
Courses and Curricula

Women's Studies in Religion and Theology

This course aims to introduce students to gender-related questions in the major fields of study within their theological degree: Biblical and theological; Historical; and Social Scientific (ministerial). The hermeneutical and methodological research tools which have been developed within these areas will be analysed, and the past, present, and future contribution of women to religion, theology, and spirituality will be studied. Within the historical section, attention will be given to women's contribution to Australia and Queensland generally and to their various churches in particular. Study of recent psychological, sociological, and

anthropological theories in relation to women's reality will provide a basis for a more inclusive and holistic spirituality and approach to ministry. Finally, biblical texts and theological themes (eg God, Sin, Grace, Ethics) will be examined in the light of the new perspectives which feminist biblical scholars and theologians are bringing to their disciplines.

It is hoped that this course will be foundational for more specific units and independent research from the perspective that it introduces.

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New Courses in Religion Studies for Senior Students

Significant Developments.

Far-reaching curriculum reform for senior secondary students in Victoria in recent years has provided excellent opportunities for the development of the study of religion(s). At senior secondary levels

the new Victorian Certificate of Education is now implementing two two-year sequences of complimentary accredited studies which focus on religion, beliefs, values and texts with an emphasis on examining the way Religious Traditions in-

teract with Australian Society and Culture.

This represents a significant increase in the amount and variety of coursework which is available. Moreover, these particular studies have been endorsed by universities in such a way as to enhance the standing of the field of Religion Studies generally within secondary (and tertiary?) education.

The beginnings of this process of curriculum reform can be clearly identified in Ministerial Paper No. 6 (on the Curriculum, 1986) and in the State Board of Education's policy statement 'Directions in Curriculum' (1987) which included the following statement -

...variations (in the curriculum) can be shown to have a common base which includes these major areas of knowledge either as distinct studies and activities or as components and perspectives within various studies and activities:

- * Values and Beliefs
- * Language
- * The Study of Society
- * Mathematics, science and technology
- * The Arts
- * Physical and personal development.

The State Board also published a collection of papers entitled 'Values and Beliefs in the Curriculum' (1986) which considered the case for Religion Studies being an explicit area of the curriculum in all schools.

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board (VCAB) recognised the place and importance of 'religion, beliefs and values' by ensuring that such studies are well-represented within Social Education - one of the thirteen Fields of Study of the new Victorian Certificate of Education ('VCE'). Two have been accredited. These are **Religion and Society** and **Texts and Traditions**. The following

gives the titles of the Units within each study:

Religion and Society:

Unit 1:Religion and Identity

Unit 2:Ethics

Unit 3:Beliefs and Life Perspectives

Unit 4:Religion and Change.

Texts and Traditions:

Unit 1:Texts and Justice in Society

Unit 2:Narrative Texts and Traditions

Unit 3:Texts and the Development of Traditions

Unit 4:Law, Wisdom and Theology in Texts.

The introduction of these VCE studies in Religious Traditions at Units 1 & 2 levels (usually Year 11) takes place in 1991. Full implementation of the two-year sequence will occur, along with most other studies, in 1992 when Units 3 & 4 (Year 12) will become available.

Previously 'Biblical Studies' was a well-recognised Year 12 Group One (largely externally assessed) subject. In the new VCE it is being replaced by the four-unit two year study 'Texts and Traditions'. The range of short one term Religious Education Group Two units (wholly internally assessed) which were developed by the Victorian Institute of Secondary Education (VISE) - the predecessor to VCAB - are effectively being replaced by the second four-unit two year sequence of study 'Religion and Society'.

Elements of the previous courses appear in the new studies, but in general they represent a new conception and approach. It was a policy directive of the Board, for instance, that the successor to Biblical Studies be developed in such a way that it was open to the texts of any Religious Tradition - and not just primarily those of the Judeo-Christian Tradition - even if most initial courses in fact em-

phasised the selection of these texts for study.

One of the pleasing things about this curriculum development in Victoria is the fact that all universities there have recognised the academic integrity of these two new studies by including them in their selective listings of acceptable subjects for university entrance and Faculty prerequisite purposes. (This is particularly noteworthy that in the case of The University of Melbourne which has been rather trenchant in its criticism of the new VCE and which still does not accept almost half of the 44 VCE studies.)

So, in terms of the old way of looking at things, Victoria now has two 'Group One' status - type subjects for senior students instead of only one. This represents an important advancement for the field of Religion Studies.

A feature of the new studies is the fact that they have had to be specifically designed for **all sectors of education** - Government, Catholic and Independent alike. This has required some rethinking of the nature of the curriculum for Catholic, Church-related and Religious Denomination Schools on the one hand, and opens up the possibility of religion studies becoming accepted within the government sector.

Another feature of these curriculum developments in Victoria lies in the understanding of what a VCE study design is. For instance, it is not 'a centrally prescribed course' but rather a somewhat sophisticated curriculum statement which teachers are to professionally interpret and from which they are to develop courses which are appropriate to the local needs, interests and circumstances.

Both of these features require further comment. The second provides a context for the first.

The 'study design' concept of the new VCE.

