

## Article

# Thresholds of Self-Organisation in Catholic Religious Education: A Complex Analysis of Curricula in Latin America

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## Abstract

This article analyses the official Catholic Religious Education (CRES) programmes in Chile, Brazil, Costa Rica and Colombia from the perspective of complexity sciences, using the concept of self-organisation as a central analytical axis. Given Latin American contexts marked by religious pluralism, cultural transformation, institutional crisis and youth subjectivities, it is proposed that the adequacy of CRES does not depend solely on content or methodologies, but also on the systemic architecture that articulates students, classrooms and institutions in relation to their environment. Methodologically, the study develops a framework of three thresholds of educational self-organisation—reactive, reflective, and ecological—and applies it comparatively to the four national programmes, examining how they distribute agency, learning capacity, and openness to context at the student, classroom, and school-environment levels. The analysis reveals that, although all programmes activate relevant forms of reactive and reflective self-organisation, only some partially enable thresholds of ecological self-organisation capable of sustainably integrating contemporary sociocultural and religious complexity. The results allow us to identify structural tensions between current curriculum designs and the demands of increasingly complex environments.

**Keywords:** school religious education; complexity; self-organisation; curriculum; Latin America; education systems

## 1. Introduction

School religious education is part of the national curriculum in many Latin American countries (Martínez 2021, 2022). In the specific case of Catholic Religious Education in Schools—CRES, Pérez Sayago (2024) emphasises that it must be organically integrated into the function of the school in order to respond adequately to an increasingly multicultural and multireligious Latin American society. This requires questioning both the current socio-religious landscape of the continent and the place that CRES occupies today in profoundly transformed contexts.

### 1.1. Socio-Religious Changes

Over the last decade, Latin America and the Caribbean have undergone a significant socio-religious transformation, marked by the progressive weakening of the Christian, essentially Catholic, monopoly that historically structured the cultural and symbolic life of the region. According to recent data from the Pew Research Center (2025), although



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85% of the regional population still identifies as Christian, this figure has fallen by five points in ten years, while both those without religious affiliation (12%, an increase of six points) and those affiliated with non-conventional expressions, including indigenous, Afro-descendant or syncretic religiosities (3%), have grown rapidly. This trend is particularly visible in countries such as Chile and Uruguay, where the unaffiliated reach 30% and 52%, respectively.

These quantitative data, however, do not exhaust the complexity of the processes underway. As Morello warns, the relationship between modernity and religion in Latin America has not produced a simple decline in religiosity, but rather its profound reconfiguration. In his words,

There is an interaction between modernity and religion, but the result has not been a decline in religiosity, but rather its transformation. [...] In Latin America, there is more religion than secularists expect, but of a different kind than religious leaders would like. (Morello 2021; Rodríguez Fernández et al. 2022, p. 23)

From this perspective, Latin American socio-religious transformation cannot be understood as a direct step towards secularisation, but rather as a process of pluralisation, hybridisation and re-signification of beliefs, practices and affiliations. In this new scenario, individuals no longer passively inherit stable religious identities, but rather construct mobile, selective and situated spiritual trajectories in dialogue with an increasingly diversified symbolic offering.

### 1.2. Ecclesial Mutations

Faced with the shift in the religious configuration of the continent, the Catholic Church has initiated a process of discernment that recognises not only the transformation of the cultural and spiritual environment, but also the need to review its own structures, languages and practices. The First Ecclesial Assembly of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM 2022) identifies social fragmentation, the emergence of new ethical sensibilities, institutional disaffection and the proliferation of multiple forms of popular, ancestral and alternative spirituality as signs of the times. This diagnosis is not formulated from a defensive attitude, but from an awareness of synodal conversion still in process, marked both by the evangelical witness of numerous communities and by open wounds—clericalism, abuse, and deficits in the participation of lay people, women, young people, and indigenous peoples—that affect the Church's credibility.

In this context, the document itself recognises that many pastoral and educational structures continue to operate with models that are not very meaningful for contemporary life. Education thus appears as one of the areas where the gap between the emerging cultural paradigm and traditional educational approaches is most visible: "The transmission of the faith is difficult in areas such as education" (CELAM 2022, n. 72). This diagnosis points to a crisis that cannot be resolved through specific curricular adjustments, but rather requires a more profound review of the meaning, methods, and place of educational processes within the evangelising mission.

From this perspective, it is essential to question the current paradigm of Catholic religious education in Latin America. The predominant model, focused on the transmission of doctrinal content and with little sensitivity to the complexity of current cultural and existential contexts, is showing signs of exhaustion (Zapata Zapata 2024). The growing distance between traditional school approaches and the actual spiritual experiences of students not only limits the educational effectiveness of CRES, but also weakens its legitimacy as a relevant educational space within public systems.

Consequently, what is at stake is not merely a methodological update, but a paradigm shift that allows us to rethink CRES in terms of its *raison d'être*, its epistemological foun-

dations, its modes of mediation, and its relationship with the social and cultural fabric in which it is embedded. Within this framework, this article aims to answer the following question: what levels of educational self-organisation do official CRES programmes in Chile, Brazil, Costa Rica and Colombia enable, and what tensions emerge when these levels face increasingly complex socio-religious contexts?

## 2. Religious Education in Schools

The presence of religious education in schools in education systems has been systematically addressed by the Magisterium of the Church, which has established its fundamental principles of meaning and purpose. The Second Vatican Council's Declaration *Gravissimum Educationis* (Concilio Vaticano II 1965) emphasised the integral formation of the person and their openness to God, a framework that was later developed by documents such as *The Catholic School* (Congregación para la Educación Católica 1977) and *The Religious Dimension of the Catholic School* (Congregación para la Educación Católica 1988), which insisted on the synthesis between faith, culture and life, as well as on the rationality of the believer's choice and the formative value of religious experience. This perspective was confirmed by *Fides et Ratio* (Juan Pablo II 1998), which affirmed the convergence between faith and reason in the search for truth.

