Managing Religious Diversity in Religious Education Curriculum: Some approaches for Australian Church Schools

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Since the 1944 Education Act made religious education a compulsory subject in all British schools, it has become clear that the underlying philosophy and therefore practice of this subject in county schools must be objective (Hull 1984). It cannot be biased toward one expression of religious faith rather than another, and it cannot draw its content from just one or two religious traditions. In religiously diverse Britain, phenomenology, with all that this implies about content and method, has been chosen as the underlying methodological approach. Local agreed syllabuses, drawn up by Churches and educational leaders, include core content from Christianity, but also from six other traditions (Skinner 1997:31). Through their study of these traditions, students are introduced to the belief systems of majority and minority groups in Britain. While Christian groups have criticised this approach as encouraging relativism in teaching and therefore among students' perspectives on religious beliefs, religious education in British schools still provides one of the few ways in which students are encouraged to become aware of cultures and beliefs other than their own. It was even suggested by the Education Reform Act that this phenomenological approach to religious education could provide material that the student could draw on in his or her own spiritual development (Skinner 1997).

In what ways do religious educators in Australian Church-related schools face the same issues that the educational reformers in Britain faced, and how can they meet the challenges raised by these issues? In a related but different way, religious diversity is a fact among the student populations of Church related schools in Australia. These schools, have, for the most part, compulsory religious education curricula, with a primary focus on the branch of Christianity within which the particular school belongs.

Few Church related schools in Australia have large numbers of students who belong to traditions other than Christian.. In those schools and geographical areas where this is the case, careful consideration needs to be given to this in curriculum development. In most Church related schools in Australia, however, religious diversity is a different phenomenon. It consists in the pluralism represented in a spectrum of positions from belief to non-belief among students; in the relativism that comes from the wide variety of choices, including religious choices, that are put before

young people in our increasingly complex society; in the fact that students in Church related schools live in a society so overwhelmingly secular that any truth claims or contribution to public debate on the part of religions is more and more seen as irrelevant. This tends to be encouraged and fed by public political debate in Australia. In one Australian state where a group of Church leaders protested about the growing gambling culture which appeared to be fed by the State government, they were referred to by the state Premier as "yesterday's men". One Australian Prime Minister referred to a Jesuit who spoke out about reconciliation with the Aboriginal community as "that meddling priest". The inference is clear that Churches have no place in public debate, that so long as they stay separate, attending to preaching and ritual, society and religion can co-exist. When Churches want also to be responsible citizens, contributing to debate on issues of importance, they are deemed irrelevant.

The particular form of religious pluralism that religious educators in Church affiliated schools face, challenges them to, in the words of Lombaerts: "a thorough reorientation and founded formation of theory, in order to guarantee a qualitatively superior and sufficiently independent and worked out teaching discipline" (Lombaerts 1999:1).

For the remainder of this paper I will discuss five issues related to practice, that can help religious educators in Church schools to meet the particular challenges posed by the fact of religious diversity among their students.

In Church Related Schools, Religious Education can be a Dialogue between Believer and Non-Believer

For several years in Australian Catholic schools I taught a state based senior secondary course in biblical studies. The intention of the course was to introduce students to the world and literature of the bible, to give them skills in biblical analysis and to assist them to understand some of the meanings that people have and do attach to this sacred text. In the study of such a course it is important that the particular worldview or faith position of the student not influence in any way his or her development of knowledge and skills. I remember one student who told me as we began this course that he was an agnostic. He was concerned that this would hold him back in working with and interpreting the literature of the bible. When he was able to see that his personal position in relation to the material was not of first priority in his work, he engaged with the content of the course with a freedom that I am sure he had not previously experienced in religious education classes. His need to make his initial declaration suggested to me that, along with many other students, he had previously been irritated by assumptions made about his faith position. Throughout the year, as a result of the absorbing work that was involved in the course, this student and others like him who did not claim religious belief, were able to dialogue intelligently and openly with students who were Christian believers. This conversation, although not expected or planned, was a most rewarding aspect of the course. It could only happen because all were free to take whatever faith

position they chose, within the rules of respectful dialogue.

Noddings expressed what I learned from this experience and from many similar experiences in this way: "If both religious and secular education were to teach conscientiously towards intelligence in belief or unbelief, we might predict three desirable outcomes; a more reflective, open belief for believers, a more reflective open unbelief for unbelievers, and better communication between the two" (Noddings 1997:245). Noddings speaks of an education that: "faces the common doubts and commitments squarely and openly" (Noddings 1997:246) and claims that young people need to share both doubts and commitments in an atmosphere of free inquiry. They need to learn from each other and to work together towards the common goal of true education.

Teachers in Church related schools, faced with a religiously diverse group of believers and non-believers in their classroom, will engage with students better, and educate all better if the doubts and commitments of students are acknowledged and used as part of the learning process.

The Nature of "Objectivity" in Religious Education in Church Related Schools

The Schools Council Working Paper speaks of the objectivity required in teaching religious education in this way: "Teaching is not objective when one interpretation is presented as though it were an absolute and unquestioned fact and as though no alternative explanations were possible or admissible" (School Council Working Paper 36:24).

