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## Teaching controversial issues in Religious Education: RE teachers' attitudes and perceptions

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# Teaching controversial issues in Religious Education: RE teachers' attitudes and perceptions

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## Abstract

Controversial issues in education have become more and more popular in recent years. Teachers themselves play a key role in their effective teaching, as they are the ones who are called upon to put into practice what the literature suggests in theory. This article explores the attitudes and perceptions of 33 Religious Education teachers on controversial issues, their competence (theological-pedagogical) and their concerns, regarding the teaching of controversial issues. The research was conducted in the context of two training meetings in September and October 2019, through a closed-ended questionnaire, based on the Likert rating scale. Data analysis was performed using the SPSS statistical package (version 25.0). The main conclusion is that teachers, although willing to apply the teaching of controversial issues in the classroom, nevertheless seem reluctant and uncertain about their professional and personal readiness. Therefore, the need to design a training framework for teachers, based on the model proposed by the Council of Europe on the teaching of controversial issues, emerges.

**Key words:** controversial issues, Religious Education (RE), RE teachers, attitudes, perceptions

## 1. Introduction

Controversial issues have been the focus of education in recent decades, mainly in Europe, but also at a global level. The emergence of extreme social phenomena (fundamentalism, terrorism, the rise of far-right parties), coupled with the educational shift towards real-life issues, make the teaching of controversial issues necessary for democratic education. That is why, in recent years, controversial issues have been included in a series of official texts that clearly define how they should be approached in school. According to the Council of Europe (CoE), controversial issues are defined as “issues which arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society” (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015, p. 8). However, a controversial issue does not constitute a mere disagreement, but it also encompasses a set of criteria. More specifically, an issue is considered to be controversial when: a) it divides society, communities and/or social groups; b) it evokes strong feelings; c) its arguments cannot be contrary to reason (Dearden, 1981, p. 38); d) it provokes social criticism; e) it generates conflicting explanations and solutions

based on alternative beliefs or values and/or competing interests (Stradling, Noctor, & Baines, 1984); f) it involves a substantial number of people or groups; g) it cannot be settled by appeal to evidence (Levinson, 2006, p. 1204).

Despite the fact that a controversial issue may arise in any social environment and at any time, its character and content are subject to a variety of factors. First of all, controversial issues vary, depending on their impact (local vs global), duration (long-standing vs very recent), place and time (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015, p. 8). In addition, it should be noted that, despite their public nature, controversial issues rely heavily on the subjective interpretation of reality and the personal experiences of the parties involved (Lynch & McKenna, 1990). People often tend to interpret the same issue in different ways, as they conceive different causes leading to the problem and, therefore, propose different solutions (Oulton, Dillon, & Grace, 2004, p. 412). Having this argument in mind, it is important to highlight the significance of the personal, historical, social, and cultural context of each person (Misco, 2012). The differences between people, in terms of personality, sex, attitudes, historical and social background, cognitive thinking, skills and knowledge organizing, potentially lead to different interpretations and processing of the already existing information and experiences. This is especially evident with regard to controversial public issues, such as traumatic historical events or human rights debates (Hess, 2002; 2008; McCully, 2005; 2006). In this case, emotions play a key role in the emergence of controversial issues, since they refer to the ethnic and cultural identities of those involved. As a result, it could be argued that emotions constitute a reinforcing factor for controversial issues, since they reproduce emotionally charged views and sharpen social divisions (Zembylas & Kambani, 2012).

From this perspective, it is obvious that controversial issues affect education, since they constitute both a lived reality for students and a part of the curriculum for most school subjects, such as Religious Education (RE). International research shows that the teaching of controversial issues contributes significantly to the development of skills and attitudes, general literacy and academic performance, and it seems that in the long run, students dealing with these issues in school tend to develop active participation in public life and decision-making, a fact that highlights the democratic value of controversial issues in education (Barton & McCully, 2007; Harwood & Hahn, 1990; Hess, 2008; Kerr & Huddleston, 2015; QCA, 1998).

It is evident from the above, that the teaching of controversial issues requires the creation of a safe environment within the classroom, “where [these] issues can be discussed and debated openly by students, supported and facilitated by teachers” (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015, p. 12); one which will allow students to negotiate safely and fruitfully about sensitive issues and prepare them to live in a democratic society, where controversies and conflicts are handled through non-violent means, such as discussion and dialogue (Claire & Holden, 2007). In order to achieve such a goal and develop a safe environment for teaching controversial issues, it is necessary to look into the role of the people who are responsible for building and maintaining it. Therefore, the aim of this article is to examine RE teachers’ perceptions and attitudes and towards controversial issues. Based on research conducted in the context of a master’s thesis (Nazar, 2020), this article provides useful findings about RE teachers’ readiness and willingness to

engage in teaching controversial issues in the classroom and proposes the development of a training framework, based on the European standards for teachers' training.

