

Courses & Curricula

Religious Education in ACT Public Schools - Precept and Practice

When the administration of public schools in the Australian Capital Territory was transferred from the New South Wales government to the Commonwealth Government in 1974, an old New South Wales law governing the provision of religious education in public schools continued in force in the ACT. This curious legacy created a dilemma for both the fledgling ACT Schools Authority and the then Commonwealth Minister for Education, Kim Beazley, and it has since dogged the introduction of liberal religious education curricula into Canberra's public schools. This article will describe the position of religious education in the schools and suggest reasons for the modest level of success achieved by a small progressive public school system in implementing programs which address religion as a significant human phenomenon. There may also be a lesson here for the academic study of religion.

The legislative background can be stated briefly. Public education in the ACT is governed by the ACT Education Ordinance 1937 and the ACT Schools Authority Ordinance 1976 made under the Seat of Government (Administration) Act 1910. The former provides for school level education generally, including compulsory attendance at school and the registration of non-government schools, and the latter provides for the administration of public schools. The chief interest here is Section 3 of the Education Ordinance which provides for the incorporation of the New South Wales Public Instruction Act of 1880. This Act as enacted

before 1911 now applies in the ACT only in the matter of religious education in public schools. Sections 7, 17 and 18 of the Act provide respectively for the setting apart of up to one hour during each school day for 'religious instruction', the inclusion of 'general religious teaching' in the secular school program, and the right of parents to withdraw their children from any 'general or special religious instruction'. Without amendment, these outdated provisions with their ill-defined terms would have sat uneasily in the Schools Authority Ordinance which formally established the Authority, and partly for this reason and because amendment was problematic, they were retained as incorporated in the less appropriate Education Ordinance. Some events leading to this legislative settlement are described later in this article.

It is instructive to note parallel developments in the parent State. The Committee appointed by the New South Wales Government in 1975 to consider religious education in the State's public schools recommended continuation of the legal basis for it. In a re-interpretation of the 1880 Act, the Rawlinson Report on Religion in Education in NSW Government Schools (1980) attempted to define 'religious instruction' and 'special religious instruction' as Special Religious Education, and 'general religious teaching' and 'general religious instruction' as General Religious Education. The former meant "education *in* the

distinctive religious tenets and beliefs of the home and family, provided by the churches and other religious groups for children of parents expressing the desire that they receive such teaching"; while the latter, moving beyond biblical studies, aimed "to provide understanding of the major forms of religious thought and expression characteristic of our society and also of other societies in the world", being education *about* these forms. A major weakness of the Rawlinson Report in its preoccupation with the historical principles embodied in the 1880 Act was its proposed retention of non-participation rights in respect of both forms of religious education, thus implicitly denying general religious education its universal educational validity and, in practical terms, preventing integration of general religious education into other curricula. The Education and Public Instruction Act 1987, which replaced the 1880 Act but retained its provisions for 'general religious teaching,' did not resolve this issue.

The policy constraints of the 1880 Act were faced earlier in the ACT where the ACT Schools Authority, which until three years ago reported to the Minister for Education, now to the Minister for Territories, is responsible for overall system-wide policy guidance. School boards, with parent and teacher representation, are responsible for developing the educational policies of their schools within the Authority's guidelines. The initial response of the Schools Authority to its discovery of continued State law on religious education was that school boards should accept responsibility for religious instruction policy. In October 1974 it developed its position on the matter and its policy advice to schools on 'Religious Instruction' was issued at the beginning of the 1975 school year as part of its "Guidelines on Relationships Within the Education

System". In developing this policy the Authority was almost certainly influenced by the Campbell Report on Secondary Education for Canberra (1973) which had recommended that "critical and comparative studies of religion be integrated into the core curriculum, but that dogmatic or sectarian religion not be offered at high school, except on demand as an extra-curricular activity".

The Authority's policy advice, its only statement on religious instruction and religious education, factually confirmed the continuing legal validity of the 1880 Act's provisions but then incongruously affirmed that each school board should determine its own policy on religious instruction. The Authority made clear its view that "there is no place for religious instruction of a denominational kind in the government school program", even if school facilities could be used for such instruction outside the normal school program provided it was requested by students or parents. Importantly, the Authority's advice also conveyed its belief that "general religious education may well form part of a school's curriculum". In a letter to the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine in October 1974, the Authority defined general religious education as "teaching about religion and questions of moral, ethical and spiritual values", and suggested that it could form part of a school curriculum "either as a subject area in itself, as part of an integrated program of studies, or as an essential element in the study of other subjects". In December 1974 the Authority decided that there was a need for further action to promote religious education as distinct from religious instruction.

