



Towards a reform of religious teaching in the Chilean school system

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Religion
Religious education
Public education
Chile

ABSTRACT

This essay proposes to change the current manner by which religion is taught within the Chilean school system. Currently, all schools are legally compelled to offer a particular religious teaching in a confessional fashion, although exemptions are offered on an individual basis; whilst state-owned or private secular schools must choose a religion from a list of alternatives (usually Catholicism), private faith schools only teach about the religious belief that defines their educational project. As it stands, this scheme generates problems of exclusivism (students only learn about one faith), confessionalism (they are directed to believe in said faith), and religious illiteracy (in cases where they are allowed to opt-out from the religion class). After characterising religious learning as an educational good for anthropological, cultural, existential, and civic reasons, we propose a move towards a scheme of universal (all faiths), mandatory (no exemptions), and non-confessional (non-directive) religious teaching for state schooling (UMNC). Finally, we propose extending UMNC to faith schools, for reasons related to the epistemic and axiological place of the religion class within the curriculum, and a shift from concerns about parental rights to a child-centred approach.

1. Introduction

The place of religion on the school curriculum remains a controversial issue in political theory and philosophy of education (Aldridge, 2015; Biesta et al., 2019; Clayton and Stevens, 2018; Enstedt, 2020; Freathy, 2015). Against the background of this literature, this theoretical essay proposes a substantive reform to how religious teaching has been carried out in the Chilean school system. As most reflection and research on this issue focuses on the US and UK, we are thus contributing to an unpopulated field.³ Among the questions we aim to address in the context of an allegedly secular state such as Chile are whether religious education -in the form of teaching about religious doctrine, tradition, rite, etcetera- should be part of the compulsory school curriculum, taught in a non-directive way or instead confessional by nature, and whether publicly-funded state schools should be treated differently to privately funded faith schools in this respect. We suggest that a specific mode of religious education -that is, a universal, mandatory, and

non-confessional teaching- is normatively advisable in the Chilean case, to the extent that it can be described as an educational good for all students regardless of their parents' faith, as well as contextually pertinent, given the ongoing process of cultural secularisation and growing religious pluralism. This represents an important innovation with respect to the current model of religion in the Chilean classroom.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 1 offers an overview of the Chilean school system and its current model of religion (henceforth referred to as Religion in the Classroom in Chile, thus RCC), before identifying its main normative problems: exclusivism, confessionalism, religious illiteracy. Additionally, this section provides some clues to understand the changing religious landscape in Chile. Section 2 delves into four arguments -the cultural, the anthropological, the existential, and the civic- that help us to think about religious learning as an educational good for all. From this, Section 3 proposes that we move towards a model of universal, mandatory, and non-confessional teaching of religion (henceforth, UMNC) that replaces RCC. As this proposal

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³ Among salient exceptions in the study of religion in the classroom and subsequent proposals for reform, the Latin American Interreligious Network of Education for Peace (RILEP) and the Group of Multidisciplinary Studies on Religion and Public Advocacy (GEMRIP) have jointly published a working document GEMRIP & RILEP. (2018) that explores the possibility of interreligious education in Chilean public schooling. In turn, Moya and Vargas (2017) analyse the experience of religious education in Belgium, Italy, Spain, and England to draw some lessons for the Chilean case.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2023.102791>

Received 2 October 2022; Received in revised form 14 April 2023; Accepted 28 April 2023

Available online 2 May 2023

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might generate certain resistance if extended beyond state schools, [Section 4](#) is dedicated to flesh out two main arguments to include faith schools into UMNC, thus satisfying the topic of this special issue.

2. Religion in the classroom in Chile (RCC)

The Chilean school system is comprised of three broad categories: (i) state-owned schools that are run decentrally by municipal departments of education or Local Educational Services, for which parents do not pay; (ii) privately-run but state-subsidised schools, which may or may not be faith-based depending on their management; (iii) fully private schools that receive no state funding, meaning that families must pay the entire tuition, and which may or may not be faith-based as well. To bear some figures in mind, (i) roughly represent 36% of the national school enrolment, (ii) amounts to 55%, and (iii) comprises just 9% of students.⁴ We assume that (i) are officially secular in nature, as they belong to the state. If we take only (ii) and (iii) together -that is, privately-run schools- it appears that roughly 32% of the national school enrolment attend faith schools, while 28% go to non-confessional schools.⁵

Regardless of these categories, all schools must submit to mandatory curricular guidelines. In the case of RCC, this is regulated by decree N°924, dated 1984 ([Chile, 1983](#)). In broad strokes, it establishes that every school in the country *must offer* a religion course of two hours per week at all levels. Of course, this is not an issue for faith-based schools, which typically offer a religion course corresponding to their denomination. The interesting case is how this curricular instruction is applied to schools that are not faith-based.