## 2. Controversial issues and Religious Education

Up until recently, the term “controversial issues” was rarely used in the context of RE, per se. Apart from the recent special issue of *Religions* on this particular theme<sup>1</sup>, controversial issues have been sparsely researched in RE. This is mainly due to the fact that controversial issues, as a subject of teaching, are mainly occupied by school subjects such as Citizenship Education and Ethics. According to international educational experience, the term “controversial” refers to issues that have a political, social or personal impact and raise and/or address issues of values and beliefs (QCA, 2001). This assumption is particularly important for RE, if one considers that, in its essence, RE refers to what people believe (beliefs), depending on their value background, that is, their religion or non-religion. Questions about the nature of truth, the importance of rules and behavior, and the search for meaning are presented as demanding and controversial, with strong moral precepts in the context of RE (Broadbent, 2002, p. 22). In addition, it is pointed out that “Religious Education probably embraces the very essence of controversy, dealing as it does in foundations of moral behaviour and the purpose and meaning of life” (QCA, 1998, p. 57). Therefore, it is no surprise that certain models of RE avoid referring to specific issues as controversial, since, according to the above-mentioned positions, all issues that concern it can be characterized as controversial (Walsh, 2011). However, the type of RE plays an important role, as well, and is often a decisive factor in teaching controversial issues. This is especially evident in the context of confessional/denominational RE, which has to “fit” into the respective religion and primarily aims at socialization in one tradition (e.g. Greece-Orthodox Christianity). On the contrary, non-confessional/non-denominational RE models (e.g. Belgium, Netherlands), which can be more “reflexive” and critical, and primarily aim to inform about different religions/worldviews and foster dialogue and reflection, seem to handle controversial issues easier – at least theoretically.

On this ground, controversial issues cannot be ignored neither by students nor by teachers themselves. On the contrary, it can be supported that teaching controversial issues in RE contributes to the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Indeed, research in RE has shown that the teaching of controversial issues raises students' awareness about issues of faith and values (McDonough, 2015) and helps them develop respect for the religious “other” (Quartermaine, 2016), promoting and strengthening the confidence of young people to form a democratic and prejudice-free society (Religious Education Council of England and Wales, 2010, p. 2). Cognitive benefits are also distinguished, such as the expansion of knowledge on controversial religious issues (Anker & von der Lippe, 2018), the development of valid and powerful arguments used for problem solving (Basel, Harms, Prechtel, Weiß, & Rothgangel, 2014), as well as the effective distinction between the actual content of religious beliefs and practices and the stereotypes reproduced within society (Religious Education Council of England

1 See [https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special\\_issues/teaching\\_controversial](https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/teaching_controversial) (Retrieved August 1, 2020).

and Wales, 2010, p. 2).

With regard to Greek RE, the teaching of controversial issues faces a set of challenges, posed by the volatile situation regarding the national framework for the subject. According to Koukounaras-Liagkis, RE in Greece “has become the linchpin of national identity and a fundamental element of Greek education as an example of secularisation (*sic*) in which the Church, to a certain extent, still maintains its influence” (Koukounaras-Liagkis, 2020, p. 153). This is evident by the Church’s intervention in the State’s planning of RE, a fact that flows from the ambiguous constitutional relation between the two parties. Over time, almost all of the changes in RE, from the 1960s onwards, were accompanied by strong reactions from religious organizations, theological unions, and the Church itself. This was the case with Papanoutsos’ reform (1964-66), the revision of the curricula in the 90’s and the new curricula introduced in 2003 (Koukounaras-Liagkis, 2019, pp. 34-45). More recently, the debate on RE focuses on the reforms introduced in 2011, which led to the formal dialogue between the State and the Church, and the introduction of a series of curricula, focused on religious literacy, student-centered development of goals, learning outcomes, subject content, and teaching methodology (Koukounaras-Liagkis, 2020, p. 154). The most recent of these curricula came into force in 2017 and remained effective until the end of 2019.

In this context, it should be noted that, in terms of RE epistemology, RE in Greece is a unique case of RE in Europe. On the one hand, it could be supported that RE in Greece is confessional, as it focuses on the teaching of one dominant religion (i.e. Orthodox Christianity), but non-denominational, since it is organized and supervised by the state, without the direct involvement of any religious institution. On the other hand, the close relation between the State and the Church in Greece could lead to a denominational interpretation of RE, since it is organized and supervised by the state, in cooperation with the state church. Apart from these “antinomies”, it seems that RE in Greece complies with the international and European frameworks regarding human rights, religious freedom and the teaching about religions in public schools (Koukounaras-Liagkis, 2012). However, the teaching of a single religion (i.e. Orthodox Christianity), which aims to the development of an Orthodox Christian conscience and is addressed only to Christian Orthodox students (according to the recent decisions regarding RE, which are discussed below), leaves room for further discussion on the issue<sup>2</sup>.

The recent condemning decisions issued by the Greek Council of State (CoS) (2019), which deemed the curricula for RE at the time as unconstitutional, propose the teaching of all issues in RE with the sole aim to develop students’ Christian Orthodox conscience. This development raises questions about the teaching of controversial issues in RE, in the context of its imminent transformation – as indicated by the decisions of the

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2 Today, RE in Greece is a compulsory school subject, taught two hours per week from the third to the sixth year of Primary School (ages 9-12), throughout Lower High School (ages 13-15) and up to the second year of Upper High School (ages 16-17), and one hour per week in the final year of Upper High School (age 18) and the first three years of Vocational School. The students have the right to opt out, without the option of an alternative RE subject. Since 2020, new curricula have been in force, substituting the curricula of 2017, as a result of two condemning decisions issued by the Greek Council of State.