Some of the initial difficulties the tertiary sector had with the VCE was the result of academics not understanding what the nature of a study design was! Many took a study design and read it as if it were a prescription for a course. Apparently, tertiary academics are not as familiar as their Education Faculty counterparts in such matters!

The study structure concept of the VCE is in fact the result of a State-wide two year research and development project essentially with the secondary sector. The concept became clarified towards the end of 1987 after innovative responses in the form of over forty draft studies from the thirteen Field of Study Committees and wide-spread consultation concerning these with schools.

A 'study' is a curriculum statement which specifies the degrees of freedom and constraint which local schools and teachers must follow in developing courses. It is based on the presupposition of there being particular interpretations of the study at the local level as a matter of **necessity**. It therefore makes local course development essential within an overall centralised system of control of the curriculum. **Each VCE accredited study** therefore allows for the generation of a **wide variety of actual courses**

The components of a VCE study are:

THE AIMS OF THE STUDY

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY WHICH OUTLINES THE AREA

A NUMBER OF SEMESTER-LENGTH UNITS, EACH HAVING THE FOLLOWING ELEMENTS

* An introductory statement

* Objectives

* Areas of Study (usually two to four in number)

* Work Requirements.

Units:

The semester length units assume between 50 and 60 hours of class contact time and 100 hours overall for the student. Most studies have four such units, thereby making it possible for a full two-year sequence to be undertaken. However, students can take any Unit 1 or 2 from a study and even withdraw after Unit 3 - although Units 3 & 4 are designed as a one-year sequence and intended to be taken as such.

The Areas of Study provide descriptions of the focus of the unit and the Work Requirements are the driving-force of any particular local course developed within the study. Work Requirements are not 'add-on extras' to a course but actually determine the methods and content. Units 3 and 4 also have **Common Assessment Tasks** ('CATS') which are usually based on a Work Requirement and provide for the specification of 10 levels for assessing achievement (A+ to E). At least one of these CATS will be taken under test conditions and all are subject to verification procedures by VCAB to ensure comparability of assessment.

A typical semester Unit will have between 3 and 6 Work Requirements. For Units at levels 3 & 4 there will be between 3 and 5 CATS. The actual prescriptions relating to these matters are contained in each study. Schools are free to conduct their own assessment and reporting for Units 1 & 2, although such assessments do not fall within the public reporting of the certificate.

Assessment:

The secondary teaching profession will be given a hitherto unknown degree

of responsibility for assessment upon which the tertiary sector and community will rely. There has, accordingly, been much debate about the criteria of assessment used for CATS and the way in which these criteria will be consistently applied. Extensive trialing has been undertaken of criteria for assessment in all studies - especially in the Phase 1 'leading edge' of the VCE implementation of English, Mathematics and Australian Studies which were taken by students in 1990 at Units 1 & 2 levels and will be fully implemented with Units 3 & 4 in 1991.

Neither criterion referencing nor normative scaling have been adopted as the basis for the approach to assessment: rather an intermediate position, founded on the research and thinking of Dr Barry MacGraw of the Australian Council of Education Research, has been largely adopted. The aim has been to clearly define the criteria used in making judgements of achievement in terms of the curriculum Objectives and Work Requirements so that they are professionally recognisable system-wide.

This is as much an art as a science in that they have to be at such a level of generality as to allow for individual variation in local course design on the one hand, and yet enable consistent and reliable interpretations of them by teachers and others (and therefore be 'common'). Verification Panels are being established for each study at local, regional and State Levels to ensure these intentions are implemented, and some believe that the work of these panels will represent, in fact, 'the second half of the development of the VCE'!

The Approach of the VCE Religion Studies.

Being publicly accredited studies for all sectors of education, it was essential that the study designs in religious traditions be appropriate to a pluralist society if they were to gain acceptance.

Public Curriculum Statements:

Throughout the 80s there was a consistent and well orchestrated attempt on the part of universities and religious traditions to participate in the curriculum decision-making processes which were gathering momentum throughout the State, ultimately leading to 'The Frameworks' (Years P to 10) and the VCE. A consensus developed around the proposition that central government curriculum guidelines and policy statements ought not to be prejudicial towards religion (treating it as 'an outsider having influence' for example), nor should they obviously promote it in a 'confessional' sense to further the cause of particular Traditions or interest groups.

There was a recognition that to exclude religion from the curriculum was a form of 'negative indoctrination' which effectively said to students 'about this thou shalt not inquire'. Accordingly, a tacit acceptance developed of the need for a more enlightened understanding of the meaning of 'secular' in public education in this State which arguably has had, historically, one of the most severe interpretations of this in place. The Victorian consciousness of the multicultural society continues to be a powerful ingredient in educational debate in the State - an ingredient that was dormant in the debates about religion in schools in the 1970s.

This enlightened understanding has been present among the leaders of cur-

riculum reform in the State, although it remains true that many government school curriculum committees may not yet be fully aware of the implications of Ministerial Papers and State Board policy statements when viewed in the context of the new VCE as far as the study religion is concerned.