A decisive milestone was the *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregación para la Evangelización de los Pueblos and Congregación para la Educación Católica 1997), which explicitly distinguished school religious education from catechesis, defining CRES as an original form of the ministry of the Word that “makes the Gospel present in the personal process of systematic and critical assimilation of culture” (n. 73). Along the same lines, Benedict XVI characterised religion classes as ‘laboratories of culture and humanity’ (Benedicto XVI 2009), emphasising their vocation for dialogue between faith, reason and historical experience.

These references allow us to understand the educational–ecclesial identity of CRES: rooted in the tradition of the Church, but oriented not towards confirming faith through community membership, but rather towards offering religious knowledge as a cultural and anthropological horizon for dialogue with the world in contexts of growing plurality and complexity.

This distinction has allowed for multiple and creative developments in the search for a catechesis suited to modern times. However, efforts related to religious education in modern schools have not been of the same kind. Authors such as Sullivan (2009, 2018), Pollefeyt and Bouwens (2010), Wodon (2023) and, more recently, Beattie (2025), offer very interesting and innovative perspectives on this issue, but applied to the contemporary European context and from the perspective of Catholic schools, largely ignoring religious education in non-denominational contexts and, therefore, where it cannot be confused or discreetly mimicked as another form of catechesis.

At the global level, there are no definitive statistics on the presence of religious education in school systems. However, studies by Pajer (2015) for Europe, Martínez (2021) for Latin America and Rivard and Amadio (2003) for a group of 142 countries allow us to estimate that RE is taught, under different models, in at least 38% of the world's countries, a figure that could reach 51% according to the available data. This diversity reveals that religious education is a global educational phenomenon, although it is regulated in highly differentiated ways according to national contexts.

In the case of Latin America, Pajer (2015, 2019) and Martínez (2021, 2022) have been the main systematisers in the field. Pajer introduced a key distinction by defining CRES not by the confessional nature of educational institutions, but by the existence of religion classes within the curriculum, regardless of the nature of the establishment. This approach

highlighted the work of educators in state school systems, traditionally overshadowed by the identification between religious education and denominational schools. For his part, Martínez analysed CRES in Latin America, taking into account its legal frameworks, educational models and degrees of institutionalisation.

Both authors agree in highlighting the high variability of CRES provision models, determined by the history of Church–State relations, the historical and institutional relevance of the Churches, and the type of secularism in force in each country. This diversity is expressed, for example, in the distinction between countries that allow the teaching of religion as part of the public curriculum and those that restrict it to denominational institutions. In Latin America, ten of the nineteen countries that comprise it incorporate religion in public schools<sup>1</sup> of the remainder, three prohibit it in any school setting and six authorise it only in denominational spaces, with mixed cases such as Argentina, where legislation varies by province.

On this basis, Martínez identifies five main models of CRES in the region:

- Catholic denominational (exclusively);
- Catholic and supra-denominational (incorporating supra-denominational elements at higher levels);
- multi-denominational (offering students a choice of different faiths);
- interdenominational (a common programme agreed upon by all churches); and
- supra-confessional (a programme that emphasises the religious phenomenon).

This overview confirms that Latin American CRES is a heterogeneous field with a structural difficulty: the absence of a shared framework capable of coherently articulating identity, purpose, content and practices in contexts characterised by high cultural, religious and existential complexity. In many cases, CRES is caught between its ecclesial foundation, the demands of the school system and the life trajectories of its interlocutors, resolving these tensions in a fragmentary or pragmatic manner, rather than through comprehensive reflection.

What emerges, therefore, is not only the need for curricular adjustments or functional redefinitions, but a more radical challenge: the revision of the assumptions from which religious education is conceived as an educational, cultural and ecclesial phenomenon. This observation raises the question of theoretical frameworks capable of addressing the inherent complexity of contemporary CRES, not as a problem to be reduced, but as a condition for understanding and integrating it. It is precisely at this point that dialogue with the sciences of complexity and complex thinking becomes relevant as a way to rethink in a more articulated manner the meaning, scope and practices of CRES in the current Latin American context.

### 3. On the Complex Perspective

In light of this tension between educational practices situated in increasingly complex contexts and frameworks of thought that do not always assume such complexity, it becomes necessary to consider the contribution that complexity sciences and complex thinking can offer to school religious education.

#### 3.1. Origins

Although it is possible to trace intuitions about complexity back to the origins of philosophical reflection, it was from the 19th century onwards, and more clearly during the 20th century, that a field of systematic study began to take shape around complex phenomena. Various scientific and philosophical developments converged at that time in a critique of the mechanistic imaginary of modernity, questioning the idea of closed systems that are predictable and reducible to simple causal relationships. This process culminated

in the 1970s with the explicit recognition of complexity as a new scientific field oriented towards the study of open, non-linear and irreversible dynamics.

The sciences of complexity developed from the analysis of systems far from equilibrium, open systems and self-organising processes, integrating contributions from thermodynamics, systems theory, cybernetics, biology and network science. From these intersections emerged a vocabulary that is now widely shared (self-organisation, emergence, feedback, attractors), which made it possible to describe collective behaviours that could not be explained by classical deterministic models. Rather than a unified theory, complexity thus became a transdisciplinary field aimed at understanding dynamic patterns on multiple scales.

It is important, however, to distinguish between the sciences of complexity and complex thinking. While the former describe and model dynamic phenomena using mathematical and computational tools, the latter—particularly in the work of Edgar Morin—proposes a broader epistemological reflection on knowledge, order, uncertainty, and the organisation of knowledge (Morin 1999, 2001). Confusing the two levels often leads to superficial metaphorical appropriations, especially in the field of education, where complexity must be assumed as a framework for understanding rather than as a simple rhetorical device.

This distinction explains why complexity has become a particularly relevant topic for contemporary pedagogy. Educational processes do not unfold as linear sequences of transmission, but as relational dynamics in which subjects, contexts, knowledge, institutions and life trajectories interact. Teaching and learning always involve inhabiting a tension between order and disorder, between planning and events, between pedagogical intentionality and the emergence of unforeseen meanings.

In the case of CRES, this perspective is particularly fruitful. As shown in the previous sections, this is a field marked by religious plurality, institutional fragility, non-linear biographical trajectories and often contradictory educational expectations. Reading CRES from a complex paradigm does not imply abandoning its ecclesial references or diluting its identity, but rather equipping it with a framework capable of integrating tensions, recognising emergencies and understanding the diversity of configurations it takes on in different countries and programmes.

