


Religious Education and the Development of Individual Subjectivity from the Perspective of Neo-Thomistic Philosophy of Education

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EN Abstract. The development of subjectivity in maturing individuals is one of the primary goals of modern education, with religious education representing a significant dimension of this process. The current analysis aims to problematise the relationship between religious education and the development of individual subjectivity. This analysis is conducted through the lens of the neo-Thomistic philosophy of education, which facilitates the formulation of the concept of human subjectivity and its development. To this end, three distinct concepts of religious education, derived from three general educational paradigms, are identified. The analysis leads to the conclusion that confessional education, which focuses on fostering relationships between maturing individuals and God, provides a reference point for decisions that may oppose social structures that undermine the dignity of their participants.

Keywords: subjectivity; fortitude; temperance; religious education; neo-Thomism.

ES La educación religiosa y el desarrollo de la subjetividad individual desde la perspectiva de la filosofía neotomista de la educación

ES Resumen. El desarrollo de la subjetividad en los individuos en proceso de maduración es uno de los objetivos primordiales de la educación moderna, y la educación religiosa representa una dimensión significativa de este proceso. El presente análisis pretende problematizar la relación entre la educación religiosa y el desarrollo de la subjetividad individual. Este análisis se realiza a través de la lente de la filosofía neo-tomista de la educación, que facilita la formulación del concepto de subjetividad humana y su desarrollo. Para ello, se identifican tres conceptos distintos de educación religiosa, derivados de tres paradigmas educativos generales. El análisis lleva a la conclusión de que la educación confesional, que se centra en el fomento de las relaciones entre los individuos en proceso de maduración y Dios, proporciona un punto de referencia para las decisiones que pueden oponerse a las estructuras sociales que socavan la dignidad de sus participantes.

Palabras clave: subjetividad; fortaleza; templanza; educación religiosa; neotomismo.

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1. Introduction

“Subjectivity” is a key concept in contemporary culture and the humanistic and social sciences. It has developed from a long-standing tradition of viewing humans as active subjects capable of rational decision-making and shaping their environment (Renaut, 2014). This concept is also contextualised by experiences of political systems that have questioned human subjectivity, treating individuals instrumentally and using them as a means to achieve political ends. Consequently, there is a growing emphasis on subjectivity and empowerment, advocating for the creation of conditions that allow individuals to function subjectively in social relations and participate in decision-making processes. Despite the attention given to subjectivity in culture and the humanities and social sciences disciplines, various social and cultural factors threaten individual subjectivity (Kostyło, 2019). Thus, subjectivity is regarded as a fundamental goal of education, often interpreted as an emancipatory endeavour that prepares individuals to critically assess social structures and resist manipulative influences (Kopińska, 2017, 2020). Developing individuals should involve enabling them to not only make prudent decisions but also withstand pressures from those who seek to manipulate or exploit them.

Religious education constitutes one dimension of the education of maturing individuals. Education in the spiritual or religious sphere is significant because individuals relate to not only material and social realities but also transcendent dimensions, encompassing both religion and various forms of spirituality (Benner, 2010; Stępkowski, 2014). Religious education occurs within families, schools and religious communities. In contemporary discourse, it often incites controversy, particularly in school settings (Osewska, 2015; Chrostowski & Kropač, 2023; Chrostowski, 2024), as religion is frequently perceived as a factor that limits subjectivity. Such a thesis is primarily championed by proponents of liberal thought (Wrońska, 2023). It is not difficult to notice a conflict between liberal ideologies, which stress the rights to shape the world freely, and religious thought, which postulates the implementation of a specific vision of socio-cultural reality and appeal to authority (Magier, 2015). In his exploration of Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant posited that it involves liberating individuals from authority to enable them to be guided by their reason: “Nonage is the inability to use one’s own understanding without another’s guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one’s own mind without another’s guidance” (Kant, 1984). Contemporary post-Enlightenment liberal thought is deeply influenced by Kant’s ideas.

This article aims to problematise the relationship between religious education and the development of human subjectivity, specifically addressing the potential connection between religious education and the support of subjectivity in maturing students. The relationship between these two elements is complex. Subjectivity can be understood in various ways, depending on the philosophical framework employed. Additionally, numerous concepts of religious education exist, ranging from those that reduce religious education to mere knowledge acquisition about religions to those that view its purpose as establishing and strengthening a relationship with God through the maturation of individuals (Chrostowski, 2024).

