

RIG3.1 paper for 2009 Annual Meeting of REA:APPRRE

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Pleasures and Pitfalls of Interfaith Religious Education in secular schools in Australia.

For most of the twentieth century, Religious Education in Australian secular schools used to be given by the voluntary representatives of particular denominations or religious faith groups to their own children for 30 minute lessons once a week. These centred on particular doctrines, catechisms, or bible stories each denomination thought it most appropriate to teach their own children. In some States, if Christian denominations agreed to teach the children together, they argued about the bible stories to be used and insisted on 'no interpretation' or denominational doctrines to be included in the lessons. Jews, Moslems, Buddhists, Baha'i and other faith groups taught their own children separately or had them withdrawn from the general Christian lessons.

During the 1970's, interests in UK developments such as Ninian Smart's comparative religions approach and the work of John Hull and Michael Grimitt at Birmingham University and Selly Oak College, resulted in innovations in some States in Australia for more 'multi-faith' curriculum content. At some senior high school levels, a sequential study of religions was introduced. There were pitfalls and problems with these developments but some have transformed into a better 'inter-faith' approach while others have been discarded.

I was part of the Queensland Religious Education Curriculum Project team who developed from the mid-1970's an approach that took seriously the faith of students and teachers in the dynamic hermeneutical process of religious education. Instead of assuming students had either 'no faith' and were an 'empty vessel' to be filled with religious knowledge, or 'accepted faith' and were willing to have their faith further formed and informed, our RECP team tried to teach the RE teachers to explore with students the various faith claims and attitudes, behaviours and beliefs associated with stories and practices from the religious traditions of which they were a part or which they were studying at any one time. Our philosophy and process were described in *Religious Education: Its nature and Aims* (Department of Education, Queensland, 1977) and *Teaching Approaches* (Department

of Education Queensland, 1986). We published curriculum materials with ideas for teachers to build into lessons for students from Year 1 to Year 12 (elementary to senior secondary) between 1983 – 1987.

By attention to the language style of teachers re faith claims, the goals of the program, and the lesson process, it became possible to do 'interfaith' and 'multi-faith' teaching with full integrity for teacher and students. It was not the 'comparative religions' Lancaster approach, nor a catechetical approach, nor a 'praxis' formation/transformation approach, nor the 'objective study of religion' social science approach. I defined the purpose as "Religious Education is learning how to think religiously and understanding how religious people think." Such a purpose was influenced at the time by Eduard de Bono's work on styles of thinking and Philip Phenix in *Realms of Meaning*.

Since the 1990's, other Australians like Terry Lovatt, Kath Engerbretson and Margaret Scanlon have published curriculum resources attempting to foster a more open approach within religious education in Australian schools – whether they are church-related or Government owned. These complement numerous materials and processes developed overseas, especially in UK and Europe where multifaith or interreligious education is more established, e.g. Peter Vardy and earlier Michael Grimmit and Edwin Cox. From Canada, Elmer John Thiessen 's book *Teaching for Commitment* (Gracewing, 1993) and from Israel, Michael Rosenak's *Commandments and Concerns: Jewish religious education in secular society* (Jewish Publication Society, 1987) explore similar issues for their contexts. I shall not comment on other's work, but share my own experiences and insights.

Pleasures

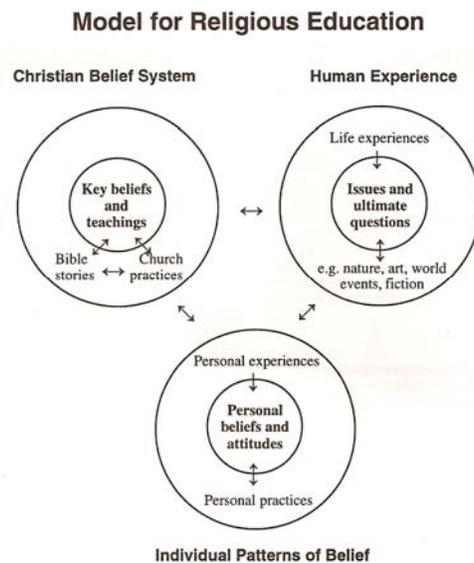
Perhaps the greatest pleasure of approaching religious education in an interfaith way is that dialogue, not dogmatics, dominates the exploration. This encouragement of sharing ideas and beliefs and then exploring their associated behaviours and sources in stories and practices, promotes values such as developing respect, tolerance, and accurate awareness of the religious dimension of life for others in our community and the rest of the world. Through the process of this education, students and teachers also clarify their own personal faith and observe its fluid 'development'.