Decree N°924 establishes that schools *without* a faith-based educational project must equally offer students a variety of alternatives for a religion module, if they have both suitable teaching personnel and the Ministry of Education approval for such programs. In other words, these schools are compelled to teach religion, but rarely offer a variety of options. As is often the case, school directors make the discretionary call about what religion they will teach, based on their own beliefs or the community's majoritarian beliefs, and/or available teaching resources. According to a study focused on state-owned schools, more than 50% of schools surveyed offer only one option, and only a small portion provides two alternatives ([PUCV, 2017](#): 162).

Regarding the variety of options available, there is a sizable list of religious denominations whose programs are officially approved (Adventist, Anglican, Bahai, Baptist, Catholic, Jewish, Lutheran, Methodist, Orthodox, Pentecostal, and Presbyterian). Nonetheless, most schools just teach a recently adapted version of the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, which goes by the acronym EREC ("*Enseñanza de la Religión Católica*" [CECH, 2020](#)), mostly for historic and pragmatic reasons (such as the availability of teachers). There are only a few schools that choose to teach about other religious beliefs instead of Catholicism, such as the Christian protestant faiths. According to the same study, 55% of state schools declare that they use the Catholic program, almost 17% of schools offer both Catholic and Evangelical classes, and only 2.8% teach just about the Evangelical faith ([PUCV, 2017](#): 148–149). However, Decree N°924 also establishes that students can be exempted from the religious classroom by explicit parental request. In practice, they rarely opt out, possibly because the

bureaucratic formalities are not known by families, because students face peer pressure to remain in the classroom, or because public schools lack infrastructural alternatives to spend such time productively (such as libraries).⁶ To outline the sort of Catholic teaching offered, the most recent version of EREC has a pedagogical emphasis as embedded in the school curricular architecture. It is noted in the literature that "the EREC 2020, like any study program, is not an end in itself" ([Cerdea et al., 2022](#): 131), that is, it is specifically devised to service the general purposes of the Chilean school system. Although this syllabus briefly mentions the importance of interculturality in a pluralistic society, there is no reference to the existence of other religions.

The weaknesses of RCC are apparent. To begin with, as Decree N° 942 was issued by the conservative military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1973 to 1990, it lacks political legitimacy. There was no open, transparent, and democratic discussion. There was no parliamentary debate. Beyond this political feature, we identify three problematic points at the normative level:

- (i) Exclusivism: under Decree N°924, and regardless of the type of school, Chilean students learn about only one religious' tradition, excluding the rest.
- (ii) Confessionalism: students are taught that this religious tradition is true, as most catechetical education works, which may trigger the charge of indoctrination.
- (iii) Religious illiteracy: children whose parents decide that they should be exempted from the religious classroom, will probably remain religious illiterates.

These normative weaknesses are aggravated by contextual elements. The religious landscape of Chile has changed significantly in the last decades. From a mono-religious society, with Catholicism as the historically hegemonic faith, the country has progressively shifted to a more pluralistic religious environment. As [Inglehart \(2020\)](#) reports, Chile has experienced the greatest decline in religiosity in the world during the period 2007–2019, coming second only to the United States. According to a recognised regional public opinion survey, the portion of the Chilean population that declares itself atheist, agnostic or without religion has grown steadily from 7% in 1995 to 35% in 2017, while the percentage of Catholics has decreased from 74% to 45% in the same period ([Latinobarómetro, 2018](#)). Other local surveys show that the Catholic population decreased from 70% in 2006 to 45% in 2019, while nonbelievers have grown from 12% to 32%, and Evangelicals have increased slightly from 14% to 18% in the same period ([Encuesta Nacional Bicentenario UC, 2019](#)). Another reports that Catholics have declined in number from 73% in 1998 to 55% in 2018, while evangelicals have grown from 14% to 16%, and those who consider themselves non-religious have increased considerably from 7% to 24% ([CEP, 2019](#)). The numbers are consistent: traditional Church-based belief has receded. We refer to Church-based belief since a general and non-denominational "belief in God" remains high, though it has steadily descended from 93% in 2007 to 70% in 2021 ([Encuesta Nacional Bicentenario UC, 2021](#)). Considering these data, it is fair to speculate about an ongoing process of cultural secularisation, leastwise an identifiable trend. Borrowing from Charles Taylor's (2007) characterisation of the secular age, we are approaching a point in which religious belief and religious non-belief are increasingly equiprobable alternatives. Indeed, it has been suggested that Chilean non-believers are not only swelling in numbers, but improving in social status ([Bellolio, 2021](#):

⁴ Centro de Estudios MINEDUC (2021)

⁵ Elaboration of data by the authors from the database of the Ministry of Education 2022 <https://datosabiertos.mineduc.cl/directorio-de-establecimientos-educacionales/>

⁶ [PUCV: 166 \(2017\)](#) also points to these kinds of problems, but we lack more systematic and updated empirical research in this area, especially regarding the numbers and social impacts of the exemption from religion class. For a series of testimonials on this matter, see [Bellolio : 278, 279 \(2014\)](#). See also [Strhan and Shillitoe \(2022\)](#) for a study of the problems experienced by non-religious children in confessional religion education.