In an earlier time in Church related schools, the teaching of religious education was far from 'objective'. The intention was to 'pass on' faith in one tradition, and to mould students into the attitudes and practices that made them recognisably members of that particular religious community. In the homogenous Australian population of the first half of this century this was easy. The immigration that has made Australian a deeply multicultural nation, and the growth of relativism and secularism among Australian youth, (to the extent that even in Church related schools the student population is multi-religious and multi-faith), had not yet been felt. Now the complex nature of the student population has led Christian religious educators to think about what 'objective' means in a school that is unambiguously sponsored by a particular Church and where, for the most part, the teachers of religious education are believing Christians.

Hull (1980) speaks of the 'divergent' teacher whose personal religious position may not be the same as that which he or she is required to teach. One example of this is the believing Christian who is required by the curriculum to teach about the religions of the world in a pluralistic way. In Hull's definition, this teacher is objective and professional when he or she teaches in the way that is required, and does not allow personal faith to interfere with the educational task. This, Hull claims, is suitable objectivity for religious studies in county schools. On the other hand, the teacher

who: "has a personal religious faith, prefers to teach it, and hopes that his or students will come to share it" (Hull 1980) is, Hull argues, only professional in the context of a faith community, or, for the purposes of this discussion, in a Church related school.

Hull's view of this teacher, whom he refers to as 'convergent', is helpful for thinking about the appropriate position of the Christian teacher in the Christian school, for such teachers also must consider the nature of objectivity in religious education. While an objective and professional teacher in a Church sponsored school is biased for faith in the sponsoring tradition, he or she never coerces or assumes faith positions in the students. He or she teaches clearly and professionally, and hopes that the study of this religious tradition will assist in the young person's search for meaning. This teacher engages non-judgmentally and openly with students, and readily enters into discussion with them about religious questions. Therefore education occurs at the intellectual level, but also may provide students with useful signposts in their own search for meaning and values.

Cooling's (1986) analogy also provides useful material for the reflection of teachers in Church related schools. He dismisses Grimmitt's illustration of "a shopkeeper with wares in his window which he is anxious for his customers to examine, appreciate and even 'try on', but not feel under any obligation to buy" (Grimmitt 1978:26 in Cooling 1986) as unlikely because there would doubtless be some wares in the area of religion that most teachers would definitely not want young people to 'try on'. Cooling then goes on to describe the approach of the teacher of religion as a doctor:

> who knows of, say, two possible cures for his patient's condition. Medical opinion is divided as to which is the most effective, but the doctor's personal assessment of the evidence leads him to believe that one course of treatment is superior and that the other may have unpleasant side effects. What is he to do as a responsible professional? I would argue that his only option is to make a recommendation to his patient while at the same time ensuring that he is made fully aware of the divergence of medical opinion. To withhold his own recommendation and leave the patient free to make up his own mind is a denial of his professional responsibility. On the other hand to hide the fact of the divergence of medical opinion is to fail to respect his patient as a person with a unique right to determine his own destiny. (Cooling 1986:149).

Cooling argues for such an approach to the teaching of religious education even in the county school, claiming that it respects the rights of the student but does not relegate the faith of the teacher to the unacknowledged private sphere. However, it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss appropriate approaches for county schools, but to weigh up what objectivity in approach can mean in the multi-faith Church school. Cooling's analogy of the informed, responsible but non-coercive professional has much to offer in that context.

Working with the life questions of students

Recently I read a paper (Scott 1998) written by a chaplain in a Western Australia state high school. In the paper he spoke of the stereotypical attitudes from staff and students that greeted his appointment as chaplain. He was thought of as a 'moral policeman' and 'bible-basher' who had come to convert the school community to Christ. Scott's commentary on this situation recalled for me the experiences of teachers of religious education in Church schools, for they too daily face the ever widening gap between the secular world of the students and the world of religion.

Such expressions highlighted for me the stereotypes that people had of Christians and the clergy, and the ever increasing gap between the Church and the secular community. This saddened me but also motivated me. The challenge of bridging this gap and confronting the stereotypes is what excited me about chaplaincy (Scott 1998:45).

Religion teachers in Church schools face the same stereotypes, and this is not surprising when we reflect that, as alluded to earlier in this paper, the media and public leaders often reinforce them. Grimmitt (1982) proposes an approach to religious education, which starts with the 'ultimate questions' of the students, and shows them what religions have to offer in response to these questions. In other words, the wisdom of the world's traditions is offered to students as a means of illuminating their own search for meaning. I believe that religious education programs in Church schools can learn from this.

All human beings strive to make sense of the complex and often conflicting needs and pressures that they experience. For younger secondary students these tend to centre on issues of belonging, self-esteem, peer pressure, and the array of choices that face them in daily life, from the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse to issues of sexuality. Their questions are about themselves and their worth, about steering a path between peer acceptance and a sense of self, about relationships where self worth and acceptance are reinforced. It is not surprising that Christianity has responses to offer to all of these questions, for they are the questions of human life.