The reference point for this discussion is neo-Thomistic philosophy. This may appear surprising, as Thomas Aquinas’s writings do not directly address the concept of subjectivity. However, it is possible to articulate such a concept through his writings (Horowski, 2011). Furthermore, this concept is distinctive because neo-Thomistic thought assumes the existence of objective truth, i.e. it understands subjectivity in relation to individuals’ actions concerning this truth.

The article is structured in the following manner: the first section introduces the neo-Thomistic concept of subjectivity. The subsequent section presents the specific nature of subjectivity development according to this approach. Following this, various concepts of religious education are discussed, culminating in an analysis of the relationship between the development of subjectivity and religious education.

2. The neo-Thomistic concept of “subjectivity”

The term “subjectivity” encompasses various realities. In Thomistic philosophy, “subject” refers to an entity that serves as the basis (suppositum) for various traits, such as shape or colour (“the individual substance of a certain kind which is the subject of existence and all accidental modifications which constitute the individual”; Deferrari, 1960, p. 1018). In this sense, every entity is a subject, whether it be a stone, a plant or a human being (Maritain, 1966; Gilson, 1971; Wippel, 2000; Gorman, 2017). However, this understanding of subjectivity is not applicable in the humanities and social sciences disciplines. The relevant understanding of subjectivity in these disciplines refers to the common linguistic practice of attributing subjectivity to entities that are sources of action, capable of making rational and free decisions (Spaemann, 2006; Renaut, 2014; Dziaczkowska, 2016; Salamucha, 2021). The opposite of subjects are objects, which lack the capacity to make decisions about themselves or their surrounding reality. In this context, only humans can be considered subjects among the beings that exist on Earth.

Understood in this manner, subjectivity is closely related to freedom, defined as the ability to make decisions through mental faculties, intellect and will (Spaemann, 2006). The distinction between freedom and subjectivity arises from the contexts in which these concepts are employed. When the term “freedom” is used, attention is drawn to processes occurring within individuals, involving reflection on possible solutions to practical dilemmas, followed by the persuasion of “feelings” towards such decisions, which may necessitate sacrificing pleasure or overcoming fear of difficulties (Krapiec, 1983). Conversely, the term “subjectivity” is used when analysing individuals’ actions within the framework of social relations. Subjectivity can be attributed to individuals who participate in creating their surrounding reality, rather than merely executing others’ orders. Naturally, subjectivity is constrained in social structures where decision-making power is denied to certain

individuals (e.g. “blacks” in South Africa during apartheid) or where individuals lack the competence to make decisions (e.g. intellectually disabled).

Freedom and subjectivity should be viewed as two facets of the same reality. On one hand, the ability to overcome fear or renounce pleasure, indicative of freedom, fosters subjectivity in social relations. On the other hand, the avoidance of subjectivity in social relations, i.e. the reluctance to make autonomous decisions, stems from a lack of freedom, such as the fear of rejection by one's social group or the unwillingness to forgo pleasures derived from subordination to a particular group. Behaviours that reveal deficits in freedom and subjectivity can manifest in both large and small social groups. For instance, the fear of rejection by a spouse may lead to an inability to object to a cohabitation arrangement involving violence or neglect. Similarly, adolescents may succumb to peer pressure, engaging in unacceptable behaviours due to the fear of marginalisation and exclusion. Such situations also occur among adults in social and professional groups, where members may refrain from opposing perceived injustices due to social pressure (Wałęjko, 2016; Horowski, 2020; Stern, 2023).

Moreover, the connection between subjectivity and freedom in neo-Thomistic thought implies that a given person can only be considered a subject in actions where the criteria of freedom are met, while freedom consists of choosing the objective truth indicated by reason. This means that subjectivity is also shaped by individuals' reference to objective truth in their actions toward others. To comprehend the nature of subjectivity, an introduction to the neo-Thomistic theory of knowledge is necessary.