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Taking these changes into account -a society that progressively ceases to be hegemonically Catholic whilst becoming more pluralistic and culturally secular- RCC seems increasingly untenable. In 2005, civil society organisations campaigned for the abolition of Decree N°924 after a widely publicised case in which a state-owned school forced a 7-year-old child to remain in the religious classroom despite being exempt. His mother sought judicial and mediatic support, while the educational authorities admonished the school (Baeza, 2015). The Chilean Liberal Party has since claimed that the episode builds a strong case for reforming the RCC, spreading across social media statements such as “For a secular education, let’s abolish decree N°924”, “If Chile is a secular state, then why are religious classes mandatory?”, and “End mandatory religious education”, among others.⁷

This paper does not propose to put an end to all religious education as such, but shares the idea that RCC should be substantively reformed, both for normative and contextual reasons. Prior to articulating our own proposal, in the next section we enumerate three reasons to understand a non-confessional religious module as an educational good to all students.

3. The religion class as educational good

What do we mean by an educational good? Borrowing from [Brig-house et al. \(2016\)](#), we broadly understand “the set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions that students develop both for their own benefit and that of others. These goods are varied including cognitive abilities, the ability to collaborate with others, the appreciation of beauty, among many others”. In sum, an educational good advances both individual and societal aims. Let us now explore the contributions that can be provided by a curricular formation in religious themes to children.

3.1. The anthropological argument

The religious phenomenon is rooted in the human condition. To deprive students of the opportunity to learn about this phenomenon is to deprive them of a relevant source of understanding related to their own condition. Students do not need to assent to the theological claims of any religious tradition to grasp the relevance of their fundamental insights. This argument reverts to Benjamin Constant’s claim about the relationship between religious feelings and the human condition, a relationship that is not accidental but constitutive of the human experience in the world. Human beings are, in this view, religious animals ([Van der Leeuw, 2017](#)). The rites, stories, and symbols that usually spring from religious feelings reveal the ancestral longing for a richer, deeper, longer life. This feeling of longing does not oppose the notion of rationality, to the extent that we interpret rationality in a broader sense as including intuitions, reflexivity, and wonder ([De Monticelli, 2013, 2018](#); [Sedakova, 2009](#)). It invites us to *know* about the world by engaging with it, not moving away from it. In this sense, it is not scientific rationality, which is another valuable dimension of the same human capacity, but does not exhaust it. The religious kind of rationality we describe is amazed and takes care of the reality it finds.

Beyond this anthropological reading of religious sentiment, in recent decades there has been an explosion of scientific research over the evolutionary origins of religion, which reinforces anthropological insight ([Atran, 2004](#); [Boone and Corbally, 2018](#); [Boyer, 2001](#); [Johnson, 2016](#); [Szocik, 2017](#); [Wilson, 2002](#)). Summarising some of this investigation, the philosopher of science Barbara Forrest has concluded that religious beliefs are far from irrational, but “are products of evolved intelligence, reflecting a natural, imaginative curiosity about what lies beyond the horizon of experience and an ability to envision alternative

possibilities” ([2013](#): 278). In the same vein, the theologian Alister McGrath argues that “there is now a growing consensus that religion is best understood as a natural phenomenon, a cognitively natural human activity which arises through -not in spite of- natural ways of thinking” ([2015](#): 124). Therefore, not all efforts to understand and dissect religiosity under a scientific light need to be interpreted as intellectualistic blows against religion.

In sum, if education is a process that aims to comprehend and develop the multiple dimensions of the human condition, as is indeed established in the Chilean law⁸, then the religious class is aligned with this objective. Knowing about religion is knowing about ourselves, about the fundamentals of our worldly experience, about the pillars of our ancestral life as *Homo sapiens*. But it is not only about the past; it gives us the tools to understand contemporary problems and future challenges, ranging from collective anxieties and tribal cognition to how new technologies are redefining the meaning of life and death. Again, these seem to be indispensable educational skills in a changeable world.

3.2. The cultural argument

Religious literacy also offers valuable knowledge about the cultural contribution of religious traditions. Besides their core metaphysical and theological claims, people from different worldviews can conclude that our material and nonmaterial world has been enriched by the artistic, patrimonial, historical, architectural, musical, and literary footprint, among others, of religion. Arguably, these cultural contributions provide a deeper understanding of the world inhabited by the students. While these contributions are usually thought of as great universal treasures such as the Sistine Chapel, the Last Supper, Notre Dame, Mecca, the Holy Sepulchre, the Wailing Wall, Angkor Wat, Handel’s Messiah, Gregorian chanting, etcetera, they can also be imagined at a more local level. Latin America has the Day of the Dead, the Popol Vuh, the Amazon Voodoo, the catacombs of Lima, the Christ the Redeemer statue, and Liberation Theology, among many others. Specifically in Chile, there is the story of the so-called Cristo del Elqui, the celebration of the We Tripantu (akin to the Mapuche New Year), the La Tirana carnival, popular festivities such as Cuasimodo, Selk’nam mythology, etcetera. Without formal teaching, most students remain ignorant about the meaning and significance of these rites. Furthermore, the Chilean Palace of Government (commonly known as *La Moneda*) annually hosts the most relevant religious ceremonies, including Christmas, Hanukkah, and Ramadan ([Bellolio, 2019](#)).