In this 21st century, the term 'spirituality' has become more popular to describe the 'religious' dimension of life because it is seen as not necessarily dependent on any one system of belief. Helping students

to see the connections between their own spiritual experiences and those of others; to see the similarities and differences; and to become aware of the past and present religious traditions which have similar practices yet perhaps different stories, is deeply satisfying for the teacher committed to interfaith dialogue.

Correcting misconceptions; acknowledging diversity with the humility of a fellow searcher open to new insights; revealing how one's beliefs and values are expressed in concrete behaviours, if not always consistently – these are some of the ideals of honest, loving and freeing teachers. The development of the students' capacities for making connections; for seeing future implications and identifying past consequences; for being open to new possibilities and changes in behaviour and thoughts and attitudes in relation to contemporary, concrete life issues – this is real teaching as we see the students learning.

Lest this seem an amorphous open conversation, I acknowledge that it is grounded in a specific 'field of inquiry' diagram of the boundaries of the process. This three circle model of religious education first developed by the Queensland RECP team and refined by myself in the 1990's, reflects the hermeneutical process of theologising or 'deepening one's spirituality'. The interplay between the circles and within them tracks the thought processes including questioning and analysing data then valuing it for future action.



One circle represents the **Traditional Belief Systems**. It may be more useful to have multiple versions of this circle for each of the faith traditions being explored, but for the description of the process, one is easier to work with. These faith systems have an outer circle surrounding an inner circle. In the inner circle are the **doctrines and teachings, the beliefs** that lie at the core of the faith. These are abstract ideas made concrete in the outer circle practices, stories, sacred texts, liturgies, artwork and social structures of the faith. The outer circle is interpreted through the inner circle and a dynamic process is constantly evolving for each faith tradition, producing more data for both inner and outer circles. For example, the stories of the Bible (outer circle) both give rise to various beliefs and teachings for different denominations (inner circle), and then become interpreted from the theological perspectives of the denominations. Thus, biblical scholars and theologians will dispute the significance of certain passages. Students may ask: Do we have to practise this ritual this way or is that other group's performance just as legitimate? What does our way express about our beliefs?

Another circle represents the **Life Experiences** of humans in the world – for all family, classroom, local community and global community situations. The concrete outer circle examples may be found in real life or fiction, drama, art, TV documentaries or newspapers. These life experiences cause us to raise the **ultimate** or deep **questions and issues** for humans: Where do we belong? Do we deserve to be loved? What is the purpose of life? On what basis do we choose between alternatives? Such ultimate questions have answers in the faith traditions of the first circle above.

The third circle represents **Individual Patterns of Belief** for each student and teacher in the classroom. Once again, there actually are multiple circles – one for each student and teacher – but for the diagrammatic process, we use only one. At the centre or inner circle here are the **personal beliefs and values** for each participant. These are expressed in the behaviours and actions, the speech and writing of the individuals. The specific experiences of these individuals, e.g. death of a parent, are interpreted through their beliefs which are formed and clarified as they go through the dynamic process of seeing their experience as part of the Life Experience circle of others, raising the ultimate questions about death, and then exploring the various answers offered by the Traditional Belief Systems.

Because of the openness of the model, one can include any number of faith traditions to explore with each issue or topic. One may choose to begin the RE lesson with a student's personal query, e.g. re the death of a parent, and track the thinking process through the various circles, both inner and outer. For example, from her story about what happened and how she felt and acted, the teacher may generalise the death to other humans' experiences. This may include viewing a film or video and then exploring what questions were raised in it and what answers it offered from which religious or faith traditions. Students may then be encouraged to suggest what actions, values and attitudes could be expected from holding such beliefs. What tensions could arise for individuals or families?

Alternatively, a newspaper or TV story may begin the lesson process of identifying that story with our individual stories and how it affects us; then what questions it raises for us; what beliefs or ideas we hold in relation to it. Exploring how various religious traditions deal with this topic or have stories like it in the sacred texts and the beliefs or teachings they derive from them, further expands the students' awareness. The teacher may encourage the students to respond in some concrete way to the original story via personal journal reflections, letters or project activities.