Neo-Thomistic thought posits the existence of objective truth, i.e. the truth of being and, consequently, the truth of goodness. Human beings are not seen as creating the truth about the good but as discoverers who adopt a certain attitude towards it (Gilson, 1971; Starnawski, 2008; Grygiel, 2022). According to this perspective, the specificity of human cognition lies in the fact that individuals perceive reality through their senses, thanks to their ability to recognise the physical properties of surrounding entities, and then through reason, which allows for the discovery of values “imperceptible” to the senses (Krapiec, 1983). For example, while we can discern the physical qualities of others that may provide pleasure, it is through reason that we can perceive the dignity of others, which is not evident to the senses. In their decisions, individuals often have to choose whether to succumb to sensual desires, thereby violating the dignity of others for selfish pleasure, or renouncing pleasure to respect others and care for their well-being (Wojtyła, 1979). Of course, these two values need not be mutually exclusive; actions can be both pleasurable and morally good. In a social context, subjectivity can be attributed to actions where individuals follow the dictates of reason and recognise the dignity and well-being of others. Ignoring these values signifies a lack of subjectivity, as external factors must influence individuals' choices, limiting their freedom.

In neo-Thomistic thought, the ability to find solutions to practical dilemmas that reflect respect for the dignity and well-being of others is termed prudence. Aquinas states: “The end of moral virtues is human good” (S.Th. II-II, q. 47, a. 4) and “it belongs to prudence [...] to apply right reason to action” (S.Th. II-II, q. 47, a. 4). The opposite of prudence is considered cunning, which involves finding solutions to moral dilemmas that satisfy a person's desires at the expense of others' good (Mróz, 2010). One condition of prudence is justice, understood as an attitude towards others that fundamentally involves fulfilling obligations to them. Aquinas states: “Hence the act of justice in relation to its proper matter and object is indicated in the words, ‘Rendering to each one his right,’ since, as Isidore says [...], ‘a man is said to be just because he respects the rights of others’” (S.Th. II-II, q. 58, a. 1). The virtue of justice is expressed in care for one's closest relatives – parents, spouse and children – as well as in the conscientious fulfilment of professional duties and the consideration of others' good in decision-making. Subjectivity is thus manifested not so much in any action of individuals but in decisions where those individuals can overcome fear and desire, ultimately leading to morally good actions (Horowski, 2011). Opposition to the intellect, which recognises the dignity and well-being of others, is seen as a manifestation of a lack of subjectivity, conditioned by submission to social pressures or a lack of control over desires. Paradoxically, individuals who declare their subjectivity, i.e. who resist social influence and choose attitudes and behaviours that diverge from those dominant in their social group, may be driven by uncontrolled desires that condition their decisions.

To illustrate the issue of subjectivity, consider a decision made by a student when peers mock a poorer, disabled classmate (Dillon, 2001). If the student accurately recognises the dignity and rights of this individual, they face the dilemma of whether to defend the humiliated classmate or to join their peers in ridicule. Paradoxically, opposing peers who engage in immoral behaviour may be seen as an expression of subjectivity, while succumbing to fear of rejection and yielding to group pressure constitutes a lack of subjectivity.

When addressing the theme of subjectivity, it is important to note that it was particularly emphasised during the Enlightenment, which framed the issue of subjectivity in terms of opposing unjust social structures and ideologies dominating culture. However, in contemporary culture – characterised as postmodern – subjectivity acquires a specific meaning shaped by subjectivism and individualism. It is essential to consider the implications of linking reflections on subjectivity with contemporary postmodern culture. First, the objective nature of truth has been called into question (Bronk, 1998; Grygiel, 2022). This shift means that subjectivity is understood as the ability to create and implement one's vision of reality, independent of any objective order. Second, considering subjectivity within the context of individualism marginalises the issue of responsibility for others (O'Flynn, 2009; McCann, 2014). In other words, subjectivity is not viewed as the capacity to act against social structures and the dominant culture aimed at the welfare of others; rather, responsibility for others is often overlooked, and subjectivity is frequently interpreted as the ability to realise an egoistic vision of reality, wherein other individuals are perceived as limitations and obstacles.

3. Conditions for the development of subjectivity from the neo-Thomistic perspective

Reflecting on the nature of subjectivity from a neo-Thomistic perspective allows for conclusions regarding its development. To find prudent solutions to practical dilemmas in the context of social relationships, individuals must first be able to accurately identify the dignity, rights and well-being of the various parties involved, as well as critically assess the dominant social structures that violate these principles. Secondly, the condition of subjectivity – concern for the dignity and well-being of all participants in social life, as indicated by reason – requires overcoming the desire for pleasures that contradict the effort to respect others' dignity and well-being, as well as overcoming the fear of rejection from those dissatisfied with one's morally good choices. Unjust social structures are typically built on the selfish interests of specific individuals or groups.