Appropriate for All Sectors of Schooling:

In Victoria, almost half of the senior student population may be found in non-government schools where there is at least tacit or strong support for the study of religion in the curriculum. Nevertheless, The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board has developed and accredited the religion study designs as being appropriate for senior students in all sectors of schooling - government and non-government schools alike. It remains to be seen, however, how fast the 'osmosis' effect is within government education in such studies being taken up within those schools.

These curriculum developments have not occurred without the significant Catholic sector of schooling rethinking its approach to the comprehensive nature of the Catholic School. The Social Education Field of Study Committee of VCAB, with substantial representation from the Catholic Education office, accepted the proposition that a general distinction could be made between 'Education in Faith' approaches to Religion in the curriculum and 'Education in Religions' approaches. There was, consequently, a clear case for the development of studies within the latter orientation as a part of the new VCE.

The Catholic Education Office and other Church educational bodies accepted and welcomed this distinction, and a differentiation in the working out of these

two intentions within the school curriculum was begun. No longer were the new VCE courses to be the vehicle for catechesis into the Catholic Tradition: that task belonged to other aspects of the curriculum of a Catholic School at senior levels. This distinction has also been promoted in the independent schools of the Non-Government, Non-Catholic sector.

What kind of religion studies?

The first public drafts of the Religion Studies design (subsequently to become 'Religion and Society') adopted a phenomenological and dimensional approach to Traditions, together with the way these Traditions responded to and shaped pre-defined fundamental life issues and questions. The drafts emphasised objectivity and analysis and were criticised for not facilitating an informed view of what it was like to belong to a tradition 'from the inside'.

In some respects this was similar to the early Grimmitt approach in the U.K. although the methodology was different. The titles and understandings of the dimensions adopted were those proposed by Elliott (1986) which were, in turn, a refinement of Moore and Habel's 8-fold typology (1981) and of Smarts's six dimensions of religion. The terminology of 'aspects' of a Tradition was preferred to dimensions.

The overall approach to Traditions followed an organic model. Indeed the structure of the Religion and Society study itself is based upon the proposition that it is possible to approach the study of (religious and non-religious) Traditions by having one of these eight aspects as the central focus (or 'point of entry') for a whole Unit (for example, ethics, beliefs, ritual, social structure, and so on). This philosophical understanding of traditions

is present also in the Texts and Traditions study, although a thematic approach is primarily followed in the definition of the Units of that study as a whole.

The final accredited version of the Religion and Society study avoids the distinction between 'an insider' and 'an outsider' view which is a basic presupposition of previous phenomenological approaches to the study of religion. The study is concerned to develop a critical yet open understanding of religious traditions in the way they shape life perspectives. As such the study ought to be no more alienating for the practitioner of a tradition investigating his or her own tradition through the methods and approaches of the study than an interested outsider. A more positive way of expressing this is to say that the study is designed to promote empathy, investigatory skills and understanding of Traditions without presupposing any particular religious or sceptical starting-point on the part of the participants.

It is proposed that the Religion and Society and Texts and Traditions studies could be applied to the investigation of any tradition in Society. The introduction to the former study provides the criteria which are to be applied in the selection of appropriate traditions:

'For the purposes of this study a tradition may be classified as religious if it satisfies the following criteria.

- * A body of beliefs, values and ideas expressed through words, symbols, rituals and codes of behaviour

- * A specific collection of ideas about existence and human experience which provides an ultimate frame of reference and meaning for living

- * A form of social organisation which includes in its aims the continuation, inter-

pretation and propagation of these beliefs, values and ideas.'

Consequently, the decision as to which traditions are to be selected is left to the course developer. The studies recognise that a holistic approach to a tradition is not possible without doing violence to the actual experience of the participants:

'it is inevitable that one or two variants will constitute the way in which a particular tradition is encountered and studied' (Religion and Society, page 1).

Implementation.

Indications are that there are significant enrolments in Units 1 and 2 in both studies in 1991. There is almost a 50% increase in student numbers in Texts and Traditions (over previous enrolments in Biblical Studies), and several thousand students are enrolled for Religion and Society Units 1 & 2. These studies promise to be the most frequently used studies out of the six in Social Education.

The second Unit 'Ethics' in Religion and Society has the potential to be of immediate interest to a wide audience in the government sector. It makes possible an inquiry into a range of religious and

philosophical approaches to current ethical issues in society.

Social Science Press has published, in good time, two student texts specifically for the Religion and Society study - *My Story, Our Stories: Religion and Identity in Australia* (for Unit 1), and *Chaos or Clarity: Encountering Ethics* (for Unit 2). Both are part of the Traditions and Society series. Each book reproduces, with VCAB permission, the relevant sections of the VCE studies. These texts are assisting the establishing of religion studies in senior secondary education and are being widely used.

VCAB and the Regional Education Offices have also been conducting a series of professional development workshops around the State to assist course design and professional development in these and other studies in the new VCE.

In conclusion, it is thought that the approach to religion in the new Victorian Certificate of Education may well be of interest in other Australian States.

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Note: Reviews of the two texts mentioned appear in the Book Reviews section. ED.