CoS – into a confessional subject. Will it be useful to teach controversial issues in a RE, which will be addressed exclusively to Orthodox students and their participation in it will be equivalent to an indirect statement of their religious faith? Apparently, the teaching of such issues may not be considered necessary, since it will be concluded that those who attend RE embrace an Orthodox interpretation on every issue, as Orthodox Christians. However, the decisions of the CoS stipulate that RE should be confessional only in regard to its content, without referring to its teaching methods. On the other hand, teaching controversial issues refers to a specific teaching approach, which does not oppose the content of the RE curricula. As a matter of fact, the transitioning curricula for RE (M.E.R.A.-I.E.P., 2020a; 2020b), which were designed in accordance with the decisions of the CoS, include most of the issues taught in the previous “condemned” curricula and maintain their experiential focus. Therefore, it is up to the teachers to choose whether they will teach certain issues (e.g. death, sin, wealth and poverty) as controversial. That being said, it is important to look into the teachers’ role in teaching controversial issues.

### **3. Controversial issues and the teachers’ role**

#### **3.1 Teachers’ attitudes towards teaching controversial issues**

Despite the usefulness and positive value of discussing controversial issues in school, their teaching often raises challenges. Most of them are mainly expressed by teachers and concern the teaching methods, the protection of students, the formation of a safe and appropriate environment in the classroom, the lack of specialized knowledge and the management of student reactions (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015, p. 15). External factors are also added to these challenges, such as possible reactions from parents and the wider community and a lack of support from the education system and school administration.

The emergence of such challenges is mainly due to the fact that, when it comes to teaching controversial issues, it is not a matter of passing on a predetermined “body” of knowledge, with which everyone agrees in advance (Stradling, 1984). It is rather a matter of issues that embody major conflicts of values and interests, which are often accompanied by questionable allegations of events, that are not always obvious (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015). The lack of objectivity, in the sense of one universally accepted interpretation of reality, combined with the strong emotions and conflicts raised by controversial issues (Dewhurst, 1992), lead teachers to teaching deadlocks and concerns, which are expressed in various ways, as research shows.

These reservations are mainly expressed by the teachers’ tendency to avoid issues, which, according to them, increased difficulty. A study conducted at a university in southwestern Scotland, observed a tendency by prospective graduate teachers to avoid issues such as racial and religious conflicts (Robertson, 1998). Similarly, in a later survey conducted in 2008-09 at eight UK universities, prospective teachers stated that issues such as sexual relations, death and mourning, family relations, religion and spirituality, racism, the media and the economic situation, are the most difficult and demanding issues to teach (Woolley, 2011). In this case, the social, economic and ethnic contexts play



an important role in shaping teachers' choices (Abu-Hamdan & Khader, 2014, p. 76; Engebretson, 2018), as the discussion of a controversial issue may refer directly to the students' personal experiences and lives. Philpott et al. (2011) report that the teachers' difficulty in teaching certain issues as controversial, such as religion, in fact lies in the students' predetermined and solid perceptions of them and their dissatisfaction when these issues are approached in a multifaceted and subjective way.

In addition, factors such as lack of relevant training and reduced preparation before teaching, appear to further contribute to the avoidance of teaching controversial issues. Indeed, a large percentage of teachers admit that their professional training in teaching such issues ranges from minimal to non-existent, resulting in their insufficient preparation when they are called upon to talk about them in class and, ultimately, in their abandonment. This assumption is confirmed by research conducted in different educational contexts and across varying subjects, such as: England, where 99 primary and secondary school teachers were asked about this topic, in the context of Citizenship Education (Oulton, Day, Dillon, & Grace, 2004); the USA, where the views of six secondary education teachers of Social Studies were investigated through interviews (Philpott, Clabough, McConkey, & Turner, 2011); Turkey, where a survey was conducted among 20 History teachers in 2012-13 (Demircioglu, 2016); Chile, where 13 prospective secondary school teachers participated in a survey on controversial issues in History (Iglesias, Aceituno, & Toledo, 2017); Norway, where 8 RE teachers were interviewed and expressed their reluctance about teaching terrorism in RE, due to the lack of joint strategy, time and expertise (Anker & von der Lippe, 2018).

The above-mentioned trend is also reinforced by the personal concerns expressed by teachers, about their views and the possible reactions that several issues may raise, as well as by the lack of support from the education system, through an institutionalized teaching framework. To support this position, research has been conducted on teachers' and prospective teachers' concerns about teaching controversial issues, in countries and subjects such as: England, where three Upper Secondary Education (Lyceum) teachers participated in a research on teaching controversial environmental issues in Geography (Cotton, 2006); the USA, where 167 candidate teachers of secondary education were asked whether they were ready to teach controversial issues (Smith & Lennon, 2011, p. 44); Cyprus, where 18 primary school teachers participated in a survey on teaching controversial historical issues in 2010 (Zembylas & Kambani, 2012, p. 125); Taiwan, where 18 prospective Social Science teachers were interviewed (Misco & Tseng, 2017, p. 9).