Freedom and subjectivity are not inherent traits bestowed upon individuals at birth; they must be achieved (Maritain, 1943, 1963; Rembierz, 2009). Learning to recognise the dignity of others and find solutions to moral dilemmas that demonstrate respect for them is challenging. Obedience to reason, however, presents an even greater challenge. Children naturally seek to avoid unpleasantness and pursue pleasure. Over time, they learn that in many cases, the pursuit of rational good necessitates enduring unpleasantness and renouncing pleasure (S.Th. II-II, q. 141, a. 2). If they develop the ability to forgo pleasure for the sake of the rational good, they can be said to have acquired the virtue of temperance. Aquinas describes it in the following words: "it belongs to moral virtue to safeguard the good of reason against the passions that rebel against reason" (S.Th. II-II, q. 141, a. 3). Similarly, resisting pressure from social groups, accepting marginalisation or exclusion, and growing to accept such treatment for the sake of protecting others' dignity can occupy a significant portion of an individual's life. This maturation is expressed through the final cardinal virtue, fortitude (S.Th. II-II, q. 123, a. 1). Aquinas states: "it belongs to the virtue of fortitude to remove any obstacle that withdraws the will from following the reason" (S.Th. II-II, q. 123, a. 3).

In summary, according to neo-Thomism, the condition of freedom and subjectivity is the possession of cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude (Pieper, 1966). Interestingly, while virtues are primarily understood as the ability to act morally well in relation to specific objects, the cardinal virtues primarily reveal the freedom and subjectivity of acting human beings (Horowski, 2011).

Although the factors determining the subjectivity of participants in social relations can be identified based on the analysis presented above, the question of the enabling factor for achieving subjectivity remains unanswered. However, conclusions can be drawn from Aquinas's analysis of the decision-making process. He argues that practical reasoning differs fundamentally from theoretical reasoning, as practical reasoning arises from a dialogue between reason and will, with the aim of achieving happiness (Pieper, 1966; Gilson, 1971). At each stage of the search for a solution to a practical dilemma, the will's desire directs the intellect's inquiry. Without analysing the entire process, it is worth noting that Aquinas (S.Th. I-II, q. 12-15) distinguishes the following activities of reason in decision-making: counsel (*consilium*), which involves considering means to an end, and judgement (*iudicium*), which entails selecting the best means to an end. However, the individual activities of the intellect are permeated by the activities of the will. Before counsel, the will must express the intention (*intentio*) to pursue some good. After counsel, the will selects one means to an end while rejecting others (*consensus*). Even the judgement of reason is insufficient to initiate action, as the will must first make a choice (*electio*) (Mróz, 2001).

Aquinas asserts that individuals' decisions differ, even when addressing similar issues in comparable circumstances, because they do not result from the independent functioning of the intellect. Some individuals focus on selfish pleasures, considering the means to those pleasures, and subsequently make judgements that facilitate their gratification. Others seek the welfare of their loved ones, thus employing a different criterion for judging means to an end in a selfless manner. There are also individuals for whom happiness is contingent upon the happiness of all those around them, including strangers.

God can also serve as a reference point for the will (Archer, 2006; Archer et al., 2004). In such cases, the specific approach to others inherent in a given religion becomes crucial in resolving practical dilemmas. In Christianity, the preferred attitude towards others can be discerned in the parable of the prodigal son, particularly in the father's words to the older brother (Luke 15:11-32). When the older brother refuses to enter the house where a celebration has been organised for the return of the prodigal son, the father employs a specific argument to persuade him to alter his attitude towards his brother. His words clarify that he will never find happiness unless both of his sons reside with him in his house. Thus, the older brother is encouraged to forgive, not for his brother's sake, but for his father's. From this narrative, the commandment to love one's enemies becomes evident. Since God loves all people as His children, He wants them all to dwell in His house. Loving one's enemies should be viewed as a means of re-establishing a relationship between God and those who have distanced themselves from Him or have yet to discover Him. It is important to remember that love must not be conflated with indulgence (Horowski, 2024).