At about the same time, however, the Authority's views on religious instruction (though not on general religious education) and its proposal that all legislative reference to religious education in public

schools be removed were brought to the attention of the Minister for Education, Mr. Beazley. His Department advised him that if Section 3 of the Education Ordinance was repealed without making a corresponding provision in the Schools Authority Ordinance, all legislation in respect of education in the ACT would be 'silent' on the subject of religious instruction, and that consequently the right of clergy or their representatives to enter schools for purposes of religious instruction and the right of parents to withdraw their children from any form of religious instruction would cease to exist in law in the ACT. The Minister perceived this silence as an issue of civil rights, which neither the Schools Authority nor school boards were competent to abrogate, and even as an issue of religious toleration and liberty. He and the Attorney General felt that there was a right under Section 116 of the Constitution for the provision of religious instruction in government schools. Mr. Beazley was alive to the potential political ramifications of this 'key ideological issue'. His concerns were understood by his successors when confirming his decision to provisionally retain Section 3 of the Education Ordinance. Despite several reviews, most notably in 1982 by Senator Peter Baume, then Minister for Education the legislative provisions for religious education still remain in force. Change was considered neither pressing nor politic; but in 1989 change must be contemplated with the advent of self-government in the ACT.

In describing the position of religious education in ACT public schools, it is necessary to look also at what has actually happened in the schools regardless of legislative outcomes. The ACT public education system was presented with the opportunity in the mid-1970s to develop innovative general religious education programs suited to our pluralistic and

multicultural times. The ACT Schools Authority assisted such development by organising a public seminar on religious education in March 1975 to clarify concepts and aims, a curriculum workshop on religious education for teachers shortly thereafter which resulted in a *Religious Education Workshop Report 1975* made available to school boards, and several in-service courses in religious education in the years that followed. These measures encouraged many school boards to adopt religious education policies and to develop curricula in line with these. The available evidence, however, including a survey of religious education policies and practices in ACT primary schools that I carried out in 1985,¹ suggests that, despite some notable efforts,² religious education has not been a strong feature of the national capital's public schools since their administration was assumed by the Commonwealth. Using the Rawlinson Report's concepts as described earlier in this article, my survey revealed that while some form of Special Religious Education was offered in about one-half of the primary schools, fewer than one-third of the schools offered some form of General Religious Education, usually integrated with other curricula. Why did implementation fall short of the ideal? Apart from factors that inhibit general religious education in other Australian public education systems, such as its perceived marginality and lack of teacher confidence, other possible reasons more peculiar to the ACT but with wider significance suggest themselves.

A primary reason in my view lies in the very devolution of power to school boards which is a major feature of the ACT system. Unless a member of the board, particularly the principal, proposes and pursues a general religious education program with the cooperation of the teaching staff and agreement of parents, no program will be developed or main-

tained after review. It remains discretionary, and this arbitrary situation has resulted in limited opportunities within the system for literacy in religion. This is cause for disquiet for those who consider that a liberal education, among other objectives, should lead to skills in understanding the religious experience of humankind. Nevertheless, although for some years now the ACT Schools Authority has been addressing imbalances in educational practice, such as in its 1984 policy paper on "Responsibilities for Curriculum in ACT Public Schools", believing that it was "timely to place greater emphasis on high standards, good order, coherence and equity across the system", it would be unrealistic to expect general religious education to command unequivocal, broad-based support in a decentralised system. Whether it would fare better or worse than in a more centralised system is another issue.

Again, the religious education reform enthusiasm of 1975 was succeeded by other preoccupations within the system and in time dissipated. The Authority has since taken a low profile on religious education, believing the existing situation to be satisfactory, and only one of the sectoral reviews of ACT education has addressed the matter. The Steinle Review of High Schools in the ACT (1983) declared that curricula would be 'deficient' if schools failed to include a systematic study of human religious experience, but it acknowledged that decisions about curriculum are made by school boards and it would be inappropriate for the Schools Authority to demand the introduction of religious education into schools by administrative fiat.

General religious education has also suffered through its historical and conceptual association with faith education. Its importance in public schools has tended to recede in the face of competing de-

mands for or controversy over faith education, particularly when the school community fails to properly distinguish between the two. This became apparent during my survey. However, a distinction has always been recognised by the Schools Authority.

Lastly, moves to implement more liberal programs in religious education in the late 1970s were dampened somewhat by the articulate opposition of a Canberra group called the Keep Out Religious Indoctrination Society (KORI). While recognising that religion could not be excluded from the study of human society, KORİ staunchly defended the secular basis of public school education. The group exposed the quasi-confessional foundation of the Religious Education Workshop Report and several religious education programs, and revived the argument over non-participation rights. The group's opposition supplied a necessary if deleterious corrective to religious education development. During the 1983 controversy over the establishment of Radford College, the President of KORİ pointed out that "there are many in the community who will be working hard to ensure the secularities of all public schools and to ensure that the right of withdrawal of pupils from both special and general religious instruction is maintained in any future review of legal provisions."