### 3.2. *Outlines of a Description in Motion*

Talking about complexity therefore means recognising the emergence of a vast scientific and intellectual field that arises from the intersection of multiple areas of knowledge, assuming that reality cannot be understood from the inherited mechanical linearity, as it is dynamic, unstable and creatively open.

Along these lines, Luengo and Martínez Álvarez (2018) define complexity as a field of knowledge integration that articulates physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics and, later, the social sciences and humanities. Its strength lies not only in bringing together disciplines, but also in showing that real phenomena are organised through patterns where order and disorder, stability and change coexist, and where the new emerges from multiple interactions. Complexity is therefore based on non-linear methods and technologies that expand our ability to understand living, social and environmental systems.

The term *complexus*—‘the intertwined’—expresses this perspective well: the complex is not the complicated, but that which is constituted by multiple elements in relation, whose meaning is lost when they are isolated. In this sense, the reference to Plato’s *symploké* is enlightening: reality is presented as a network of dynamic connections and disconnections, not as a sum of independent parts. Hence, complexity is constantly evolving,

enriched by a broad vocabulary of concepts, principles and properties that are articulated and transformed.

Finally, complexity does not admit a closed definition. Its power lies precisely in its processual and transdisciplinary nature, in its ability to integrate diverse contributions without closing them off. Rather than a finished system, it constitutes a way of thinking that accompanies the very movement of reality: a way of thinking that links, recognises emergence, avoids reductionism and opens up space for more integrated ways of understanding and transforming the world (Morin 1990).

### 3.3. *Traces of the Encounter Between Pedagogy and Complexity*

A decisive milestone in the link between complexity and pedagogy was the publication of *Seven Complex Lessons in Education for the Future* (Morin 1999), which proposed an epistemological itinerary aimed at contextualising knowledge, understanding the human condition, facing uncertainty and placing education on a planetary horizon. These ideas found strong resonance in Latin America, where they fuelled growing criticism of linear pedagogical legacies.

At the same time, in the Anglo-Saxon and European spheres, the field of educational complexity took shape. Davis and Sumara (2006) conceived of learning as a nested, fractal system in which biological, psychological, and social processes are intertwined. Doll et al. (2005) linked chaos, curriculum and culture, emphasising that unpredictability is not a defect but a condition of educational vitality; and Davis et al. (2015) insisted on the need to transform education for turbulent times through the systematic integration of the sciences of complexity.

In Latin America, Carlos Eduardo Maldonado has contributed to this discussion from a perspective closer to the sciences of complexity, arguing that education belongs to the realm of the ‘social sciences of non-equilibrium’ and criticising the predominance of the *Morinian* approach for its epistemological weakness (Maldonado 2019). This tension expresses an internal divide within the field, between a philosophically and epistemologically inspired complexity and a more scientific and formal one.

This dynamism has generated a new pedagogical vocabulary—self-organisation, emergence, recursion—and has prompted a profound revision of education. As Calvo Muñoz et al. (2020) point out, educating involves creating possible relationships that, through pedagogical mediations, can become emerging configurations of meaning, moving away from the linear logic of instruction–response. However, this renewal coexists with a persistent gap between discourse and practice: “there is a disconnect between a discourse that declares complexity to be an essential construct and a schematic and reductionist practice” (Joaqui and Ortiz 2020, p. 157).

As Luengo and Martínez Álvarez (2018) warn, the theoretical systematisation of complex education in Latin America has barely begun and requires a major collective effort. In this context, exploring the link between CRES and complex thinking can be understood as a contribution to this pending task, especially in a field that must articulate pedagogy, theology and complexity<sup>2</sup>.

From this perspective, complexity offers not only a conceptual framework but also criteria for questioning the specific configurations of CRES. If CRES unfolds in non-linear, culturally plural and biographically unstable contexts, it is necessary to examine the extent to which these features are being taken on board by the official programmes that guide its practice. Reading these programmes from a complex perspective involves paying attention not only to their content and methodologies, but also to the implicit anthropologies that underpin them and the way in which they articulate faith, culture and context. The following analysis is situated within this horizon.

#### 4. Development of CRES Perspectives Today

If Catholic religious education is now being deployed in contexts marked by cultural plurality, non-linear biographical trajectories and changing institutional frameworks, it is insufficient to evaluate it solely on the basis of the coherence of its doctrinal content or the clarity of its curricular guidelines. From a complex perspective, what is decisive is not only what a programme proposes, but how it enables subjects, relationships and contexts to be dynamically articulated in processes of meaning production. Against this backdrop, one of the most fruitful concepts for questioning the pedagogical vitality of an educational system is that of *self-organisation*.

In complexity sciences, self-organisation refers to a system's ability to generate relatively stable structures and coherences from the interaction of its components, without being totally determined by centralised external control. A self-organised system does not lack frameworks or rules; on the contrary, order emerges from the relationships between the agents themselves rather than from the mere application of predefined instructions. Translated to the field of education, this concept allows us to ask whether educational processes enable students, teachers and school communities to become active agents of meaning production, or whether they place them primarily as executors of a closed design. As Luengo and Martínez Álvarez (2018) point out, education must address the dynamics of social interactions on multiple scales so that the system—whether educational or collective—can self-organise and generate emergent properties that enhance its transformation and sustainability (p. 88).

Applying this criterion to CRES involves shifting the focus from content to the relational dynamics that programmes enable or restrict. It is not a question of demanding that curriculum documents explicitly use the language of complexity, but rather of observing whether their implicit anthropologies, their conceptions of learning and their ways of articulating the school with its environment create conditions for genuinely self-organising processes. In this sense, self-organisation operates here as a critical cross-cutting operator that allows us to evaluate the extent to which programmes open up spaces for the emergence of living and situated educational configurations.