In conclusion, for the subjectivity of a mature individual to develop in social relations, that person must discover a good for which the desire surpasses the desire for sensory pleasures and is strong enough to motivate them to endure the challenges associated with pursuing this good. In other words, individuals are capable of renouncing various pleasures and confronting the difficulties of rejection when they yearn for a good that outweighs these pleasures and challenges (Maritain, 1990). Consequently, the development of subjectivity is contingent upon not only acquiring the ability to identify deficiencies in social structures and proposing solutions to perceived problems but also establishing a relationship with a good that becomes a source of motivation for cultivating the virtues of moderation and fortitude, which are essential for opposing

perceived social injustices. To further explore the relationship between the development of subjectivity and religious education, a brief presentation of religious education is warranted.

4. Religious education from different educational perspectives

The contemporary discourse surrounding religious education is multifaceted, giving rise to numerous disputes and controversies, particularly as it pertains to school education. The answers to questions regarding the functions and significance of religious education are contingent upon the criteria adopted for evaluation. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine the pedagogical theories that underpin the concept of religious education. The differences among these theories stem from their ontological and anthropological assumptions, which, in turn, influence the choice of educational objectives. In conducting this analysis, I refer to the Polish context, recognising that individual cultures and countries may differ significantly from the Polish situation, while also acknowledging that such an analysis may contribute to reflecting on religious education in other cultural and social contexts.

The first position on religious education arises from a materialistic worldview regarding both the world and human beings. This perspective assumes that spiritual reality does not exist; thus, the goal of education, including schooling, is to prepare maturing individuals to function within the material world. This preparation includes acquiring knowledge, skills and abilities that enable them to form social relationships and achieve personal goals, particularly concerning career satisfaction. These assumptions are primarily evident in pedagogical concepts such as instrumental pedagogy (also known as positivist pedagogy) and the pedagogy of pragmatism (Hejnicka-Bezwińska, 2005; Melosik, 2005). The former, which was dominant during the communist era (1945–1989) but still retains many adherents today, views education as a process of adapting the individual to social life. The pedagogical thought of Florian Znaniecki, the world-renowned sociologist, exemplifies this type of concept, as he perceived education as a means of “adapting” individuals to social life (Znaniecki, 1928). A similar ontological and anthropological foundation underlies pragmatism. John Dewey concluded that social life would flourish to the extent that individuals possess the freedom to discover increasingly effective solutions to social challenges (Dewey, 1916). He thus advocated for individualism. However, the reference point for the development of maturing individuals in his theory remains the same as in instrumental pedagogy – the social and economic sphere. It is evident that modern neoliberalism also links individual development exclusively to preparation for functioning within this reality (Potulicka & Rutkowiak, 2010).

The assumptions outlined above, which regard human beings as solely material entities operating within an exclusively material world, do not eliminate religious education from schooling. However, based on these assumptions, religious education is reduced to religious studies, which involves equipping maturing individuals with knowledge about religions (Barnes, 2006, 2024; Stern, 2018). In this framework, religions are understood as socio-cultural phenomena, with emphasis placed on their horizontal dimensions. Knowledge of religions and the ability to engage with representatives of different faiths are considered important primarily for educated individuals to pursue their chosen goals across diverse socio-cultural contexts and for fostering dialogue and cooperation with representatives of various religions. The peculiarities of this type of religious education become apparent when considering the use of sacred texts. Since the vertical dimension of religious education is questioned, sacred texts and even certain passages within them are described, yet an in-depth, existential analysis of these texts is often neglected (Stern, 2018; Bowie et al., 2022).

The second position on religious education stems from the belief that human nature possesses a spiritual dimension. In this case, spirituality is not equated with religiosity (Socha, 2000; Hay et al., 2024). The assumption is that human spirituality is grounded in the recognition of human references to immaterial phenomena such as dignity, honour, forgiveness and their quest for answers to existential questions and meaning in life. This perspective is primarily represented in Poland by advocates of cultural pedagogy (humanistic pedagogy or hermeneutic pedagogy), which developed under the influence of German *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* (Milerski, 2005). Proponents maintain that human nature encompasses not only a physical dimension but also a spiritual one. The development of young people is determined not merely by the acquisition of knowledge and skills but by drawing inspiration from the spirituality of others. However, access to another person's spiritual realm is not direct but mediated through culture. For young people to develop spiritually, they must seek to understand the cultural products through which others have expressed their spirituality. Such a search serves as the basis not only for understanding both others and oneself (Milerski, 2011).

