

“Sacred text as a platform for interreligious dialogue”

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The study of sacred texts is widely practiced in religious education. What has often been neglected is the rich educational potential of the range of exegetical and pedagogical practices of faith communities for providing new platforms for mutual learning. Empirical research shows that when carefully introduced with methods of inter-religious dialogue, the process of encountering strange texts and exegeses can contribute significantly to peace building. The paper discusses the results of research into how pupils in classroom settings experience sacred texts, and in the process develop hermeneutical and intercultural competence. Given that sacred texts are usually associated with specific faith communities and ethnic groups, texts can become places where respect is learned, in aesthetic or in playful moments.

Sacred texts in public education

For many people a sacred text is a source of inspiration, moral orientation, and - even where they might have very limited knowledge of its content - an aspect of their identity. What is understood by the sacredness of a text varies considerably. For some pupils, it is to be treated with the absolute seriousness due of a message from God, for others there might be a vague sense of respect for an element of the cultural heritage, and for others there is irritation with idea of such an authority being imposed on them. In our research into the place of sacred texts in public schools in South Africa and in Germany it soon became clear that the issue was not simply one of encountering strange texts, often more striking are competing understandings of inspiration and differing pedagogical traditions.¹

Over the past two decades the inner-city schools in Germany have become religiously diverse. In many classrooms over half the pupils are from Muslim families, there is a sprinkling of other minorities, and most of the others while formally Christian do not see religion as something to be taken very seriously. Here curricular priority is given to Christianity, Islam and Judaism, all who have easily identifiable sacred texts. In many post-apartheid South African classrooms there is also considerable religious diversity. Here too emphasis is placed on the educational goals of religious education, and to underscore the point about its descriptive character the area is now called Religion Education. In a society where difference had been the grounds for separation, religion has become the subject which is seen as central to the process of learning about each other and from each other. It nevertheless does not exist as a separate subject and has been integrated into the Life Orientation and Human and Social Sciences learning areas. In the policy debates of the mid-nineties sacred texts were, it was insisted, simply one of several aspects of religion. A comparative model with emphasis on written texts, religious buildings, or theological controversies would marginalise African Religion. Religious Studies approaches were at the time beginning to emerge which gave priority to aspects of myth and ritual, and the fluid appropriation of religious symbols. Furthermore, if the aim was to promote mutual understanding in the society it was necessary to emphasise lived religion. This perspective came underlie the new policy, syllabus, and

¹ This study is based on fieldwork conducted in Cape Town and in Hamburg. The project was initiated in 2001 with funding from the Education and Ecumenical Formation Office of the World Council of Churches in Geneva.

most text books. The reality in schools classrooms is often very different however. In the virtual absence of effective in-service training teachers resort to what they already know, and that is the Bible. The space however remains secular, and thereby provides one of a range of fascinating laboratories for the inter-religious reading of texts.

Shared texts

In South Africa the joke is still repeated: “When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us ‘let us pray’. After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible” (Mofokeng 1988: 34). In spite of this ambivalence the Bible has come to be deeply rooted in African culture. Years of colonial and apartheid religious education has created a remarkable skill in generating alternative and sometimes subversive readings. Instead of being seen to belong exclusively to one religious community, the Bible has been for many people, regardless of religious affiliation, a venue where they could retell their own stories. Its words are in songs which are sung in the school and in the powerful retelling of its stories. The Bible is treated as an open source, a living tradition which can be reconfigured and retold in new ways in new situations. Research on African hermeneutics has begun to offer important insights into how textually oriented readers and orally oriented readers differ in their interpretive practice (Mazamisa 1991). ‘Oral knowledge of the Bible’ and mastery of this form of storytelling are truly awe inspiring. With emphasis on performance and audience impact, there is much less concern with questions of historical reliability or theological position. Therefore, instead of these practices being a serious departure from the multi-religious aims of the new Religion Education policy, creative genres of choral music and storytelling go some of the way in fulfilling them. (This is however no argument against the necessity to get the policy back on track again!)

Teachers in Hamburg, taking their cue from inter-religious dialogue programmes, have sought to emphasise the common religious heritage of Jews Christians and Muslims. A favourite starting point has been the person of Abraham (Sieg 1995). While such exegeses of Genesis may help pupils to appreciate the legitimacy of religions borrowing each others sacred symbols, the territory is not without its pitfalls. When Isaac and Ishmael are identified as the ancestors of Jews and Moslems respectively, then the conflict between them and the conflict between their mothers is hardly the archetype one is seeking. There are also differences between the traditions which soon become evident. Thus while in Genesis 22 Isaac is to be offered as a sacrifice, the Qur’an speaks about ‘his son’ (Sure 37: 99-113), and in later tradition it is unequivocally Ishmael who is taken up onto the mountain. Teachers have tended therefore to make use of less controversial passages.