To carry out this reading systematically, self-organisation will be observed at three complementary analytical levels:

- (a) in the conception of the student, examining whether the subject is understood as an agent capable of constructing their own religious trajectories or mainly as a recipient of already defined frameworks;
- (b) in the conception of relationships within the classroom, analysing whether it is thought of as a space where unpredictable dynamics of dialogue and interpretation can emerge or whether a logic of sequencing and control predominates;
- (c) in the conception of the relationship between the classroom, school and sociocultural environment, investigating whether CRES is presented as an open system that learns from its context or as a device that translates the world into pre-established categories without receiving feedback from it.

From this triple perspective, the official programmes of Chile, Brazil, Costa Rica and Colombia, countries that are particularly relevant in the reflection on CRES, will be read not only as normative texts, but also as designs for educational systems that distribute agency, define margins of indeterminacy and configure specific modes of relationship between faith, culture and learning. The aim is not to classify them as 'complex' or 'non-complex', but to identify the extent to which they enable or inhibit self-organisation processes that allow CRES to respond creatively to the complexity of current Latin American contexts.

#### 4.1. CRES Programme Chile

The Catholic School Religious Education Programme in Chile (CECH 2020) is part of an institutional framework in which the subject of Religion is compulsory and freely chosen, and in which various denominations can submit programmes for ministerial approval. In its current version, the Catholic programme is defined as “interdenominational, dialogical and proactive” (Vega Ramírez 2020), which places it in a position that is relatively open to religious and cultural pluralism.

##### 4.1.1. Self-Organisation in the Conception of the Student

The programme formulates an educational anthropology that places the student at the centre of the educational process. It explicitly states the following:

The curriculum recognises the student as the centre of the educational process, as the protagonist of their development, understanding development as the achievement of a comprehensive, full education that leads them to an autonomous, full, free and responsible way of life. (CECH 2020, pp. 13–15)

It also points out that such development involves “the harmonious complementarity of the development of skills, attitudes and knowledge, which enable them to discern and develop attitudes in line with spiritual openness to the world” (CECH 2020, pp. 13–15).

From the perspective of self-organisation, these formulations recognise the student as an agent capable of discerning, deciding and guiding their own life path. However, this agency is formulated mainly in individual and vocational terms. Thus, the programme states the following: “When one discovers and follows one’s personal vocation, life is filled with LIFE: one knows deep in one’s heart that this is where one should be and what one should do” (CECH 2020). It therefore promotes strong subjective self-organisation, without explicitly mentioning a collective dimension of emerging religious meaning.

##### 4.1.2. Self-Organisation in Classroom Dynamics

The programme proposes numerous activities that involve planning, decision-making, teamwork and project execution by students. For example,

With the help of their teacher, students organise a round table discussion on the topic ‘Life is free giving in favour of others’. They must think, plan and execute the project to carry it out, inviting secondary school students from their school. (p. 259)

Another unit states

They carry out a project in their school that contributes to the construction of a civilisation of love (...) To do this, they divide into groups. Each group must choose a value (...) then present the project (...) describe what was actually done (...) and reflect on the experience. (p. 231)

These guidelines form a teaching system in which students identify problems, define objectives, distribute roles, carry out actions and evaluate results, which corresponds to a clear logic of pedagogical self-organisation.

However, this dynamism unfolds within a poorly regulated institutional framework: religious authorities provide guidelines, but do not have effective mechanisms to verify or monitor their implementation. This generates high levels of creativity and local freedom, but also low coordination and systemic identity.

##### 4.1.3. Self-Organisation in the School-Environment Relationship

The programme explicitly promotes the opening up of the classroom to the school and the community. In the 8th year of basic education, for example, it is proposed that students

conduct an assessment of the level of waste generated by the school (...) conduct surveys (...) identify the main problem (...) plan an information project aimed at the school community (...) prepare presentations (...) recreational activities (...) and share their reflections on the experience. (p. 166)

Similarly, in community service projects in secondary education, it is indicated that students should “create tools (...) visit the field (...) carry out an assessment (...) and develop the community service project” in relation to the community and its real problems (p. 223). These guidelines show that Chilean CRES is conceived as an open system that interacts with its environment, a relevant condition for local systemic self-organisation processes.

However, at the national level, there are no mechanisms in place to enable collective learning from these experiences: compliance with the curriculum is not effectively verified, and programmes can be replaced without structured feedback. This means that, even though there is strong local self-organisation, the system lacks institutional memory and the capacity for integrated reorganisation.

In summary, in the Chilean case, self-organisation appears strongly at the student and classroom level, as well as in openness to the community. However, it remains fragmented and localised, without translating into a capacity for the national CRES system to learn from its own practices. This tension between high local dynamism and low systemic identity is one of the most significant features of the Chilean model from a complex perspective.

#### 4.2. CRES Programme Brazil

The Brazilian case differs from the other countries analysed in that religious education does not take the form of a confessional programme, but is integrated as a public curriculum component in the National Common Core Curriculum [BNCC] (Ministério da Educação 2018). Within this framework, religious education is defined as a non-denominational space, oriented towards the ethical and scientific study of the religious phenomenon and respect for cultural and religious diversity. According to the Permanent National Forum on Religious Education [FONAPER], its purpose is “to establish guidelines that respect the principle of the secular nature of the state, ensuring that religious education is non-denominational and promotes respect for cultural and religious diversity, without proselytism” (FONAPER 2024, p. 18). This definition places Brazilian CRES within an explicit framework of plurality, dialogue and the construction of meaning that is not subordinate to any particular religious tradition.

##### 4.2.1. Self-Organisation in Classroom Dynamics

At the classroom level, the programme explicitly introduces mechanisms for feedback and internal regulation of the educational process. It states that teaching practices should “promote student participation through the implementation of self-assessment and peer assessment” (p. 81). These mechanisms turn the classroom into a system that observes its own processes, evaluates its results and adjusts its actions, which constitutes a direct form of pedagogical self-organisation.

The praxeological methodology that structures the subject reinforces this approach by integrating reflection, action, and evaluation as moments of the same process aimed at transforming the students’ immediate environment, configuring the classroom as a space where learning emerges from the interaction between subjects, experiences, and contexts.