However, keeping in mind the reasons for avoiding teaching controversial issues, it can be argued that the difficulties faced by teachers are not due to the issues themselves and their content. From the teachers' point of view, most of the studies cited above, confirm their positive attitudes towards the teaching of controversial issues. The positive value of controversial issues, according to teachers, lies in the role they play in the development of students' democratic consciousness, in the high learning outcomes of their teaching and in the topical and timeless nature of these issues for students and societies (Byford, Lennon, & Russell, 2008; Demircioglu, 2016; Oulton, Day, Dillon, & Grace, 2004; Philpott, Clabough, McConkey, & Turner, 2011; Robertson, 1998; Smith &

Lennon, 2011; Woolley & Wragg, 2007; Zembylas & Kambani, 2012).

What seems to constitute an obstacle to the smooth integration of controversial issues in teaching, are the aforementioned external factors, which, however, can be dealt with effectively. This position is supported by research findings on the role of training and preparation in the teaching of controversial issues. Research conducted among candidate teachers in Turkey has shown that the inclusion of controversial issues in their education improves their classroom skills and promotes analytical thinking and respect for differing views on controversial issues (Ersoy, 2010). More recently, it has been verified that teachers who are trained and supported by their school environment, tend to approach controversial issues and discuss them more comfortably (Gindi & Erlich, 2018). In addition, it is emphasized that the appropriate training of teachers helps them (a) to choose which controversial issues they will teach, having in mind the context and dynamics of their class; (b) to examine controversial issues through multiple perspectives, adapting them to the students' emotional and cognitive level; and (c) to protect students from misinformation that prevails in several cases, as well as themselves from external reactions, creating a safe and balanced learning environment (Pace, 2019, p. 27). When asked, in the context of relevant research, teachers themselves argued that thorough planning for teaching and learning about controversial issues contributes to increasing interest within the classroom and facilitates the teaching and the evaluation of the learning process (CCEA, n.d., p. 12). Furthermore, an important factor is the support of teachers in their approaches by parents, colleagues and the school administration, according to a research conducted by Hess (2002). Finally, it is worth noting that education in teaching controversial issues does not eliminate the personal perspective of teachers, but further contributes to its promotion, as the combination of teaching experience with high-level training, encourages the exploration of new approaches and highlights new learning opportunities (Hung, 2018; Kruger, 2012).

### **3.2 Developing a framework for teachers' training**

The challenges faced by teachers are exacerbated by the fact that they (i.e. teachers) are called upon to teach something for which there is no general agreement and, therefore, the risk of prejudice in its teaching is great. To avoid similar risks and overcome obstacles, teachers are called upon to develop a range of knowledge and skills that will help them approach controversial issues more objectively and comprehensively, and deal with any student reactions effectively, aiming to their didactic utilization. According to the CoE (Kerr & Huddlestone, 2015, p. 25), teachers who teach controversial issues need to develop three types of skills:

a) Personal: these skills include the self-awareness of the teachers' beliefs and values, so that they are able to recognize the impact they have on teaching controversial issues, as well as to judge whether it is educationally useful or not to reveal their personal views on an issue.

b) Theoretical: teachers who are engaged with or called to teach controversial issues, should be aware of and take into account the specific and complex nature of these issues. This implies at least a basic knowledge of the economic, social, political,



historical and psychological factors involved in an issue (Stradling, 1984, p. 3) and the ways controversial issues emerge, are approached and – if possible – resolved.

c) Practical: practical skills include the use of appropriate teaching strategies, depending on the topic, the dynamics and the peculiarities of the class, as well as the effective handling of controversial issues with caution and sensitivity.

In the context of the discussion on the competency of teachers on teaching controversial issues, it is proposed – at the European level – to have continuous training on these issues, in order to meet the aforementioned needs. The CoE's guide to teaching controversial issues is a useful educational tool, as it contains a teacher training package, which is addressed to teachers from across the humanities and can be applied to all European school environments (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015, pp. 29-32). The aim of the training package is to help teachers recognize the value of discussing controversial issues in the classroom and to develop their knowledge, skills and confidence for a safe and effective teaching.

Drawing from European experience and the CoE's framework, the training of theologians in teaching controversial issues in RE is proposed. Based on the issue of wealth and poverty and its teaching as a controversial issue, an experiential training workshop was designed, in order to highlight the value of teaching controversial issues, such as wealth and poverty, through RE (Nazar, 2020). In this pilot application, experiential methods were used to approach a controversial issue, while at its core the program was based on continuous discussion and negotiation of all views on the subject. It is also worth noting that the material used was drawn from both the CoE's guide to teaching controversial issues and the Religious Education Curriculum for the Lyceum (M.E.R.R.A.-I.E.P., 2017), a fact which further justifies the place of controversial issues in a modern and democratic RE. Below, we present the research findings from the application, which confirm both the value of teaching of controversial issues in RE and the need for more training applications for teachers, such as the proposed one.

## 4. The research

### 4.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of the research was to investigate RE teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards controversial issues, their method of teaching, and its application by them, in the context of RE.

In order to achieve this aim, the researcher developed the following research questions:

What are RE teachers' perceptions of controversial issues?

What are RE teachers' attitudes towards the place of controversial issues in RE?

What are RE teachers' perceptions of their theological and pedagogical competence?