According to this concept, students' spirituality can be nurtured through religious education, as it is assumed that human spirituality, which pertains to the search for answers to existential questions and the quest for meaning, finds expression in religion and its texts. By striving to understand these texts, students not only seek to understand the spirituality of their authors through hermeneutics but also gain a reference point for self-understanding, discovering their spiritual desires, searches and potential paths of spiritual exploration (Marek & Walulik, 2020; Marek, 2022). Religious education conducted according to this concept focuses not on learning “about” religions, but on learning “from” religions. Regarding Christianity, examples such as Peter or Paul illustrate this point. Peter, captivated by the power of Jesus, had to overcome his desire to align with a political messiah to accept that Jesus' mission was not political but religious. His denial of knowing Jesus three times epitomises his struggle (Mark 14:66–72). Paul's pivotal moment involved a complete transformation of the worldview he had constructed since childhood, influenced by the truth he suddenly encountered (Acts 22:3–21). Cultural pedagogy posits that the spiritual journeys of others can

provide a reference point for the spiritual quests of maturing individuals. Consequently, an in-depth analysis of the spiritual journeys of biblical heroes can help maturing people in their spiritual struggles. It is worth noting, however, that this type of religious education does not take into account building a relationship with God.

The third position is rooted in personalistic thinking. It is based on not only the understanding of human beings as a person, i.e. according to Boethius as “an individual substance of a rational nature” (Nowak, 2005), but also – crucially – on a specific account of interpersonal relationships. Proponents of this perspective differentiate between individualistic and personalistic relationships. In individualism, relationships are formed based on the interests of individual people, rendering them instrumental. One person engages with another to benefit from the latter’s qualities, with reciprocal benefits being expected. However, in this type of relationship, no responsibility is taken for the other person, and the loss of attractive qualities by one party may lead to the relationship’s dissolution. Personalistic relationships, in contrast, are built on the foundation of pursuing a common goal, which includes taking responsibility for the other person. Advocates of this personalistic understanding of education emphasise that the development of mature individuals is contingent upon the relationships they cultivate with others. Within these relationships they experience care and simultaneously have the opportunity to take responsibility for others, thereby maturing as persons (Grzybek, 2010; Amilburu, 2024; Chrost, 2024; Crotti, 2024; Musaio, 2024).

In personalistic thought, the development of maturing individuals is linked to the formation of relationships in which they take responsibility for the other parties involved. In other words, individuals mature and develop character traits not merely through the influence of educators or by a better understanding of spiritual matters but by building interpersonal relationships that allow them to recognise the dignity of others and care for their welfare. Consequently, religious education is understood as the establishment of relationships between maturing individuals and God; thus, the cultivation of interpersonal relationships is rooted in a relationship with God (Bagrowicz, 2006; Marek, 2017; Słotwińska, 2019). This perspective is well articulated by Robert Spaemann: “religious identity ... is not the criterion by which we find our own way or judge the way of another, but what results from the attempt to relate to divinity” (Spaemann, 2010, p. 193). The adoption of such attitudes by mature individuals can be seen as fulfilling the goals of religious education when they care for others for God’s sake, akin to the elder son in the parable of the prodigal son, who was asked to forgive for his father’s sake (Luke 15:31–32). In this context, the implementation of religious education contains elements of religious initiation (Bagrowicz, 2006) and it is problematic to implement it in school settings, although initiation is distinct from indoctrination. It is worth noting that, within this conception, reading of the sacred texts becomes an engagement with a text through which God communicates with humanity, thereby forming part of the dialogue between the maturing individual and God.

5. Religious education and the development of subjectivity

An introduction to the understanding of subjectivity development in neo-Thomistic thought, along with the distinction of three types of religious education, lays the groundwork for exploring the central topic of this article: the relationship between religious education and the development of the subjectivity of maturing people.

From the analysis conducted above, it can be concluded that neo-Thomistic thought identifies two factors as conditions for the development of individual subjectivity. The first is the ability to recognise both the dignity of individuals and the best means of safeguarding that dignity. The second factor is the desire for a good that surpasses various pleasures and is significant enough that individuals who desire it are willing to give up pleasure and strive to overcome difficulties and fears – in other words, to cultivate the virtues of temperance and fortitude.