##### 4.2.2. Self-Organisation in the Conception of the Student

The BNCC conceives of students as active subjects, situated and protagonists of their own learning process. It states that schools must “guarantee the protagonism of students in their learning and the development of their capacities for abstraction, reflection,

interpretation, proposition and action, essential to their personal, professional, intellectual and political autonomy” (BNCC—Secondary Education, p. 468). Likewise, students must have “time and space to (...) reflect on their individual and interpersonal experiences and learning (...) and use more efficient strategies for their learning” (BNCC, p. 468).

These formulations describe a subject capable of reflecting on their experience, re-organising their learning strategies and constructing their own life project. In addition, the programme recognises young people as protagonists of multiple cultural and digital networks: “young people have become increasingly engaged as protagonists of digital culture (...) and social networking” (BNCC, p. 62), which reinforces their understanding as active nodes within complex social systems.

#### 4.2.3. Self-Organisation in Classroom Dynamics

The BNCC does not conceive of the classroom as a space for simple curriculum execution, but rather as an arena for situated decisions. It establishes that “curricular and didactic-pedagogical decisions (...) must take into account (...) the needs, possibilities and interests of students” (BNCC, p. 16), and that pedagogical proposals must recognise the linguistic, ethnic and cultural identities of students. At the classroom level, this translates into a strong promotion of collaborative and action-oriented dynamics: schools must “promote collaborative learning” and “stimulate cooperative and proactive attitudes to face the challenges of the community, the world of work and society in general” (BNCC, p. 466).

These guidelines configure the classroom as an interactive system in which roles, strategies and learning are reorganised according to real problems, which corresponds to an explicit form of pedagogical self-organisation.

#### 4.2.4. Self-Organisation in the School-Environment Relationship

The BNCC directly links the school experience with the challenges of contemporary society, the world of work, culture and technology. Schools must “promote the attribution of meaning to learning, through its connection to the challenges of reality” (BNCC, p. 467) and ensure “the contextualisation of knowledge, articulating the dimensions of work, science, technology and culture” (BNCC, p. 466). Furthermore, the education system itself is conceived as capable of learning from its experience: ‘inventorying and evaluating all this experience can contribute to learning from successes and mistakes and incorporating practices that have led to good results’ (BNCC, p. 18).

From a complex perspective, these formulations describe a system that not only acts but also reflects, learns and reconfigures itself; that is, a system with an explicit capacity for systemic self-organisation.

Overall, Brazil’s CRES Programme demonstrates a high capacity for self-organisation at the three levels analysed: the student as a reflective protagonist, the classroom as a space for situated construction, and the school system as a structure capable of learning from its own experience. Unlike other cases in the region, here self-organisation appears not only as an emergent effect of local practice, but as a structuring principle of curriculum design.

#### 4.3. CRES Programme in Costa Rica

Religious education in Costa Rica is part of a state framework that explicitly articulates social constructivism and the paradigm of complexity as the foundations of the national education model. The programme itself states that Costa Rican education is guided by a “comprehensive, humanistic, rationalist and complex educational model based on social constructivism” (MEP 2013, p. 50), and that its curriculum design is based on “the analysis of the educational and socio-community context” (p. 51). From this basis, self-organisation does not appear as a side effect, but as a feature sought by the pedagogical model.

#### 4.3.1. Self-Organisation in the Conception of the Student

The programme conceives of the student as an active subject capable of regulating their own cognitive, emotional and social processes. They are expected to develop “autonomy, curiosity, analytical, critical and creative thinking (...) self-regulation, decision-making and problem-solving” (MEP 2013, p. 78). Likewise, it is stated that students “compose and construct their own conceptual and symbolic fabric (...) act on reality, transform it and are transformed by it” (p. 81). These formulations describe a clear logic of subjective self-organisation, in which the individual is not a passive recipient of religious content, but an active agent in the construction of meaning.

#### 4.3.2. Self-Organisation in the School-Environment Relationship

At the systemic level, Costa Rica’s CRES is explicitly linked to social, cultural and community realities. The curriculum is based on the ‘analysis of the educational and socio-community context’ (p. 51), which implies that content, activities and pedagogical mediations must engage with the problems, identities and challenges of the environment. This contextual anchoring, together with the paradigm of complexity, allows the school to function as an open system that adapts, learns and reconfigures itself in interaction with its environment.

Overall, Costa Rica’s Religious Education Programme demonstrates a high capacity for self-organisation at the three levels analysed. Unlike the Chilean case, where self-organisation emerges mainly from low regulation, and the Brazilian case, where it is structured by a national decision-making system, in Costa Rica self-organisation appears pedagogically codified as an explicit part of the curriculum design.

### 4.4. Colombia’s CRES Programme

The Colombian School Religious Education programme is presented as a highly structured, legally regulated and pedagogically standardised curriculum system. CRES is defined as a compulsory and fundamental area of the national curriculum, integrated with the same criteria of academic rigour as other subjects: “it is not an accessory part of the curriculum, but a compulsory and fundamental subject (...) with the same academic rigour, pedagogical and didactic methods and evaluation criteria as other subjects” (CEC 2022, p. 11). This framework anticipates a strongly centralised logic, in which self-organisation is mediated by a precise regulatory, curricular and methodological framework.

#### 4.4.1. Self-Organisation in the Conception of the Student

At the student level, the programme recognises a reflective, interpretative and projective capacity. CRES seeks to promote “the growth of the person in their search for meaning and in the configuration of their personal and community life project” (p. 9), as well as the development of a spiritual intelligence that allows an understanding of the world from its religious and transcendent dimension (p. 9). From a complex perspective, the student appears as a partially self-organised cognitive-symbolic system, capable of integrating information, values, experience and meaning into a life project.

#### 4.4.2. Self-Organisation in Classroom Dynamics

At the classroom level, the curriculum introduces an investigative and dialogical logic that enables self-organising processes within defined doctrinal frameworks. Knowledge is structured around problem-based questions: ‘Asking questions to present the content... is to recognise that the Christian message is revealed (...) in the midst of dialogue and searching’ (p. 19), and these may even be ‘questions that arise in children, adolescents and

young people from contact with experiences in their environment' (p. 19). These dynamics allow for the emergence of learning trajectories that are not entirely predictable.