What difficulties do RE teachers' face in teaching controversial issues?

What are RE teachers' attitudes towards teaching controversial issues as such?

## 4.2 Sample and duration

The research on teaching controversial issues in RE was conducted in September and October 2019, in the context of two training meetings for RE teachers<sup>3</sup>. The first meeting was part of the experiential workshops that took place at the 3rd Panhellenic Meeting of Theologians organized by the Panhellenic Theological Association “KAIROS – for the improvement of Religious Education” (Greek-French School of Ursulines, Athens, September 6-9, 2019). The second meeting was scheduled after an invitation by the Office of Student Practice and Teacher Training (Department of Theology, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens) was sent to RE teachers, and took place at the Myrtillo Café (Athens, October 1, 2019). A total of 33 RE teachers, 15 men (45.5%) and 18 women (54.5%) participated in the research (Table 1). Of those, 12 were teaching at Lower Secondary Education (Gymnasium) schools (36.4%), 11 at Upper Secondary Education (Lyceum) schools (33.3%), while 4 teachers said they were teaching in both (12.1%). In addition, 4 RE teachers stated that they were not appointed in any school yet (12.1%), while 2 of them (6%) indicated their past service at Gymnasium and Gymnasium-Lyceum schools, respectively. Finally, 2 participants chose the answer “Other” (6.1%), apparently because, although they hold Theology degrees, they either work in a different professional field or teach in another educational level (e.g. pre-school, primary or tertiary education) (Table 2). Therefore, it seems that the majority of the research sample (87.8%) is directly related to the area of teaching of RE, that is to say, they are RE teachers with experience.

Table 1. Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	15	45.5	45.5	45.5
	Female	18	54.5	54.5	100.0
	Total	33	100.0	100.0	

3 The meetings took the form of an experiential workshop. Its title was “Crossing the Eye of the Needle: An Outdated Command or a Timeless Lifestyle?” and its duration was two hours (120’). The purpose of the workshop was to highlight the value of teaching controversial issues, such as wealth and poverty, in the modern world, through RE. Specific objectives were: 1) to draw useful conclusions about the value of the theological approach to such issues and 2) to explore teachers’ views on controversial issues, their teaching, and their application by them. At the end of the workshop, participants were expected to be able to: 1) identify Christianity’s positions on wealth and poverty as alternative approaches to the modern technocratic world and 2) highlight useful criteria for the individual and collective responsibility of believers in the management of wealth.

Table 2. Teaching Status

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Lower Secondary Education School (Gymnasium)	12	36.4	36.4	36.4
Upper Secondary Education School (Lyceum)	11	33.3	33.3	69.7
Not appointed	2	6.1	6.1	75.8
Other	2	6.1	6.1	81.8
Gymnasium/Lyceum	4	12.1	12.1	93.9
Gymnasium/Not appointed	1	3.0	3.0	97.0
Gymnasium/Lyceum/Not appointed	1	3.0	3.0	100.0
Total	33	100.0	100.0	

### 4.3 Methodology and data collection

The research data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire, designed to measure teachers' attitudes towards teaching controversial issues in RE (see Appendix). For the reliable measurement of attitudes, it was chosen to design the questions based on the summated rating scale or, as it is commonly known, the Likert scale. According to this scale, the questions are formulated in the form of positive-affirmative statements and the respondents are asked to express their degree of agreement with them. Answers to query statements usually correspond to five values, with the first (value 1) expressing absolute disagreement and the fifth (value 5) expressing absolute agreement. The three intermediate values (value 2, value 3, value 4) indicate simple disagreement, neutrality (neither agree nor disagree) and simple agreement, respectively. The advantages of the scale include its ease of development, its short and pleasant completion and its internal consistency (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 308). In addition, the five-point scale offers the possibility of a neutral response, without "forcing" the participants to express agreement or disagreement if they do not wish to do so (Zafeiropoulos, 2015, pp. 109-110).

The questionnaire used in this study, consisted of ten (10) question-statements. The first three questions concerned the teaching of controversial issues in RE. The next five questions referred to the teachers' readiness and competence to teach controversial issues in the classroom. The last two questions were related to what the workshop participants had learned and their willingness to apply them within the context of RE. The questionnaire was distributed to the teachers at the end of each workshop and the time available to complete it was ten minutes (10).

### 4.4 Data analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The purpose of the analysis was to provide a concise and effective presentation of the data (Nikitas, 2013, p. 23), in order to draw a clear picture of RE teachers' attitudes. For this purpose, the presentation of data through frequency tables was chosen. The presentation of frequencies essentially means "enumerating and recording sample values in the corresponding category"

(Batsidis, 2014, p. 31), providing information about the number of times a response to a corresponding query was selected.

Based on the above-mentioned theoretical principles, for each query in the questionnaire, a corresponding variable was created, with assigned values from 1 to 5. The only exceptions were the first two demographic questions on gender and teaching position, which received different values. Consequently, upon completion of the analysis, ten frequency tables were created, corresponding to the ten questions of the questionnaire and showing the percentages of teachers' agreement or disagreement with the corresponding statements.

All questionnaire data were analyzed using the Social Package for the Social Sciences (IBM SPSS Statistics), version 25.0 (2017).