Beyond the artistic and patrimonial contributions, religion and history are intertwined in several passages of the past. To learn about world history frequently entails learning about the history of religion. The same goes for politics: some political processes cannot be appraised without understanding the role of religious institutions and beliefs. A non-confessional religion module should address both the beneficent and morally questionable interventions of organised and non-organised religion: from the Crusades to the Spanish Inquisition, from the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* to religious wars and faith-based terrorism, from the Church’s defence of indigenous groups in America to religious inspiration for emancipatory causes linked to Gandhi and Martin Luther King, from Quaker pacifism to Catholic social teaching and its latest environmental stand to “care for our common home” (Pope Francis 2015), from anti-Semitism to islamophobia in the contemporary world, etcetera.

⁸ The General Education Law, dated 2009 ([Chile, 2009](#)) proposes that “Education is the process of permanent learning that covers the different stages of people’s lives and whose purpose is to achieve their spiritual, ethical, moral, affective, intellectual, artistic and physical development, through the transmission and cultivation of values, knowledge and skills”. We consider that the religious classroom represents an opportunity (among others) to address the spiritual dimension.

⁷ Translation is ours.

It could be argued that a religion class of this sort, even if non-confessional, is futile for non-religious students to the extent that they do not need to know about religion as such. But this is surely a mistake, as religious phenomenon has shaped the reality that we all, religious and nonreligious people, inhabit. In fact, the idea of religious literacy has even been promoted by some figures of so-called New Atheism. As Daniel Dennett (2006) asserts, we should teach children about world religions, respecting facts and history, in the same way we teach them about geography or arithmetic. In Dennett's view, we need more, not less, education about religion in schools. In turn, Richard Dawkins (2006) claims that exposing children to different religious perspectives will allow them to see their incompatibilities, from which they will draw their own conclusions. In less menacing terms, exposure to diversity will temper their potential fundamentalist zeal. Another atheist, the political theorist Matthew Kramer (2015), has long argued that analysing religious texts such as the Bible enhances our understanding of philosophy. Finally, the philosopher Alain de Botton (2012) has made a compelling argument for atheists and non-believers to learn from religion, specifically about the importance of marking important milestones in our lives -such as naming a new-born or getting married- with rites and ceremonies. And so on.

3.3. The existential argument

While anthropological and cultural arguments point to how the religious phenomenon has been incarnated in our ancestral lifestyles and the material world, there is still another dimension of religion that makes it an educational good for all: the existential. By existential we mean the sense of mystery and alterity experienced by human beings, the ultimate questions that haunt our species: where we come from, where we are going, who is the other? Of course, philosophy and science can help us to think about possible answers to these questions, but religion has a somewhat deeper engagement with such questions that do not desperately require an answer but can be entertained as pure questions. In this sense, religion in the context of education is an exercise in "questioning and questioning, first and foremost, what it means to live with a religious orientation or live without this orientation, considering religion in existential terms and not only as a set of beliefs, practices, or objectified visions of the world" (Hannam and Biesta 2019: 7). Here, we add alterity to mystery since these questions of meaning are pushed by the irruption of the other; in Emmanuel Levinas' sense, an irruption that unsettles our existence, the other as natural beings, the social world, the face of a friend, a lover, a son, God itself.

This approach is linked to the anthropological argument developed above. Van der Leeuw recalls that Constant's exploration of the religious phenomenon "has suspected what is today called the existential in religion" (2014: 546). Religious sentiment becomes the bearer of the restlessness of the human being, a thrill that inhabits him/her, and leads to questioning and reflecting on his/her own existential situation. The religion classroom opens this existential dimension by presenting the ways in which different religions have formulated these great questions of meaning, particularly, *what does it mean to live with (or without) a religious orientation?*

3.4. The civic argument

The abovementioned arguments mostly refer to the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions developed by students for their own benefit: a deeper understanding of the human condition, an overview of the cultural and historical contribution of world religions, a personal exploration of the ultimate questions about the mystery of life. But the religion classroom can be an educational good in societal terms, as it contributes to the formation of citizens who not only *know* about other religious traditions, but also learn to relate and respect them in the context of religious pluralism, even if it is incipient as in the Chilean case. Philosophers of education of a liberal mind have long argued that

instilling civic virtues is a paramount goal. If an education for autonomy is an education for individual self-determination, then civic purposes are linked to the capacity for collective self-determination in a democratic sense. In most accounts, both aims are mutually reinforcing (Arneson and Shapiro, 1996; Barry, 2001; Gutmann, 1995; Macedo, 2000).

