced and permeated by religions. Major groups and cultures are founded on various religions, making the study of religions an exploration of the individual as well. However, this has not always been the case. The history of the discipline is marked by oppressive and proselytizing ideologies that dominated its application for years, which has become a strong argument for critics of the subject.

## **RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

On January 7, 1890, Decree 119-A, which described the definitive separation between the State and the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil, was enacted to theoretically cut the ties that mixed state and religion, mainly due to acts of indoctrination committed at the time when only a single religious path was imposed for teaching in schools. "The State was prohibited from issuing legal provisions establishing or vetoing any religion and creating differential treatment among citizens based on beliefs, philosophical or religious adherence" (CECCHETTI and DOS SANTOS, 2016, p.05).

However, remnants of a not-so-distant past still echo in present times, where we still have, on both sides, a crossfire regarding the inclusion of the



discipline in the curriculum, and students are affected by teachers who prefer to preach personal beliefs instead of teaching about how the constitution grants us religious freedom in a country that was stained with the blood of people who didn't have the choice to choose their faith in the past. On the other extreme, there are attempts to preach an ideology that hinders the debate, knowledge, and understanding of numerous religious manifestations, their traditions, and beliefs. According to OLLIVEIRA (2020, cited in DICKIE, 2003):

According to Dickie (2003), the presence of RE in public schools represents an attempt by religions to regain some influence in the public sphere by legitimizing their authority over everyday life and culture, which are perceived as fragmented by individualism and a lack of values (OLIVEIRA, cited in DICKIE, 2020, p. 09).

The author considers RE as a means of manipulating individuals, with some attempting to assert authority in education. In contrast, PÊCEGO (2014) presents the discipline as a necessary tool for generating and fostering critical and ethical thinking. "Definitely, religious education is not synonymous with catechesis, proselytism, or the abstract teaching of Ethics or History of Philosophy, as interfaith or ecumenical religious education advocates would desire" (PÊCEGO, 2014, p. 16). He emphasizes that the RE stipulated by law is pluralistic and respects the diversities and rights of each individual, even if some try to use RE to perpetuate their own beliefs. The constitution itself reaffirms the right of every citizen.

The scope of the RE discipline is to promote religious freedom, to teach students about the great diversity that exists in Brazil and the world, without limiting it to personal beliefs or ideologies that go against the constitution. It aims to teach respect through diversity and respect through differences. However, what causes misunderstandings when it comes to "teaching about religions"? Is it the lack of qualified teachers? The lack of guidance and greater care regarding who will teach this discipline? It is the school's duty to ensure that this subject is not taught, in a public institution, by an evangelical pastor, a priest, or another religious leader. Interaction with the community is

necessary, but these leaders can be invited at certain moments in the teaching process. However, the teaching itself must be delivered by a qualified teacher who understands and respects the different established beliefs in Brazil and the world. The professional may have personal convictions as long as they do not interfere with the teaching. To prevent errors related to RE from occurring again, the priority should be to teach, above all, to respect religious pluralism in Brazil, thus becoming a strong advocate against religious intolerance.

### RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

A crime defined by law since 1997, religious intolerance is still very prevalent, even in a country as diverse as Brazil. In newspapers, magazines, social media, and other means of interaction and communication, one can come across numerous cases of religious intolerance. Various branches of religions are targeted with stereotypes, prejudices, and often attacks. The numbers are significantly increasing every day, according to records from Disque 100, a hotline created in 2011 for reporting human rights violations. There was a significant increase in the numbers in 2019 compared to the previous year.

## Denúncias de intolerância religiosa no Brasil

*Dados do 1º semestre (janeiro a junho) de cada ano.*

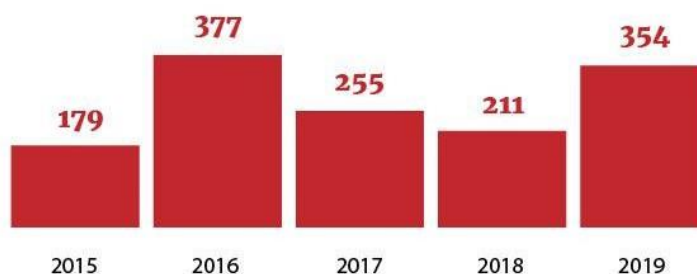


Figure 1: Chart of the balance of 'Disque 100' from 2015 to 2019

Source: Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights.

Throughout history, the cases of intolerance have been on the rise, which fuels misunderstandings, discrimination, and sometimes even death,

both within the country and worldwide. The data presented above represents only a fraction of the reality, as many situations are not even accounted for. Given this scenario, the purpose of this study is to consider Religious Education as a tool to curb such practices that exist in various social contexts, including within the school environment, in order to bring about societal change.

Human beings tend to fear, segregate, and discriminate against the unknown, as stated by psychologist-psychoanalyst Simone Engbrecht, "Intolerance originates from the sensation of threat that the other represents to me. This is culturally constructed and has been growing instead of diminishing. It is a symptom of the insecurity that people experience on a daily basis" (SILVA, Gabriela and BETINA, Kelly, 2016). Therefore, debate and clarification can be a significant step towards breaking prejudices about religious movements, their customs, and traditions.

In this sense, Religious Education (RE) has the role of fostering dialogue that can lead to positive changes. "Therefore, thinking about the BNCC for RE means thinking about strategies to overcome proselytizing practices present in the school context" (SANTOS, 2015, p. 11-12). Teaching based on the BNCC and its objectives can allow individuals to reflect on the unknown, their personal questions, and others, with their similarities and differences. Understanding religious manifestations and their characteristics can provide individuals with an education that respects diversity and promotes pluralism.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Religious Education is often taken to extremes, with religious leaders using the discipline to gain followers on one side, and others excluding religion from the curriculum in order to promote their own ideologies and propose the discontinuation of religious education. These arguments are justified based on past and unfortunately current misapplications of the discipline.

However, as stated above, Religious Education can be a means to combat religious intolerance, proselytism, and discrimination. The discipline should be implemented based on the curriculum, National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC), and the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB).

The epistemological and curricular achievements of Religious Education as a field of knowledge will be even more significant with investment in research and the publication of materials that provide theoretical and methodological contributions for both professionals in training and those already in practice. (SANTOS, Taciana, 2019, p.16)

To achieve this, studies and research focused on the subject are necessary. Only through study and research will it be possible to ensure adequate Religious Education free from proselytism and prejudice. "According to contemporary guidelines, discussions involving the holistic development of individuals, addressing issues of tolerance, respect for diversity, and otherness, should permeate the curriculum" (DE OLIVEIRA, 2020, p.15). This paves the way and prepares the path for young people to live in a future where the bloodshed due to intolerance and prejudice is only a bitter memory of a past with more weapons and fewer books, a past that will not be repeated.

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