## 4.5 Findings

In the first question, regarding the view that many of the topics taught in RE are controversial, most of the participants expressed their agreement. More specifically, 87.9% answered that they either agree (30.3%) or strongly agree (57.6%) with this statement. Four out of the 33 participants (12.1%) remained neutral (Table 3).

Table 3. Many of the issues dealt with in Religious Education are controversial.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neither agree nor disagree	4	12.1	12.1	12.1
	Agree	10	30.3	30.3	42.4
	Strongly agree	19	57.6	57.6	100.0
	Total	33	100.0	100.0	

Similarly, RE teachers expressed positive attitudes to the question about wealth and poverty in RE and whether these are really controversial issues, with 71.9% agreeing with this statement. However, one in four RE teachers appears to be uncertain about the nature of these issues, with 25% saying they neither agree nor disagree with the above-mentioned statement. The disagreement percentage was low, with only one participant declaring their opposition (3.1%) to the statement (Table 4).

Table 4. Issues such as wealth and poverty are controversial for Religious Education.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	1	3.0	3.1	3.1
	Neither agree nor disagree	8	24.2	25.0	28.1
	Agree	9	27.3	28.1	56.3
	Strongly agree	14	42.4	43.8	100.0
	Total	32	97.0	100.0	
Missing		1	3.0		
Total		33	100.0		

Regarding the next question, about teaching controversial issues as such in RE, percentages remained at similar levels (Table 5). In particular, 72.7% of the teachers said they agree with the proposal, while a significant proportion of them chose neutrality (21.2%). The disagreement percentage remained low in this case too (6.1%).

Table 5. Controversial issues should be taught as such in Religious Education.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	2	6.1	6.1	6.1
	Neither agree nor disagree	7	21.2	21.2	27.3
	Agree	14	42.4	42.4	69.7
	Strongly agree	10	30.3	30.3	100.0
	Total	33	100.0	100.0	

The first notable differentiation was observed in the questions about teachers' competences. Specifically, regarding the theological training of RE teachers, while 48.5% believe that they have the appropriate theological knowledge to teach controversial religious issues, 42.4% feel neutral about this statement (Table 6). When this percentage is added to the 9.1% of participants who disagree with the statement, it becomes clear that half of the RE teachers in the sample (51.5%) consider that they have a lack of theological training on these issues, at least to some degree. In this context, it is worth noting that the possibility of a neutral response in Likert-type questionnaires, despite its advantages, may in some cases act as an "alibi", so that the respondents do not feel exposed by choosing a clear attitude. This is a phenomenon known as central tendency bias, and its interpretation by the scientific community remains open (Douven, 2018, p. 1209).

Table 6. I believe that I have the appropriate theological knowledge to teach controversial religious issues.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	3	9.1	9.1	9.1
	Neither agree nor disagree	14	42.4	42.4	51.5
	Agree	14	42.4	42.4	93.9
	Strongly agree	2	6.1	6.1	100.0
	Total	33	100.0	100.0	

In addition, regarding their pedagogical training, one in two teachers (51.5%) believes that they can respond to the teaching of controversial issues. As with the previous question, a significant percentage (42.4%) said that they did not agree or disagree with this statement, while a significantly smaller percentage (6.1%) expressed their disagreement (Table 7).

Table 7. I believe that I have the appropriate pedagogical training to teach controversial issues.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	2	6.1	6.1	6.1
	Neither agree nor disagree	14	42.4	42.4	48.5
	Agree	16	48.5	48.5	97.0
	Strongly agree	1	3.0	3.0	100.0
	Total	33	100.0	100.0	

As for the teachers' comfort in talking about controversial issues in the classroom, the percentage of those who expressed agreement stands at 39.4%. 12.1% answered negatively, while the neutrality rate remained relatively stable (48.5%), following the

high level of the previous questions (Table 8).

Table 8. I feel comfortable when I am called upon to teach something controversial.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	4	12.1	12.1	12.1
	Neither agree nor disagree	16	48.5	48.5	60.6
	Agree	11	33.3	33.3	93.9
	Strongly agree	2	6.1	6.1	100.0
	Total	33	100.0	100.0	

The answers to the question about the role of teachers' personal views in teaching controversial issues, were more balanced (Table 9). In this case, the majority (39.4%) stated that they either disagree (33.3%) or strongly disagree (6.1%) with the statement that personal views influence how a particular issue will be taught. However, one in three teachers (33.4%) seems to be influenced by their personal views, according to the responses of those who agreed with this statement. At the same time, the percentage of neutral answers declined (27.3%), in comparison to the high percentage of neutrality observed in the previous questions.

Table 9. My personal views influence the way I teach a controversial issue.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	2	6.1	6.1	6.1
	Disagree	11	33.3	33.3	39.4
	Neither agree nor disagree	9	27.3	27.3	66.7
	Agree	9	27.3	27.3	93.9
	Strongly agree	2	6.1	6.1	100.0
Total	33	100.0	100.0		

The teachers' responses to the question about the reaction(s) that may be raised by teaching a controversial issue, are of particular interest (Table 10). In this question, almost half of the participants (48.5%) answered that they are concerned about the possible negative reaction(s) of the students to a sensitive issue, while 24.3% did not seem to be dealing with such a concern. In addition, a significant number of participants (27.3%) remained neutral, without taking a clear stance on the matter.