Arguably, these civic purposes are well served by exposing children to a diversity of values and beliefs. Not only to temper the zeal that fuels religious and political intolerance, but rather to reflect critically on one's own religious tradition and learn to value it in a comparative perspective. For most civically minded liberals, creating the conditions for mature democratic deliberation and competent citizens are non-negotiable aims of public education. We will return to this point towards the end when we justify the extension of our proposal to faith-based schools, in the name of the civic contribution of UMNC.

In sum, we have presented four arguments to declare religious schooling and literacy as an educational good for all students, both in individual and societal terms. Let us now turn to the description of our proposal to reform RCC.

4. Our proposal: a universal, mandatory, and non-confessional teaching of religion

Given the three elements that we have identified as normatively problematic in RCC (its exclusivism, confessionalism and, for some children, religious illiteracy), the current context of the Chilean religious landscape (growing pluralism and a trend of cultural secularisation), and the characterisation of the religious course as an educational good for at least four reasons (anthropological, cultural, existential, and civic), we propose to move towards a universal, mandatory, and non-confessional teaching of religion (UMNC).

The arguments for a universal and mandatory teaching of religion have been implicitly provided: universality entails that a diversity of religious traditions and worldviews should be taught (thus overcoming RCC's exclusivism), while mandatory means that there should be no exceptions to this teaching (thus overcoming the danger of religious illiteracy). In a way, RCC's exclusivism already entails a kind of religious illiteracy, but only a *partial* one: Chilean students learn about one religious tradition, but they remain ignorant about others in a context of growing religious pluralism. Only if parents exempt their children from the religion classroom altogether, this leads to *full* religious illiteracy. We propose that students should learn about a variety of religious outlooks, mostly but not limited to their country, thus enriching their comprehension of the religious phenomena worldwide.

To be sure, the conceptual perimeter of the religious phenomenon is disputed, and it might be impossible to identify a common core.⁹ Nonetheless, as hinted in the existential argument above described, our proposal does not equate or reduce religion to a set of doctrinal beliefs or truth-propositions. As Ronald Dworkin didactically distinguishes in his posthumous book, while theistic religions usually contain a dimension that "offers answers to important factual questions about the birth and history of the universe, the origin of human life, and whether or not people survive their own death", they also include "a variety of convictions about how people should live and what they should value" (2013: 23). Accordingly, Dworkin claims room for "religious atheists", who reject the first part but accept swaths of the second. Indeed, one of the most salient critiques received by New Atheists in their day was precisely that they were working with a "shallow and narrow" conception of religion, since it revolved around "doctrines, propositions about supernatural entities, events, and processes", neglecting the fact that religions are also -and even primarily- "centred in social practices that inform and enrich human lives" (Kitcher, 2011: 1). In other words, religious beliefs are not *assertional* enough: for many, rather than being

⁹ For a list of criticisms of the concept of religion often used by liberal political theory as a category of analysis, see Laborde 2017.

about a set of propositions or truth-claims, faith is about existential commitments (see also [Armstrong, 2009](#); [Eagleton, 2009](#); [Falcioni 2010](#)). Notwithstanding, for curricular purposes, even religious teaching in a UMNC fashion needs some borders, no matter how porous and eventually arbitrary these might turn out to be. Should veganism be taught as a religion? Should Utilitarianism? Should Marxism or Libertarianism? With no operational borders, any secular comprehensive doctrine -to borrow [Rawls's \(2005\)](#) capacious term- might be included, which would make the philosophy classroom idle, for example. So, with no claim to resolve the conceptual question, and at the risk of semantic imprecision, we must draw the curricular line somewhere.

The non-confessional character of the proposal needs further explanation. Here, we roughly follow the distinction between the *directive* and *non-directive* teaching of a subject. According to Michael Hand, this distinction mainly lies in the “willingness of the teacher to endorse one view on a matter as the right one” (2008: 213). While directive teaching entails teaching one matter as the true or right one, non-directive teaching admits the opposition of rational views around that matter. Hand is embracing Robert Dearden’s *epistemic* criterion (1981), which proposes that a matter should be taught non-directively when contrary views can be held on it, without those views conflicting with reason. Although it draws along the same axis, we prefer the confessional/non-confessional distinction, chiefly because it is better suited to the specific subject matter of religion. Hence, confessional teaching implies that the curriculum, school, or teacher endorses the *truth* of a specific religious view, implying that the other religious views cannot be equally *true*. This is the trademark of RCC: once school directors have decided upon which religion will be taught, it will be taught confessionally; that is, presenting that –and only that– religious denomination as *true*. This feature suffices to explain why parents who do not share this religious view might want to exempt their children (thus making the opting-out alternative all too reasonable). On the contrary, we propose a curricular module in which different religious traditions and beliefs are taught non-confessionally; that is, without endorsing that a particular religious view is right to the detriment of others, but facilitating a rational conversation on the issue. If the teaching of religion is non-confessional, the main rationale to request exemptions collapses. The non-confessional character reinforces its mandatory character.