When discussing the first factor, it is important to note that religious education – regardless of whether it occurs within families, religious communities or schools and irrespective of whether it is confessional or non-confessional – serves as a source of knowledge about human dignity and the appropriate treatment of individuals that respects their dignity. Through religious education, maturing individuals can learn a new perspective on human dignity, informed by how a given religion presents the relationship between God and humanity and how the dignity of every person is articulated within that religion. For instance, Christianity indicates that human dignity can be justified both by unique characteristics such as rationality and freedom and from a theological standpoint, based on the special relationship between God to a human being.

However, for the present analysis, the reference to the second condition is particularly significant, as it is crucial for achieving subjectivity in social relations to have a reference point for decisions made in opposition to the prevailing social norms. In the first conception of religious education, grounded in a materialist worldview, such a reference point is absent. Since the aim of education is to adapt individuals to function within social life and contribute to its development, the promotion of relativism and utilitarianism becomes embedded in this social framework. The value of individual decisions made by members of a social group is determined from the perspective of their significance for improving social conditions, even if this negatively impacts the well-being of some participants, leading to their instrumental treatment and the violation of their dignity. The knowledge of religion provided by religious education does not provide a reference point for opposing the prevailing social ethos. Of course, this does not imply that such opposition cannot occur; it may be motivated by concern for others, but not necessarily rooted in religious belief.

The second concept of religious education, which is grounded in a belief in the spiritual dimension of human nature, also fails to establish a basis for opposing social structures that some individuals find unjust.

In this context, spiritual development is autonomous, with religion only providing content that can inspire this growth. Such content can be drawn from various religions. Individuals seeking inspiration for their spiritual development may select from the religious offerings those elements and practices that resonate with them and enhance their lives. Consequently, religion does not engender a “commitment” to adopt a specific attitude towards oneself and others, as spiritual development is driven by personal desires and quests, thus exhibiting an “egoistic” profile. This form of religious education does not provide a foundation for opposing social structures that inflict harm on members of a social group, particularly when such opposition may lead to violations of their well-being and suffering. While it is possible to adopt an attitude of opposition to moral evil, its source is not religion; it may instead stem from the pursuit of “self-fulfilment”.

The desire to transcend the pursuit of personal well-being is inherent in the third concept of religious education. This approach aims to establish a relationship with God, thereby fostering specific attitudes towards others. These attitudes may vary depending on the requirements of a particular religion. In Christianity, for instance, the commitment to care for another human being, even a stranger or an enemy, is fundamental (Matthew 5:38–48). This care should stem from love for God, who regards every human being as a “child”. This care can be likened to the responsibility one feels for the offspring of a spouse from a previous relationship; despite the absence of direct ties, these children are nurtured out of love and responsibility for their parents. Therefore, religious education that prioritises the search for religious initiation – discovering God and establishing a relationship with Him – lays the groundwork for a non-conformist attitude of opposition to social structures (whether secular or religious) that harm individuals, even if such opposition entails renouncing pleasure (the virtue of temperance) or resisting difficulties and fear (the virtue of fortitude).

In summary, the reflection on the subjectivity of individuals within social structures and its development under the influence of religious education, particularly from the perspective of the neo-Thomistic philosophy of education, raises questions about the significance of an individual's relationship with God. This relationship is not only a factor in individual development but also a condition for social development, especially regarding the growth of individual subjectivity. This prompts consideration of the relationship with God as a factor currently underestimated in educational processes (Luque, 2021).

6. Conclusion

This paper sought to problematise the relationship between religious education and the development of the subjectivity of individuals undergoing such education. The reference point for this analysis was neo-Thomistic thought, which informed the concept of subjectivity and highlighted the distinction between freedom and subjectivity. In light of this framework, the development of subjectivity is primarily conditioned by the discovery and desire of mature individuals for a good that empowers them to overcome sensual desires and fears associated with the good of others within specific social structures. Thus, religious education lays the foundation for the development of an individual's subjectivity when one of its outcomes is to establish a relationship between maturing individuals and God. The love of God then becomes a source of strength to oppose the lack of respect for the dignity of other human beings, who are the objects of God's love and care.

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