Table 10. I am concerned about the possible student reaction(s) to a controversial issue.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	2	6.1	6.1	6.1
	Disagree	6	18.2	18.2	24.2
	Neither agree nor disagree	9	27.3	27.3	51.5
	Agree	11	33.3	33.3	84.8
	Strongly agree	5	15.2	15.2	100.0
Total	33	100.0	100.0		

On the other hand, 78.8% of the participants expressed a positive attitude towards the new knowledge gained in the workshop, stating that they learned new things about controversial issues, which they did not previously know. Correspondingly, 6.1% of the teachers stated that they did not learn anything new, while 15.2% expressed neutrality (Table 11).



Table 11. In today's workshop I learned things that I did not know about controversial issues.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	2	6.1	6.1	6.1
	Neither agree nor disagree	5	15.2	15.2	21.2
	Agree	15	45.5	45.5	66.7
	Strongly agree	11	33.3	33.3	100.0
	Total	33	100.0	100.0	

Finally, in the question about the possible future implementation of teaching controversial issues, according to the method proposed in the experiential workshop, the overwhelming majority (97%) of the participants stated that they think of applying what they learned in the classroom, while only one teacher (3%) maintained a neutral attitude (Table 12).

Table 12. I think of applying the teaching of controversial issues in the future.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neither agree nor disagree	1	3.0	3.0	3.0
	Agree	17	51.5	51.5	54.5
	Strongly agree	15	45.5	45.5	100.0
	Total	33	100.0	100.0	

## 4.6 Limitations of the study

The main limitation of the research was the size of the sample. The 33 teachers who participated in the study are considered a fairly small sample, so that it is not possible to generalize the conclusions, given the small number of research applications (2) too. This type of sampling, characterized by a relatively homogeneous and small number of participants, is known as “convenience sampling” in the literature, precisely because the sample is somehow “committed” to participate in the research, as it “involves choosing the nearest individuals” available to the researcher (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, pp. 155-156). In this case, the sample consisted of RE teachers, who are members of a specific theological association (KAIROS) and closely associated with the Office of Student Practice and Teacher Training (Department of Theology, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens). Therefore, their response to the research was relatively easy and anticipated. The choice of such a small and homogeneous sample, aside from serving practical reasons, aimed to gain a feeling of the issues under investigation, before conducting a proper sample survey (Robson & McCartan, 2016, pp. 280-281).

An additional limitation was the teaching experience of the RE teachers, who participated in the research. More specifically, they are teachers of a high teaching and theological level, who have repeatedly participated in trainings of RE teachers (both as trainers and as trainees), while some of them hold postgraduate and doctoral degrees. This could explain why the vast majority of them supported the inclusion of teaching controversial issues in RE and stated that they will apply the proposed method; that is, they are familiar with change. This fact, while seemingly absolutely positive, raises

questions about the representativeness of the sample. Could the research data be generalized and include those RE teachers who “resist” change (Grilis, 2019) or those who lack a similar level of teaching experience?

Finally, in relation to the above-mentioned observation, some reservations are maintained, regarding the full understanding of the object of the research, on behalf of the participants. Their enthusiasm for teaching controversial issues and their growing confidence in their competence do not go hand in hand with international research data, where teachers seem to express several reservations about applying similar techniques. This leads to the assumption that some of the participants may have thought that the workshop was about another teaching approach they already knew, due to their familiarity with the experiential methods proposed by the RE curricula.

## 5. Conclusions – Discussion

The analysis of the research data on RE teachers’ attitudes and perceptions, leads to the following conclusions:

A large proportion of participating teachers (72-88% per case) seems to understand the controversial nature of several issues debated in RE, such as wealth and poverty, and is positive about teaching these issues using a specific teaching approach. This conclusion follows from the high agreement rates in the respective questions (Questions 1, 2 and 3).

At the same time, with regard to the theological and pedagogical training of RE teachers on teaching controversial issues (Questions 4 and 5), a significant number of the participants shifted to neutral attitudes (42.4% in both cases). This phenomenon can be interpreted either as a “disguised” disagreement, in order to avoid taking a clear position on the questions, or as an expression of ignorance or even indifference on behalf of some RE teachers towards controversial issues and their teaching.

In addition, regarding RE teachers’ self-esteem and personal concerns, when asked to talk about a controversial or sensitive issue in the classroom, half of them (48.5%) avoided saying whether or not they feel comfortable about teaching controversial issues (Question 6). Similarly, when asked about whether they are influenced by their personal views or not, regarding the teaching of a controversial issue, the participants appeared divided (Question 7). Also, almost half of the teachers who participated in the study (48.5%), expressed concerns about the possible reactions, that a controversial issue could cause among students (Question 8).

Finally, most of the participants in the study appear to have gained new knowledge, that they did not have (Question 9) and are willing to use it in the classroom (Question 10), despite having no previous experience in teaching controversial issues. The overwhelming agreement rates (79% and 97% respectively) on both questions, confirm the above-mentioned conclusion.