Secularisation is often very advanced amongst German pupils. When studying Biblical texts in a multi-religious setting, this creates a space where there is considerably less risk of their being offended by historical-critical, theatrical, or other more adventurous exercises in reading texts. Mara Koch, a high school teacher in Hamburg for Religion and English had one of her classes analyse the book of Ruth over a few weeks (Koch 2004). They were familiar with the priorities of literary analysis, which enabled them to demonstrate sophistication in feminist and post-modern reading strategies. With surprising speed they began to observe the story through the eyes of its main actors, were able to identify the ideology of the implied narrator (whom they didn’t like) and throughout relate the story to their own life experience. The text provided a place where these pupils could locate themselves in relation to pressing existential questions. The fact that it was a religious text seems to have created such an expectation. Pupils who may have had difficulty with such a reading of the Qur’an were fully

active in what was for them a new approach to reading a religious text. Rather than being a chance to score points off a competitor, it was exposure to an invigorating way of reading a religious text which their tradition had after all taught them to respect.

Sacred pedagogies

Sacred texts are traditionally experienced within very specific pedagogical practices. Thus, for most Turkish-German children in the inner city schools of Hamburg or for children in a madressah on the Cape Flats, the first encounters with the sacred text is in the form of a recitation and memorization of the Qur'an in Arabic. Here the emphasis is not on translation or understanding but on accurate and melodious repetition. When they participate in religious education in public schools they are initially shocked by what they perceive as careless treatment of sacred text. Religious education teachers in Germany's schools have a thorough exposure to the methods of historical-critical and other modern methods of Biblical exegesis (at least six years of study at university), which in turn shapes how they go about using the Bible in their classes. Its scenes can be re-enacted, its characters parodied and its validity the subject of debate. Texts can be photocopied, cut-up, marked and may eventually end up in the waste paper basket.

In the city of Hamburg a popular form of religious education is excursions to mosques, synagogues, churches and temples. For many teachers this has brought a completely new understanding of the place of sacred texts in these communities. In synagogues the sacredness of the Hebrew text is underscored by ritual. The torah scroll encased in silver or gold, is kept in a special place behind a screen on the eastern wall, and is with great dignity brought into the congregation and read. The Hebrew script is recited, sung and used in decorative art. The religious socialisation of Muslim children has many similarities. From an early age young children hear the sounds of prayers and readings in Arabic. Young boys in particular are encouraged to learn passages from the Qur'an by heart, with the eventual target of being able to recite the entire book by memory. The correct and melodious recitation is the aim, with the rhythm of the words seen as having deep aesthetic and spiritual power (Kermani 1999). Calligraphy, examples of which are in homes and mosques, further underscores the beauty and uniqueness of the lettering. Exposure to these traditions has led a growing number of school teachers to experiment with alternative ways of dealing with texts.

Aesthetic appreciation

In both primary and high school classes there have been projects which draw on traditional pedagogies of the sacred. Pupils may be introduced to the Hebrew or Arabic script, initially by means of a transcription table which enables them to write their names. They can also select a favourite text from the Hebrew Bible or Qur'an and then, after tracking it down in the original, receive sufficient time and support in order to create a work of art. One such project introduces a work of Arabic calligraphy depicting the ninety-nine names (Sorkale & Starck 1996). Information is offered about their place in Muslim spirituality and how they are recited with the aid of prayer beads. The names are made available in translation so that pupils can select their favourite and copy it for themselves. A final stage is an exercise where they seek out the different names for God in the Bible, and here too by means of calligraphy pupils copy and decorate the texts as well as they are able. In the process of such exercises in 'reading the text' the script loses its strangeness and through the concentration of copying there is appreciation for their special character.

The learning and recitation of Hebrew and Arabic texts has also been tried. In some respects this is a conscious recovery of forgotten Christian artistic and liturgical practices. Teachers sometimes refer to the method as being “like reciting a mantra”, in which rational thought no longer dominates. Unsurprisingly these practices work best in art or in music classes, and not only because these teachers are more skilled in things aesthetic, it seems that because of their intensity pupils feel more comfortable in settings which are unequivocally non-religious. Recitation and calligraphy of Arabic and Hebrew texts makes the strange familiar. There is for some a degree of ambivalence associated with writing in a script which is on street signs and banners in television news coverage of the Middle East conflict, or with the Hebrew script on some old buildings and cemeteries in Germany.