However, this openness is channelled by doctrinal themes, which function as stabilisers of the system: "The themes... constitute the epistemological sphere of theological order (...) the answers that the Catholic Church gives to the problem question from the experience of faith" (p. 20). The classroom thus operates as a semi-self-organised system: questions and meanings emerge, but within a normatively fixed semantic field.

#### 4.4.3. Self-Organisation in the School-Environment Relationship

At the systemic level, CRES is explicitly integrated into the country's legal, cultural and social framework. Students are expected to apply their religious convictions to the transformation of reality: "The application of the doctrine of their own convictions to the transformation of social, political, religious and cultural reality" (p. 10). At the same time, CRES is part of a network of shared responsibility between the state, families and religious institutions: "the state... will protect people in their beliefs... and facilitate their participation... in the pursuit of the common good" (p. 12).

From the perspective of complexity, this constitutes a multilevel system in which social self-organisation is strongly regulated by legal and curricular agreements rather than by spontaneous dynamics.

Overall, the Colombian programme shows strongly supervised self-organisation: the student is conceived as a reflective subject, the classroom operates through questions and research, and the school articulates with society through the ethical application of faith. However, at all three levels, these processes are highly structured by standards, doctrines and legal frameworks, forming a complex but hierarchically regulated system.

A review of the four CRES reference programmes in Latin America shows that, although they all enable real forms of self-organisation, these are deployed in profoundly different normative, symbolic and institutional architectures. The diversity of these designs raises a question that cannot be resolved in a purely descriptive manner: what happens when systems configured in these ways face increasingly complex, plural and uncertain contexts?

## 5. Critical Analysis: Tensions and Challenges

### 5.1. The Complexity of the Environment as a Systemic Requirement

CRES programmes do not operate in a vacuum. They unfold in social, cultural and symbolic environments that, in recent decades, have undergone profound, accelerated and largely irreversible transformations. These changes affect not only the religious content that is transmitted, but also the very conditions under which religious experience can be proposed, interpreted and appropriated by new generations.

Among these transformations, at least four intertwined processes stand out.

- First, *religious and cultural pluralism* has become the ordinary condition of socialisation: students inhabit fragmented landscapes of meaning where religious traditions, non-institutional spiritualities, forms of unbelief and secularised narratives coexist.
- Second, *the crisis of religious and educational institutions* has weakened traditional forms of symbolic authority, shifting the transmission of faith towards frameworks of choice, experimentation and critical distancing.
- Thirdly, *young people's subjectivities* are now shaped by less linear trajectories, greater identity reflexivity and constant exposure to multiple interpretative frameworks, especially through digital culture.

- Finally, *global interconnection* intensifies the flows of religious and spiritual discourses, placing CRES in a network of influences that far exceeds national, confessional or school frameworks.

Under such conditions, systems aimed at accompanying processes of meaning, identity and spirituality cannot limit themselves to reproducing linear transmission schemes or rigid structures of symbolic control. Rather, they face a structural requirement: to develop forms of organisation capable of adapting, learning and reconfiguring themselves in interaction with changing environments.

It is in this context that the concept of self-organisation acquires its analytical relevance. It is not simply a desirable pedagogical feature, but a systemic condition for CRES to operate meaningfully in highly complex contexts. Curricular programmes can therefore be read as designs for educational systems that enable or limit certain levels of adaptation, emergence and learning in the face of a profoundly transformed environment.

### 5.2. Thresholds of Self-Organisation in CRES

To assess the adequacy of CRES programmes in increasingly complex contexts, it is not enough to establish whether or not self-organisation exists. From the perspective of complexity sciences, systems can exhibit different “thresholds of self-organisation”, i.e., different capacities to regulate, learn and reconfigure themselves in interaction with their environment. These thresholds do not describe normative qualities, but rather functional properties of systems.

For analytical purposes, three levels of educational self-organisation are proposed here.

1. The first level, which can be called reactive self-organisation, corresponds to systems capable of responding to stimuli and solving local problems without modifying their underlying structures. The actors adapt, but the system does not learn from itself. In education, this translates into students adjusting their behaviour to complete tasks, classrooms carrying out prescribed activities, and schools reacting to external demands without transforming their internal logic.
2. The second level, called reflexive self-organisation, introduces the system’s ability to observe its own processes, evaluate them, and make internal adjustments. Here, feedback mechanisms, pedagogical review, and institutional improvement appear. The system learns from its experience, but this reflexivity tends to remain confined to its own frameworks, without a systematic reading of the broader environment.
3. The third level, which can be called ecological self-organisation, involves the system’s ability to integrate information from multiple levels of its environment—cultural, social, symbolic and institutional—and to structurally reconfigure itself accordingly. At this threshold, the system not only adapts but evolves: it redefines its objectives, reorganises its relationships and modifies its ways of operating in dialogue with changing contexts.

These three levels can manifest themselves in different ways in the key areas of CRES: the student, the classroom and the school-environment system.

- At the student level, reactive self-organisation is expressed in the ability to complete tasks and reproduce content; reflective self-organisation is expressed in the evaluation of one’s own learning and the regulation of effort; and ecological self-organisation is expressed in the integration of diverse religious, cultural and biographical experiences into a developing spiritual identity capable of critical dialogue with its environment.
- At the classroom level, reactive self-organisation appears in the execution of planned activities; reflective self-organisation in the systematic incorporation of feedback and

pedagogical adjustment; and ecological self-organisation when the classroom can articulate knowledge, real problems and changing contexts in open learning dynamics.

- At the school-environment system level, reactive self-organisation is observed when institutions respond to regulations or crises without altering their structures; reflective self-organisation is observed when they evaluate policies and practices to introduce internal improvements; and ecological self-organisation is observed when the system is capable of reading cultural, religious and social transformations and sustainably reconfiguring its educational project and curricular frameworks.

This threshold framework allows CRES programmes to be analysed not only for what they declare, but also for the type of complexity they are structurally prepared to sustain.

### 5.3. Mismatches Between Programmes and Environmental Demands

A comparative reading of the four school religious education programmes shows that all of them activate, to varying degrees, real forms of self-organisation at the student, classroom and institutional system levels.