I conclude with two observations. First, this account suggests that a more favourable environment for the development of general religious education in ACT public schools would be engendered if the matter of 'civil rights' is successfully negotiated in the transfer of administration of the schools to a territorial government; and, assuming the preservation of school-based decision-making, if the Schools Authority or its successor develops religious education policy and curriculum guidelines acceptable to the

school community and provides the necessary curriculum support service. Second, the account is relevant to the discipline of Religious Studies. AASR members would be aware of the divisions in the contemporary methodological debate on the academic study of religion. They would also appreciate that the uncertainties generated by the debate must affect the teaching of religion at all levels. Accordingly I make the point that any 're-theologising' of this study will present a challenge not only to educational theory but also to the acceptance of religious education as such in public schools.

Teaching Aboriginal Religion in South Australian Schools

A commitment by the Education Department of South Australia and the dedication of teams of Aboriginal and other staff working in the Aboriginal Education Section has culminated in the publishing in 1988 of comprehensive courses in Aboriginal Studies covering from Reception to Year 12. The courses have been endorsed by the South Australian Aboriginal Education Consultative Committee. A 40-page booklet, *Aboriginal Studies R-12 Guidelines for Teachers*, provides an introduction to the courses as well as practical guidelines for teachers.

The courses do not have separate units on Aboriginal Religion but seek to incorporate those elements which we might identify as 'religious' in teaching about all aspects of Aboriginal culture. This reflects the absence of a specific term for religion in Aboriginal languages and the traditional Aboriginal conception of The Dreaming as the basis for the whole of natural, social and cultural life.

Contrasts between Aboriginal understandings of, and ways of teaching about The Dreaming, rituals and mythology and

Notes

1. Norman, R.D.J (1985), *Religion in Education in ACT Public Schools*, Professional Project, SACAE, August 1985, pp. 133-137.
2. See, for example, Chapman, Lance (1981), 'A Religious Studies Program with Matriculation Status' in *Religious Education in Australian Schools*, by G.M. Rossiter, CDC, pp. 51-54; Chapman, Lance (1982), 'Religious Education for ACT Secondary Schools' in *Education Capital*, Vol. 6; Russell, Sue (1982), 'Religious Education Program at Page Primary School' in *Education Capital*, Vol. 6.

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Western understandings and methods of teaching religion lead to problems when it comes to teaching about Aboriginal religion in schools. Much mythological and ritual knowledge is esoteric and restricted to older men or older women. Entry into many sacred sites is restricted with dire penalties for those who infringe the restrictions. Most teaching takes place in the situation of rituals or sacred place rather than in formal teaching situations. Thus in Aboriginal societies significant religious training commences post adolescence in contrast to the emphasis on the religious instruction of children in Western societies.

The interrelationship of all aspects of Aboriginal culture with The Dreaming implies that teaching Aboriginal Studies includes teaching about sacred story and ritual. The guidelines include amongst the aims of teaching Aboriginal Studies the following: "to develop in all students: respect for different cultural values and beliefs," and "to enhance in Aboriginal students: their sense of identity and pride in their culture. Knowledge and under-

standing of their cultural heritage, thus contributing to the development of a positive self-concept." Assuming that Aboriginal Studies should be taught, the Guidelines suggest ways in which the above problems and restrictions can be confronted and overcome. Emphasis is placed on seeking the active involvement of Aboriginal people in programs.

The Guidelines recommend that by the end of schooling students should have covered the following essential learning content:

- Aboriginal cultures are living cultures.
- Aboriginal people share many cultural similarities which are expressed in a diversity of lifestyles.
- Aboriginal history covers a vast time span.
- The Dreaming gives a strong spiritual emphasis to Aboriginal culture.
- Aboriginal social structures provide a caring environment and roles for all people.
- Aboriginal people have a close spiritual relationship with their environment.
- Aboriginal lifestyles before the European invasion and settlement were affluent.
- Aboriginal society was devastated by European invasion and settlement.
- Aboriginal people are now exercising their right to make decisions about their own future.
- Aboriginal people contribute to Australian society.

Expanding on the statement that The Dreaming gives a strong spiritual emphasis to Aboriginal culture, the *Guidelines for Teachers* makes the following points:

- The Dreaming refers to all that is known and all that is understood by Aboriginal people about their origins and culture.
- The Dreaming is central to the life of traditional Aboriginal people. It deter-

mines their values and beliefs and their relationship with every living creature and every feature of the landscape.

- The Dreaming relates every aspect of life to religious belief.
- Men and women are involved in spiritual ceremonies both together and separately.
- Aboriginal visual art, music, dance and storytelling are always linked together through The Dreaming.
- Many Aboriginal people living away from their traditional lands still retain values and beliefs which relate to their Dreaming.