Two clarifications are in place. First, teaching religion in a non-confessional way does not mean endorsing metaphysical scepticism or moral relativism as a substantive position. The curriculum, school, or teacher must leave room for students to believe in the truth of one religious’ view. The fact that the educational system does not endorse one faith does not prevent families from passing their religious convictions onto their children. This can still be done within the school (in the case of faith schools, as we shall see in the final section), or beyond its walls (in the case of secular schools, be they state or privately-run). The crucial point is that UMNC is not in the business of purposefully sowing doubts in youngsters, let alone teaching children to be atheists or *secularists* in the substantive anti-religious sense. On the one hand, religious uncertainties are all too natural at a certain age. On the other, doubts can play a relevant role in the development of critical thinking. Methodological scepticism is welcomed when it serves educational aims. But in neither case, the proposal’s aim is to train structural unbelievers who reason aseptically as from an Archimedean point of view, equally distanced from all religious views. For the same reason, we do not claim

that UMNC represents a neutral teaching of religion, if any subject can be taught neutrally in that sense.¹⁰ Our proposal only contends that non-confessional religious education is possible to the extent that children in the classroom will not be taught that one specific faith or tradition contains the whole and exclusive truth about the cosmos and meaning, doctrine and community, factual propositions and live realities, and so on. There is ample space between teaching that only one faith is true in the classroom and telling children that they are all theologically equal, and thus we should not take a stand on religious issues for the sake of a principled metaphysical impartiality. Exposing students to a plurality of religious traditions has much more to do with encouraging toleration and, hopefully, respect for diversity, as well as providing tools for critical reflection of their own religious inheritances. As such, UMNC can overcome exclusivism and confessionalism to a reasonable extent, without claiming to be neutral in a strong metaphysical or ethical sense.¹¹ In addition, we neither claim a “view from nowhere” when devising the content of UMNC, as if it were fully abstracted from the students’ cultural environment. We have already argued for cultural reasons to teach religion, and some of those reasons speak about religion in Latin-American and, more specifically, Chile (i.e., how indigenous populations engaged with ultimate questions about meaning, the role of the Catholic Church in the Spanish conquest, its recent political participation in the dictatorship, etcetera.). Therefore, beyond the philosophical force of our proposal in favour of teaching religion in a non-confessional manner, UMNC can be epistemically situated enough.

Second, we also acknowledge that there is some debate in the philosophy of education as to whether religion can be taught non-confessionally or if its teaching requires adherence to certain beliefs. It might be useful to distinguish between teaching religion in a confessional or directive way, on the one hand, and plain indoctrination on the other. As we see it, any theologically sophisticated confessional teaching involves the participation of the student who consciously accepts the belief in question. Indoctrination is instead unilateral. Here, the student is a passive recipient of information that he/she must believe. While indoctrination is arguably hard to reconcile with liberal educational aims, the suspicion that religion can simply not be taught in a non-confessional fashion -in other words, that religion and non-confessional is an oxymoron, should be taken seriously. For instance, arguing from the perspective of a Catholic education, [Kennedy \(2021\)](#) argues that bracketing the truth-claims of religion in a curricular option presents a kind of internal contradiction with the subject matter. We reply that UMNC does not discard that certain religious views can be true, but contextualise them within the school as a common space among the diverse. This is the same stand we usually adopt regarding other subjects in the curriculum. Following [Hand \(2017\)](#), we assume that religion does not constitute a fundamentally different form of knowledge, and thus it can be taught non-directively as many discussions on ethics, philosophy or literature are presented. Even in the case of the science classroom, the goal is knowing and understanding what is being taught, but not necessarily believing it (Smith & Siegel 2004). The place to instil belief could be other. As we shall see in the next section to justify the extension of UMNC to faith-based schools, there are other educational sites that play a role in relation to religion: family, churches, movements and associations, books, think tanks, and other cultural spaces that can fulfil this function of confessional teaching.

¹⁰ We do not disagree with the idea that all education is formative in the sense that it departs from a worldview point, a set of philosophical or ethical assumptions, and “if not by dogma, then by suggestion, by implication, by atmosphere”, as Chesterton once put it (quoted in [Haldane, 1990](#)). This is by no means incompatible with non-confessional teaching in the sense described here: expanding the range of knowledge and appreciation about the religious phenomena.

¹¹ For an explicit defence of “epistemic egalitarianism” and “epistemic neutrality” in the religion class, see [Jawoniyi \(2015\)](#).