- At the student level, the four programmes recognise capacities for self-regulation, reflection and meaning-making. However, these capacities are mostly designed to operate at reactive or, at best, reflective thresholds: responding to predefined content, activities and symbolic frameworks. In environments marked by fluid religious identities, non-institutional spiritualities and plural narratives of meaning, the self-organisation required is ecological in nature: integration of diverse biographical trajectories, negotiation of affiliations and critical elaboration of one's own spirituality. When the curriculum design does not systematically enable these processes, students are forced to manage for themselves a complexity that the education system is unable to fully support.
- A similar tension can be observed at the classroom level. The four programmes incorporate practices of participation, dialogue and evaluation that activate forms of reflective self-organisation. However, the complexity of the environment—religious pluralism, conflicts of meaning, cultural tensions and crises of institutional legitimacy—requires classrooms capable of operating as ecologically open systems, integrating real problems, heterogeneous knowledge and the life experiences of the student body. When the classroom remains structurally anchored to closed teaching sequences or rigid interpretative frameworks, complexity enters in a disorderly manner, generating frictions that the pedagogical system itself is not designed to process.
- At the school-environment system level, the mismatch becomes even more visible. Although the programmes analysed show varying degrees of capacity for internal evaluation and adjustment, only some achieve significant levels of ecological self-organisation, that is, active reading and structural transformation in response to socio-cultural and religious changes. In contexts characterised by secularisation, pluralism, symbolic mobility and digital transformation, systems that remain organised around impermeable identity, doctrinal or administrative frameworks tend to experience a growing gap between their design and the reality they seek to accompany.

These mismatches do not invalidate the educational or religious value of the programmes, but they do reveal a deeper phenomenon: in many cases, CRES in Latin America operates with self-organising architectures designed for less complex contexts. As the environment becomes more uncertain, diverse and interconnected, these architectures are subjected to pressures for which they do not always have sufficient mechanisms for adaptation, learning and reconfiguration.

From this perspective, the tensions currently affecting CRES should not be interpreted solely as ideological, pedagogical or confessional conflicts, but rather as symptoms of

a systemic misalignment between the available thresholds of self-organisation and the emerging challenges of the world in which they operate.

#### 5.4. The Paradox of School Religious Education in Complex Contexts

The mismatches identified in the previous section are not simply implementation deficits or curricular inconsistencies. They express a structural paradox that runs through RSE in Latin America today: the more complex, plural and uncertain socio-religious contexts become, the more tension is placed on educational models designed to offer meaning, identity and spiritual guidance.

This paradox manifests itself on several interrelated levels.

- Firstly, there is a *paradox of identity*. The CRES is called upon to accompany processes of spiritual identity construction in subjects who inhabit open, hybrid and fragmented symbolic universes. However, many of its curricular devices continue to rely on relatively stable frameworks of belonging, tradition and authority. The more open the environment, the greater the pressure to make these frameworks more flexible; but the greater the flexibility, the greater the perceived risk of diluting the religious identity that CRES seeks to preserve. The system is thus caught between the need to adapt and the fear of losing its own symbolic centre of gravity.
- Secondly, a *paradox of pedagogical mediation* arises. The programmes analysed promote, with varying degrees of emphasis, practices of dialogue, reflection, research and participation, activating relevant levels of reflective self-organisation in the classroom. However, the complexity of contemporary religious experiences (intersected by emotions, biographical narratives, non-institutional spiritualities and conflicts of meaning) requires mediations capable of integrating cognitive, affective, cultural and existential dimensions. When pedagogy remains anchored to didactic sequences or languages that fail to accommodate this density, classroom self-organisation becomes insufficient to process the real complexity that enters it.
- Thirdly, a *systemic paradox* emerges. Educational and religious institutions seek to ensure coherence, continuity and legitimacy through normative, curricular and doctrinal frameworks. However, complex contexts demand systems capable of learning from experience, incorporating diversity and reconfiguring themselves in interaction with their environment. When regulatory mechanisms predominate over ecological feedback mechanisms, the system can maintain stability in the short term, but at the cost of a growing disconnect from the cultural, religious and youth transformations that are taking place within its field of action.

These paradoxes are not circumstantial anomalies, but expressions of a structural tension between the complexity of the environment and the architecture of educational-religious systems. They reveal the limitations of CRES models which, even when incorporating participation, dialogue or reflection, continue to operate within self-organising frameworks that do not fully reach the ecological threshold required by current contexts.

From this perspective, the question that arises for CRES is not simply how to improve practices or update content, but how to rethink the very forms of organisation, mediation and relationship with the environment that structure its work. It is in this horizon that both the limits and the emerging potentials of a CRES capable of embracing and inhabiting contemporary complexity come into play.

#### 5.5. Structural Limits and Emerging Potentials of School Religious Education

The analysis of the thresholds of self-organisation and the paradoxes that permeate school religious education in complex contexts allows us to simultaneously outline the structural limits and emerging potentials of the field. Neither should be understood as

contingent features of particular programmes, but rather as effects of the systemic architectures that organise the relationship between the subject, the classroom, the institution and the environment.

Among the most significant limits is the difficulty of many CRES systems to sustain forms of ecological self-organisation at all levels. While reactive and reflective self-organisation appears to be relatively widespread—in learning, dialogue, evaluation, or reflection practices—the ability to sustainably integrate the cultural, religious, and social complexity of the environment into the curricular and institutional frameworks themselves is much more fragile. When this integration does not occur, CRES operates with maps of meaning that no longer fully correspond to the territory in which it seeks to intervene.

Added to this limitation is the tension between symbolic stability and systemic adaptability. Religious education systems need to preserve narratives, traditions and frameworks of interpretation that give continuity and depth to the believer's experience. However, in contexts marked by pluralism, identity mobility and crises of authority, these same frameworks can become obstacles to communication, recognition and cultural relevance. The challenge is not to choose between stability and change, but to develop architectures capable of articulating both poles without one cancelling out the other.

Alongside these limitations, the analysis also reveals emerging potential. In the four programmes studied, there are fragmentary but significant practices, devices and concepts that open up space for higher levels of self-organisation: student leadership, reflective methodologies, articulation with the context, intercultural dialogue and formative assessment, among others. These dynamics do not yet constitute fully ecological systems, but they do act as seeds of complexity that, under certain conditions, could be articulated into solid educational configurations.