The following points are then presented as implications for teachers:

- When teaching about The Dreaming, involve Aboriginal people or use resources written by them.
- Treat Aboriginal culture as a whole; for example, wherever possible combine visual art, music, dance and storytelling.
- Dreaming stories can be used to show the linking of law, social order, values and beliefs and the environment.
- Be careful not to trivialise the concepts of the Dreaming and demonstrate respect for them.
- Use words and terms preferred by Aboriginal people; for example, The Dreaming instead of mythology, and Dreaming Stories instead of myths, fables or legends.
- In Aboriginal society there are objects, symbols and patterns which are sacred. These vary from group to group. To avoid causing offence, do not talk about, show, or use any of the following: bullroarers, tjuringas, sacred stones, feather shoes, red ochre, pointing bones, concentric circles and concentric squares. Advice about sensitive issues can be obtained from the people and organisations listed in the resource section of this book.

The *Guidelines* recommends that wherever possible class activities take place in the natural environment and that students be given opportunities for first hand experiences through camps and excursions. A few Dreaming sites and trails have been identified in the Adelaide region and these can be visited on excursions from schools in the region. The Flinders Ranges provide opportunities for learning stories in the situation during longer excursions and camps. In recent years, an Adnyamathanha man, Mr. Cliff Coulthard, has been a valued guide and teacher for many school groups visiting the Flinders Ranges.

Teaching about The Dreaming is incorporated in the courses at all levels. A language arts approach is used for years R-3. Children are introduced to three Dreaming stories, one each from the Narunga, Ngarrindjeri and Adnyamathanha peoples, and encouraged to express them in music, art and movement in natural environments. Concepts gained are developed in years 3-4 when there is a particular emphasis on The Dreaming using a modified social studies enquiry approach. In year 4, Dreaming stories are related to particular sites.

Years 5-7 units continue using a social studies enquiry approach in studying the lifestyles of four South Australian groups. There is a focus on Pitjantjatjara Dreaming trails, using them for simulation games in the schoolyard. In year 8 the teacher chooses a local group for a case study. The case study approach continues through years 9-10 with the comparative study of another group, and an emphasis on contemporary lifestyles. A topic approach is followed in year 11 and the study of The Dreaming is approached through the observation and understanding of Aboriginal visual art. The year 12 course is a study of Aboriginal culture from Aboriginal perspectives as expressed through literature, visual and performing arts.

Aboriginal Studies curriculum resources can be purchased from:

Publications Branch
Education Department
31 Flinders Street
Adelaide, SA 5000

— Bill Edwards
*Aboriginal Studies and Teacher Education
Centre, SACAE*

Resources for Religious Education - A New ABC and AARE Initiative

Australian Religious Education Resource Service (ARERS)

The ARERS is a new Australia-wide group formed in response to discussions held between Dr. David Millikan, Head of Religious Broadcasting at the ABC, and the recent national conference of the Australian Association of Religious Education. The ARERS is a subscription service, offering good quality contemporary video teaching materials for religious

educators in Australian schools.

The ARERS offers five (5) mailings yearly at a subscription cost of \$200 per annum. Each mailing will include:

- 4 video presentations of between 10 and 15 minutes each. They will cover topics taught in Religious Education. On occasions such as the first mailing planned next year, the number of presentations may be more than 4, in order to complete a series.

- Each program will be accompanied by Teaching Notes. The right to duplicate these notes will be given to subscribing schools.

The first two mailing have been selected. The first will be a series of six presentations called *Bells, Smells and Singing: Ways of Worship in Australia*. Drawing from filming of Australian worship practice the series will introduce the basic concepts of Roman Catholic, Charismatic Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Orthodox, Mainline Protestant, and Islamic worship. The notes will be written by Heather Millikan BA, Dip.Ed., former Head of House at Geelong Grammar, now studying theology at the M.C.D.

The second mailing will be a series of four programs called *God in the Supermarket: The Cults in Australia*. This series will be presented by Dr. David Millikan and will cover the beliefs, attractions and life of the major cults in Australia.

Other topics to be covered in other

mailings:

- *Heaven on a Stick: Practices and Styles of Meditation*
- *The Big Bang: Theories of the Beginning and Fears About the End of the World*

The material will be drawn from ABC programs as well as from material produced specially for ARERS. In all cases the programs will be generated within Australia with references to Australian circumstances. Membership will also give access at concessional rates to books, and special TV and radio series relevant to Religious Education. For example, pre-production is underway for a major TV series, *A Consumer's Guide to Religion in Australia*. This is a 10-part survey of religion in Australia which promises to be very provocative.

Further information from:

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