In general, the research on RE teachers has shown that the majority of them understand both the existence of controversial issues and the need for teaching them in RE, and are willing to apply it in the classroom. However, at the same time, a significant

number of teachers appear to be uncertain about their theological and pedagogical competence, and are concerned about their psychological readiness to teach controversial issues and their students' possible reaction(s) to controversial issues. The combination of these trends, namely the willingness to apply the teaching of controversial issues, on the one hand, and the simultaneous reluctance due to lack of relevant experience, on the other, poses the need for the development of a RE teachers' training program, in accordance with the existing European training framework for teaching controversial issues.

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Summarizing the findings of the research, it should be noted that the research on RE teachers does not allow generalizations, mainly due to the size of the sample. The aim of this research was to generate a first set of indicative data – regarding Greek standards – on the attitudes and views expressed by theologians on controversial issues and their teaching in RE. Despite the limitations regarding the sample, the results of the research are, to a large extent, similar to corresponding international research. This is evident from the participants' admission that there are controversial issues related to RE and their positive attitude towards their teaching. As mentioned above, the positive attitude of teachers towards controversial issues and the recognition of their educational value for students, have been repeatedly confirmed, mostly at the European level (Byford, Lennon, & Russell, 2008; Demircioglu, 2016; Oulton, Day, Dillon, & Grace, 2004; Philpott, Clabough, McConkey, & Turner, 2011; Robertson, 1998; Smith & Lennon, 2011; Woolley & Wragg, 2007; Zembylas & Kambani, 2012). Therefore, it can be argued that the conditions are ripe for the introduction of the teaching of controversial issues in RE, at least in terms of teachers' willingness.

At the same time, the “divided” attitudes of RE teachers with regard to their competence, their personal views and the fear of possible student reaction, go hand in hand with the corresponding international experience (Cotton, 2006; Misco & Tseng, 2017, p. 9; Smith & Lennon, 2011, p. 44; Zembylas & Kambani, 2012, p. 125). The concerns of RE teachers in the research may not be explicitly expressed, but they are implied by the large percentage of those who chose to take a neutral stance. This is a trend that is indicative of the perplexity and confusion that generally prevail in a large percentage of theologians, regarding the new teaching methods in RE (Grilis, 2019, p. 78) and the constant changes that the subject undergoes. It is precisely this aspect of research that confirms the need for continuous training of Greek RE teachers (Grilis, 2019, p. 78; Karamouzis, Fokidis, & Tsirevelos, 2019, pp. 79-81), so that they are able to respond in teaching controversial issues effectively, encouraging the exploration of new approaches and highlighting new learning opportunities, as has been demonstrated in practice (Hung, 2018; Kruger, 2012).

In conclusion, the importance of this research lies in the fact that it is the first attempt to approach the teaching of controversial issues in the context of Greek RE. Its relevance to international applied research and the extraction of comparable findings, lay the foundations for the broader and more systematic engagement of the Greek research and academic community with the current topic of teaching controversial issues, both in

the context of RE and in the wider spectrum of the modern democratic school. Similar research attempts, such as the present one, could be applied to larger samples and with greater frequency in the context of the Greek RE. This would both improve the teaching of controversial issues and ensure the generalizability of the research results, as the samples would differ quantitatively from those of the present study. Future research could focus on teaching certain specific controversial issues – aside from wealth and poverty – or even exploring the reception of controversial issues by students. These research attempts could be carried out either by individual researchers or even in the context of a broader research program, which would ensure greater research coherence and reliability. In addition, it would be interesting to investigate the teachers' attitudes before and after their training on teaching controversial issues, in order to observe whether they are willing to proceed to “change” and to apply this didactic approach in the classroom. Finally, it would be useful to investigate and apply the teaching of controversial issues in Primary School, not only in terms of specific issues, but more generally for all the controversial issues that concern Religious Education in these grades.

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## Appendix

The questionnaire of the research on RE teachers' attitudes and perceptions.

Take 10 minutes to complete this short anonymous questionnaire. Your answers will be useful for shaping a clear picture regarding the teaching of controversial issues in Religious Education and will be utilized, in the context of a relevant research.

**Gender:** Male  Female  **Teaching position:** Lower Secondary Education School (Gymnasium)  Upper Secondary Education School (Lyceum)  Not appointed  Student  Other

(1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree)

Question 1: Many of the issues dealt with in Religious Education are controversial.  
1 2 3 4 5

Question 2: Issues such as wealth and poverty are controversial for Religious Education.  
1 2 3 4 5

Question 3: Controversial issues should be taught as such in Religious Education.  
1 2 3 4 5

Question 4: I believe that I have the appropriate theological knowledge to teach controversial religious issues.  
1 2 3 4 5

Question 5: I believe that I have the appropriate pedagogical training to teach controversial issues.  
1 2 3 4 5

Question 6: I feel comfortable when I am called upon to teach something controversial.  
1 2 3 4 5

Question 7: My personal views influence the way I teach a controversial issue.  
1 2 3 4 5

Question 8: I am concerned about the possible student reaction(s) to a controversial issue.  
1 2 3 4 5

Question 9: In today's workshop I learned things that I did not know about controversial issues.  
1 2 3 4 5

Question 10: I think of applying the teaching of controversial issues in the future.  
1 2 3 4 5

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