Less sacred texts

Another approach taken by teachers is to avoid those texts which are at the top of the sacredness hierarchy. In the study of Islam the Hadith are a favourite resource. These are the thousands of stories about the Prophet which began to be gathered a century or so after his death. Many are very popular and are often quoted as humorous anecdotes or short pieces of moral advice. They contain refreshing examples of self-irony and often deliberately play on ambiguity. Exegetical methods which would be highly controversial if applied to the Qur’an, can be developed here. In her feminist reading of Hadith, Sa’diyyah Shaikh of the University of Cape Town has used them to poke fun at pompous masculinities. Instead of such passages being avoided she makes them into a place where contemporary debates are raised. Jochen Bauer, a high school teacher and schoolbook author in Hamburg makes use of Hadith which describe strong women: Khadidsha and Aisha wives of Mohammed, his daughter Fatima, and Mary the mother of Jesus (Bauer 2001. 93-131). In so doing he seeks to undermine stereotypes of Muslim patriarchy and to emphasise the shared religious heritage of Muslims and Christians.

A similar strategy has been tried by a small group of Muslim and Christian educators who developed teaching material for primary schools on the person of Jesus (Sieg 2000). Even for the most tolerant of Christians, debates about central Second Testament texts can be controversial. So instead, the starting point is a Qur’anic text (Sura 3: 49), which recalls a popular story of Jesus as a young boy who made birds out of clay on the bank of a stream. And when he was criticised for doing so on the Sabbath he breathed life into them so they could fly. For Christians this may be an apocryphal story, but it has provided some fascinating opportunities for dialogue.

The rediscovery of *Formgeschichte*

In Germany in the nineteen-seventies there was a phase when extensive efforts went into creating opportunities for “children as exegetes”. They were for example, presented with parallel texts of the synoptic gospels so that they could compare and work out who borrowed from whom. Pupils found it incredibly boring. One exegetical approach that has survived, simply because it addresses relevant life issues, is Form Criticism. The starting point is to identify the literary genre of a text and to see how it employs typical form and metaphor. One then tries to determine the life setting (*Sitz im Leben*) in which the text emerged, an exercise requiring high levels of empathetic imagination. If this is ‘reading behind the text’, then the second phase is ‘reading in front of the text’. Here the task is to use the ‘form’ as the basis for

creative writing or art. Just as the early poetess or storyteller was responding to an existential situation, so we respond creatively to our own. For example, the form and function of a psalm of lamentation is selected (Baldermann 1993). Pupils would usually relate to the experience of the excluded psalmist surrounded by enemies who “sharpen their tongues like swords and aim cruel words like arrows” (Psalm 64: 3). In their own version of a psalm of lamentation they can say what they feel about mobbing. Many religion teachers are uncomfortable with the level of intimacy expected of such exercises. Here the setting where this takes place can make an enormous difference. If it is, for example, the art room then the expectations and concerns are very different. In a religion classroom we may find that the exercise has intruded too far into the private sphere, something which is inappropriate in a public school. However if the art teacher wants to encourage pupils to learn to express their feelings in colour and line then it is appropriate to discuss emotions, and here exegesis of a psalm can be very useful.

The Bible has parables, sagas, myths, liturgical texts, building plans, adventure stories, songs, poems, riddles, jokes, letters. These forms can be appreciated in their retelling. Other literary forms can be used equally well in exercises in reading in front of as well as behind the text. Thus and Rabbinic technique of juxtaposing contradictory stories to introduce philosophical and theological issues can be a useful form to use in a creative writing workshop (Gordis 1949). Another genre could be the camel stories which are popular in the Middle East. One which illustrates considerable theological reflection is about the camel who asked God why he has ninety-nine names and not a hundred. To which God replied: “There are a hundred, but the most beautiful I keep to myself so that people do not think they know everything about God”. Because these little stories are evidently playful they create a space where reflection can be serious and creative without needing to be intense.

Hermeneutical ability

The settings in South Africa and Germany are very different, but they do illustrate some of the ways in which the secular classroom might offer unique possibilities for pupils to experiment with alternative reading styles. Apart from its other benefits, a self-conscious reading in front of the text is an aspect of interpretation which opens new insights into the text. Awareness of the different perspectives can enable pupils to begin to gain some detachment and appreciation for the influence of their own horizon and preferred exegetical style. Pupils can become practiced in readings which are not only behind or in front of the text, but also the literary readings which are ‘in the text’, as well as what can simply be termed ‘reading the text’ – the recitation of sacred text and language. Variation establishes the legitimacy of different readings, as well as both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspectives. Processes of inter-religious dialogue in which pupils read the strange and the familiar can loosen claims to exclusive ownership of texts and their interpretation.

Studying sacred texts is by no means all there should be to the academic study of religion. And of course the territory should be entered with care – sacredness makes them risky. But academic exposure to different ways of reading religious texts and the development of hermeneutical competence is simply too important to be left out of public education.

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