In the case that the tag “religious education” still carries confessional implications in Chile, we can always turn to David Carr’s proposal to name it “religious literacy” (Carr, 2007). This paper does not settle on the exact denomination that should be assigned to the UMNC module.¹² In principle, “religious literacy” matches our objectives: it is not exclusivist, it is non-confessional and, by definition, avoids the educational peril of religious illiteracy.

5. Extending UMNC to faith-based schools

RCC establishes that all schools must offer a religion class of a confessional nature from a variety of denominations, with the option of exemption. Of course, in the case of faith-based schools, the denomination of the confessional religion class is already defined in the educational project, with no opting-out. We have instead proposed UMNC, that is, the school curriculum should include a non-confessional religion class in which a plurality of religious views are considered, without the chance of exemption. Many people might find our proposal attractive for schools that are not faith-based. After all, if parents are not looking for the inculcation of a particular faith in the first place, it makes sense to provide students with a panoramic picture of the religious landscape, to the extent that such knowledge is an educational asset, and there is little reason to demand exemptions once teaching is not confessional. However, they may object to the extension of UMNC to faith-based schools, whether or not they are subsidised by the state. Such objections will surely be grounded in a conventional reading of parental rights, which include decisions about their children’s education mostly, but not exhaustively, through schooling. With few exceptions (Clayton, 2006; Tillson, 2019), most political theorists and philosophers of education agree that parents can use the educational system to pass on their religious beliefs and values (Fried, 1978; Callan, 1997).¹³ Lastly, some might question the extension of UMNC to private schools that are entirely funded by families. Either way, our proposal faces a key challenge: how can we justify extending UMNC to faith schools, which are especially chosen by parents in the exercise of their educational rights and/or religious freedom? If there is something intrinsically wrong with the confessional teaching of religion, why not abolish faith schools altogether? But wouldn’t this policy be inconsistent with the respect that religious people deserve in a pluralistic society? In this last section, we face this problem head-on, arguing that there are two strong reasons to include faith school students into the UMNC scheme: the curricular argument and the child-centred argument. Let us take these in turn.

5.1. The curricular argument

The main insight of this argument is that the parental right to educate children about their own faith is not exhausted during the curricular hours of the religion class. As briefly mentioned, we take the religion class as any other curricular subject within the humanities. To that extent, it has specific epistemological aims related to the justification of knowledge-claims. On the contrary, a confessional approach pursues belief, or simply faith. In other words, as Hand has pointed out (2014), confessional teaching does meet certain epistemic standards, and therefore it cannot fulfil the same curricular functions as other subjects. The goal of the religion class within the curricular functions is knowledge about religion, not producing a particular religious belief. How we understand the epistemic role of the religion class is compatible with other approaches such as De Monticelli’s *axiological universalism* (2018), and it dialogues with other proposals developed in the field

¹² There is a debate in the literature, mostly in the Anglo-Saxon context, about the “denominational issue”: Religious Education, Religion & Worldviews, Education about Religion, among others (Biesta et al., 2019; Vlieghe, 2019).

¹³ For an objection of this sort, based on parental rights and religious freedom in the Chilean context, see Celis and Zarate (2015).

(Boeve, 2012; Pollefeyt, 2020a, 2020b; Pollefeyt and Richards, 2020).

It is key to consider that under UMNC, parents retain the right to educate their children about their own religious beliefs through a series of other means, both inside and outside the school. Inside the school, the alternatives move from an additional or supplementary religion module of a confessional nature to a set of extracurricular activities that take place on the school premises, in which a specific religious worldview is presented as the right theological path. In the former case, students in faith-based schools might enjoy a dual approach to religion: the universal, mandatory, and non-confessional religion class, on the one hand, and the confessional teaching that corresponds to that faith school, on the other. In the latter case, faith-based schools can arrange a wide variety of pastoral care, spiritual exercises, liturgical rites, community experiences, catechetical conferences, volunteer work, etcetera, in which the specific character of the faith-based educational project is revealed. The school premises and buildings might transmit a faith message through symbols, inscriptions, ornaments, places of worship, etcetera. Finally, faith-based schools can always leave their formative mark on how other subject matter is taught. As previously agreed, all school activity is indeed formative.

Beyond the school walls, parental opportunities to transmit their own religious beliefs to their children are vast - from bedtime stories to congregation assemblies, from daily prayer to teaching by example. To argue that parents are being deprived of their right to pass on their religious values and beliefs to their offspring simply because they cannot define the curricular content of the religion class is untenable. Again, as Hand (2014) has defended, there may be religious education without confessional religious teaching.

5.2. The child-centred argument

If children are taught that all religious traditions are worthy not only of recognition-respect but of appraisal-respect,¹⁴ and that their own religious heritage should be submitted to critical study, eventually leading them to weaken their familial faith, parents may retort that their educational and religious rights are being trumped. Our response is that the children’s right to a set of educational goods, within which we find the kind of religion class described throughout this paper, take precedence. We thus shift from a parental-centred to a child-centred approach. As Brian Barry reminds us, “we must take as axiomatic that the interests of the parents and those of the children are distinguishable and potentially conflicting” (2001: 202). Parental rights are indeed crucial, but fiduciary. As trustees, they are prevented to mind only their interests. When children’s interests are at stake, the polity has a word (Gutmann, 1999). In this case, paraphrasing James Dwyer (1998), the question is what we owe to children as a matter of justice.