For the younger adolescent these issues can be a way into thinking about basic approaches to personhood, relationships, conscience and moral choices from a Christian perspective. The intention is not to coerce the student into a particular way of thinking, but to pose the wisdom of this tradition in response to their life questions. For the older adolescent the questions tend to centre on the nature of suffering, on the paradox of goodness and evil in the world, on the nature of the future, on career decisions and on issues of meaning and values. It is noteworthy here that the majority of young Australian men who suicide are between 18 and 24. This is everywhere acknowledged as being connected to issues of meaning and purpose in life.

Again, a Christian vision of life has a great deal to offer to the young person who seeks responses to these questions-responses which may be weighed up and integrated into his or her own life view. It is therefore in the life-questions of students,

I believe, that the teacher in the Church related school has a starting point to lead the student into the wisdom of Christianity, as a system which provides responses to these very questions. The Victorian Certificate of Education study, *Religion and Society*, uses exactly this approach. (See Engebretson (1998) for a further development of this in relation to Religion and Society.)

Education for Spirituality

'Ultimate questions' are spiritual questions, and no religious educator in a Church school would deny that he or he is in some way engaged in education for spirituality, however this may be defined. In a homogenous and active group of Christian students, the quest to define and educate for spirituality is clear. Spirituality in this context is a way of being Christian, in response to the call of God, issued through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Christian spirituality calls the person to discipleship. Many students in Church schools, however, would not feel comfortable defining their spirituality in such decisively Christian terms. Rather their spirituality is defined and described independently of formal religion. Here is how one school principal defined it:

> Yet the age old obsession of young people with questions of justice and morality;
> the sense of being personally touched and helpless before intense beauty, pain,
> tradition or genuine greatness; the search for a frame of reference within which
> to make their own decisions; the need for a personal commitment to an ideal;
> these are all evidence of that side of our nature which can be termed spiritual
> and which can either be enhanced and enriched by the educational diet that it is
> given, or stunted and warped by starvation. (Lealman 1986:67).

Schools offer education for spirituality when they introduce students to great literature, art, music and the wonders of science. However, religions directly and specifically deal with spirituality, and show young people the ways in which individuals and groups have expressed spirituality over time. There must be room in the 'religious' education curriculum for particular activities that allow young people to reflect on and discuss their own spirituality in an atmosphere of respect and freedom, and to listen respectfully to the spirituality of others. Many young people say that they are not 'religious' in the formal sense of the word, but acknowledge that spirituality is an important part of their lives. Religious education for diversity, in the Church sponsored school, will provide many ways in which this spirituality may be nurtured.

The Religious Educator in the Church Sponsored School: A Missionary to Youth Culture

The recently released Catholic religious education document, the *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997), places catechesis within the Church's mission of evangelisation. Evangelisation is "the process by which the Church, moved by the Holy Spirit, proclaims and spreads the gospel throughout the entire world". (GDC

no 48). Within the general category of evangelisation, catechesis is one function, which is; "a school of faith, an initiation and apprenticeship in the entire Christian life" (GDC no 30).

The Church does not intend here the uncritical evangelising of previous periods, which espoused conversion at any cost. Here evangelising is literally that first proclamation of the gospel message to those who have not heard it before, or to those who are really 'hearing' it for the first time. It is acknowledged in core Catholic documents on evangelisation that this can occur for people who have already heard the Christian message and may even be baptised Christians. There is a sense in which these people may truly be 'hearing' the Christian message for the first time. It is ecumenical and respectful of faith traditions other than Christianity. It calls on and uses the culture within which it evangelises to teach and explain aspects of the Christian message.

I am reminded of the pioneer Jesuits who introduced this notion of inculturation to the missionary endeavour of the Church. Fr de Nobili, a Jesuit missionary in India in the 16th century, wore the sacred thread of the initiated Hindu, lived the life of a Hindu holy man, and gave communion on a stick to those of the untouchable caste, so as not to break the taboos of his Hindu congregation. Fr de Ricci in China, in the well-known Chinese rites controversy, spoke of Chinese ancestor worship as a rite which showed respect for the dead, so that his Chinese converts need not abandon it. (For a full treatment of the history of Jesuit missions read Mitchell (1980)). While the inculturation endeavours of the Jesuits at that time were frowned upon and finally banned by the Church, all of the documents on evangelisation since the Second Vatican Council have spoken of the need to find what is good and true in indigenous culture and use it to illuminate the gospel message.

I find it useful to apply this inculturation analogy to the endeavour of religious education within a youth culture that is not only sometimes hostile to religion, but which more often deems religion to be simply irrelevant. This is a youth culture where every stance from belief to unbelief is represented in the classroom. What does it mean to be a missionary to this culture and to use the methods of inculturation to introduce what religion has to offer? (Rossiter and Crawford 1982). What is good and true and holy in youth culture, which can be used to illuminate the wisdom of Christianity? The passion for justice, the search for a genuine spirituality, the need for identity and belonging, the deep life questions of youth are the meeting point between youth culture and an education that is 'religious' in both a broad, ecumenical and inter-faith way and, in the Church sponsored school, in a particularly Christian way.

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