From this perspective, CRES in Latin America presents itself as a field in transition. It is not simply in crisis or fully aligned with the complexity of the contemporary world, but rather situated at an evolutionary threshold, where structures inherited from less complex contexts coexist with practices that point towards more open, reflective and ecologically integrated forms of spiritual education.

This diagnosis does not close the debate, but rather opens it. Identifying the limits and potentials of current self-organising architectures allows us to understand more precisely where the possibilities of a CRES capable of inhabiting complexity without renouncing its vocation of meaning are at stake today. In this intermediate space, between heritage and emergence, lies its central challenge today.

## 6. Conclusions

This study set out to investigate what levels of educational self-organisation enable official CRES programmes in Chile, Brazil, Costa Rica and Colombia, and what tensions emerge when these levels are confronted with increasingly complex socio-religious contexts. The analysis developed provides a concise but structural response to both dimensions of this question.

First, the four programmes show that self-organisation is not absent in contemporary CRES. In all cases, significant capacities for reactive and reflective self-organisation are identified, especially at the student and classroom levels. Active participation, self-regulation, reflection on one's own learning, dialogue and the construction of meaning are promoted, with varying degrees of emphasis. These dynamics allow CRES to be more than just a mere transmission of doctrinal content, incorporating experiential, interpretative and relational dimensions characteristic of living educational processes.

However, comparative analysis reveals an uneven distribution of self-organisation thresholds, particularly at the school-environment system level. While some programmes

enable incipient or partial forms of ecological self-organisation—that is, the ability to read the context, integrate diversity and reconfigure itself in response to cultural and religious transformations—others remain structurally anchored in normative, identity-based or administrative frameworks that limit their plasticity in the face of complex environments. In the latter cases, the self-organisation of students and classrooms does not always find a systemic correlate that sustains, amplifies or converts it into institutional learning.

Secondly, these differences allow us to understand the tensions that programmes experience in the contemporary context. Where the thresholds for ecological self-organisation are low, CRES tends to face greater imbalances in the face of religious pluralism, secularisation, cultural diversity and the transformation of youth subjectivities. On the other hand, where these thresholds are higher—albeit in a fragmentary way—greater capacities for adaptation, dialogue, and re-signification emerge, even when tensions between identity stability and contextual openness persist.

Overall, the results of the study allow us to affirm that the adaptation of CRES to complex contexts does not depend primarily on the updating of content, the adoption of innovative methodologies or institutional goodwill, but rather on the architecture of self-organisation that the curriculum programmes effectively enable. It is this architecture—at its various thresholds and levels—that ultimately conditions the capacity of CRES to accompany processes of meaning, identity, and spirituality in societies marked by diversity, uncertainty, and rapid change.

Beyond comparing national CRES programmes, this study provides a conceptual tool for analysing how CRES systems are organised and adapted in highly complex contexts. By proposing self-organisation as an analytical lens, the work shifts the focus from content or regulatory frameworks to the systemic architecture that articulates students, classrooms and institutions.

This approach allows programmes to be understood not only by what they declare, but also by the type of processes they structurally enable or restrict. The introduction of different thresholds of self-organisation provides a framework for describing more accurately the capacities for adaptation, learning and meaning production of different national models, without reducing them to a scale of successes or deficits.

In this sense, the study contributes to placing the discussion on CRES on a systemic and evolutionary level, which is more appropriate for considering its place in contexts marked by pluralism, uncertainty and cultural transformation.

Like any situated analysis, this study has limitations that need to be made explicit. First, the corpus is restricted to four official CRES programmes, even though other programmes exist, and knowing that the prescriptive is only one level of curriculum development.

Secondly, the approach adopted favoured the concept of self-organisation as a lens through which to interpret the complexity of CRES. This choice made it possible to identify systemic architectures and relevant thresholds of adaptation, but it does not exhaust the multiple dimensions of complex thinking. Other concepts—such as emergence, co-evolution or feedback—would have opened up additional interpretations, at the cost of greater length and analytical density.

Finally, the study does not include empirical evidence on the implementation of the programmes or on the experience of students and teachers. The relationship between the curriculum designs analysed here and actual practices therefore constitutes a complementary line of research.

Recognising these limitations does not relativise the results, but rather places them within a broader process of exploring CRES as a complex, evolving system.

The analysis developed does not exhaust the possibilities for research on CRES in complex contexts; on the contrary, it highlights a set of questions that reconfigure the field

of CRES itself. By placing self-organisation at the centre of the analysis, the focus shifts from comparing programmes to understanding how religious education systems learn, adapt and transform.

A first line of inquiry opens up around curriculum design: how can we conceive of curricula that allow for higher thresholds of ecological self-organisation, capable of integrating religious pluralism, cultural diversity, subjective experience and spiritual tradition into dynamic configurations, and not just as transmission schemes?

A second line concerns teacher training: what kind of preparation would enable CRES teachers to act as mediators of self-organising processes, capable of sustaining dialogue, managing uncertainty and facilitating the emergence of meaning in heterogeneous contexts?

A third line concerns evaluation: how can we assess processes of meaning-making, spiritual maturation, or intercultural dialogue without reducing them to simplistic indicators, when these processes are precisely non-linear and emergent?

Finally, a question of social scope arises: if CRES achieves higher levels of ecological self-organisation, to what extent can it contribute not only to individual formation, but also to coexistence, social cohesion and the collective elaboration of meaning in fragmented societies?

These questions do not constitute a closed agenda, but rather a horizon for research and action. They outline the possibility of a CRES that not only responds to the complexity of the present, but also actively helps us learn to inhabit it.

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## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

|         |                                                 |
|---------|-------------------------------------------------|
| CRES    | Catholic Religious Education in Schools         |
| CELAM   | Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal Council  |
| FONAPER | Permanent National Forum on Religious Education |
| BNCC    | National Common Core Curriculum                 |

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The countries are Argentina (Tucumán province), Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Panama, Peru, and the Dominican Republic;
- <sup>2</sup> The work of Bonilla Morales (2015) continues to be pioneering: Educación religiosa escolar en perspectiva de complejidad. Bogotá: Editorial Bonaventuriana.

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