A reasonable enough answer is that we owe them an education that fosters their well-being. Surely, religious parents see their faith as a source of well-being. Let us draw upon a Rawlsian strategy (1999): in the same way that parties to the original contract are selecting and allocating “primary goods”, which are supposed to be goods that everybody desires, regardless of any specific life project, we choose educational goods. A typically liberal-egalitarian response would be that rational agents would sign up for an agreement that secures a fair set of educational resources, to the extent that these are fundamental to prepare individuals to be free and equal citizens. Legitimate parental concerns about their children’s curriculum are secondary to any individual expectation of having a set of educational goods as described. The specifics of this basic set of educational goods are contested. They are intended to be useful for individuals to pursue their own life projects in conditions of political equality, what Brighouse and Swift (2014) have dubbed the “egalitarian challenge”: we ought to ensure that political

¹⁴ The distinction between two types of respect (recognition and appraisal) towards religion is introduced by Brian Leiter (2013).

institutions provide equal educational opportunities to children born into different families, for them to develop similar qualifications and competences. If we agree that the religion class as we have described it is an educational good, then it must be offered to all on equal terms.

It is important to bear in mind that basic educational goods may change over time. As Gutmann points, primary goods “reflect a common understanding within a society of what goods rational individuals, ignorant of their particular interests, would want provided for them within that society” (1980: 341). If we are also correct that Chilean society is experiencing a process of cultural secularisation and incipient religious pluralism, future competent citizens require intellectual tools to navigate such a world, which translates into a greater understanding of the new religious landscape, as well as the respect it deserves. From this perspective, our proposal should not be interpreted as an arbitrary limitation of the rights of parents to educate their children, but as the enhancement of those children’s capacities. If we do otherwise, excluding faith-based schools from UMNC, we would be a disservice to those children. With Barry, we think that being able to “understand the world around us and being able to appreciate the finest creations of the human mind and spirit are, quite straightforward, benefits. And they are benefits that parents should not be permitted to withhold from their children” (2001: 221). Likewise, Gutmann rejects what she calls a “State of Families”, namely the institutional arrangement by which parents retain the right “to insulate their children from exposure to ways of life or thinking that conflict with their own” (1999: 29). To Gutmann, the role of political power is to ensure that all children are equipped “with the intellectual skills necessary to evaluate ways of life different from that of their parents” (1999: 30). Finally, most liberal theorists and philosophers of education of a Kantian mind would argue that children’s formative needs are ends in themselves. Hence, it would be wrong to treat them as non-consenting instruments for the furtherance of the ends of either parents or broader society. In sum, both liberal egalitarians and civic liberals have reasons to prefer the child-centred approach in the case at hand: with UMNC, children advance their well-being in terms of equality of opportunity and public awareness.

These two arguments make the case for extending UMNC to faith-based schools. On the one hand, parental rights regarding children’s religious education shift beyond the place of religion as a curricular unit, which has other epistemic purposes than to instil religious belief. On the other, when children’s rights to a certain set of educational goods collide with their parent’s expectations, the former prevails; in this case, the children’s right to the religious class as we have described as an educational good for both personal and societal reasons.

6. Recap

This essay has proposed a change to how religion is currently taught in the Chilean school system (RCC), for both normative and contextual reasons. Nowadays, schools are compelled to offer a religion class of a confessional nature. While faith schools teach exclusively about their own religious denomination, non-faith schools must decide from a set of approved programs the religion they will teach. As an alternative, we have firstly argued that religion as a curricular subject matter is the source of diverse educational gains (anthropological, cultural, existential, civic, among possible others). From this, we have proposed a model (UMNC) in which all students, regardless of school type, can learn about a plurality of religious views in a non-confessional manner and with no opt out possibility. In this way we overcome the problems of exclusivism, confessionalism and the potential religious illiteracy of RCC. Beyond the normative arguments upon which this proposal is based, we have also pointed to the untenability of RCC in the context of an ongoing process of cultural secularisation and growing religious pluralism, as well as the benefits that can follow for society of having generations educated in respecting the beliefs of others. Finally, acknowledging that the application of UMNC in faith-based schools may encounter resistance on the grounds of parental rights and religious freedom, we

respond that rights over children’s religious education are far from exhausted in the curricular module devoted to religion, which has certain epistemological responsibilities that rival the introduction of a certain faith. We add that if the religion class as described in the paper is regarded as an educational good that furthers the well-being of children and future citizens, it would be unfair to deprive faith school students from it.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests in relation to the development of the research for this essay.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

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