The pleasure of dealing with real life issues for students and our community enables religious education to be a very relevant subject for students. By modelling an interfaith exploration of the topics, teachers are expanding students' awareness of the often 'hidden' spiritual dimensions not discussed in the media very clearly. By providing a coherent framework or process for the analysis of topics, teachers are encouraging independent thinking for the future – setting students free to learn.

Without having to defend a particular theology or doctrinal viewpoint, teachers are set free from the inherent student resistance and rebellion at certain ages. Teachers are offered the intellectual honesty to acknowledge diversity of faith responses and the freedom of individuals to choose their own spiritual response. However, teachers do not have to pretend objectivity or neutrality. A vital part in the process is when students ask teachers their opinion or beliefs on the topic. By careful 'witnessing' or explaining why the teacher holds such beliefs and how they affect the teacher's behaviour and attitudes, students are enabled to see 'faith in action'. If the teacher waits to be invited into the conversation, students probably will be more open to consider the teacher's sharing. This is the subjective aspect of the

interfaith approach – and the careful use of language to distinguish personal beliefs from the more objective naming of various positions becomes a key aspect of this approach.

Pitfalls

The awareness of the teacher concerning his/her own faith and variety of beliefs and assumptions about life is essential for this form of religious education. Sara Little in *To set one's heart* (John Knox, 1983) quotes the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset "Beliefs are not ideas we *have*, but ideas we *are*." Beliefs are how we 'set our heart' and Thomas F. Green in *The Activities of Teaching* (McGraw-Hill, 1971) explained that our 'core beliefs' determine our values, attitudes and behaviours so they need to be examined, or made explicit, lest we educate with a hidden curriculum or ideology that may lead to false consciousness for both ourselves and our students.

We make our assumptions or beliefs explicit for students via our language about faith. Instead of treating beliefs (faith-responses and interpretations of data) as if they were ordinary fact-type statements, students and teachers in interfaith dialogue can facilitate the conversation by 'owning' or 'grounding' beliefs or faith statements. Thus, "I believe God created the world" is better than the bald, "God made the world". This is 'owning' the belief for oneself and acknowledging that others may disagree. Alternatively, one may 'ground' the belief by saying, "Jews, Christians and Moslems believe that God created the world." This grounding is helpful when one does not accept the belief for oneself, but you want to assist students to see it is a viable belief option. By making the discussion of beliefs explicit in the classroom, we normalise the spiritual dimension of life in our secular societies which often prefer it hidden.

Clergy and ardent believers keen to 'pass on the message' of faith, often find it hard to accept that their beliefs are beliefs – not facts. This hinders dialogue when truths held by one directly conflict with those held by the others in the dialogue. Stating what you believe and why it is important for your life, as well as acknowledging its source, provides information for the other listeners on how your faith positions have developed. In school classrooms, students are helped to see the filters we use for interpreting the information given to us. Indoctrination is abhorred in democratic societies so our duty is to assist students to become aware of it and to probe it for the ideology behind it. Religious education classes are seen as key for this by the UK government, now offering millions of dollars to improve the religious education system there since the bombings of 2006.

Unfortunately, some faith communities respond to secularism or lack of practice by the children of their former members, by desiring to restrict the content of religious education classes to their own 'religious' content. When choice is available, they fear the students will select the most interesting, most dramatic form of religious truth. This return to former 'denominational' curricula content often satisfies the more conservative teachers as well as the faith community leaders concerned over fewer participants in their denomination or group. In Australia, this is also seen in the rise of faith community elementary and secondary schools – both Christian and other faiths. Parents are encouraged to protect their children's faith by restricting the influence of other ideas. Secularist teachers' unions advocating for 'secular education' and the absence of teaching religious education, actually are inhibiting the development of communities where faith issues can be discussed rationally and respect developed for the wide spectrum of spirituality in our multi-religious communities today.

The other pitfall or consequence of interfaith religious education in schools is the effect it has on faith community education. Whereas in the 1970s and 1980's we had trouble trying to teach the religious education teachers in schools to do 'religious education' not faith education catechesis which presumes the faith response of students, the longer term effect now is that in some faith communities like Christian Sunday Schools, the children refuse to accept only one way of believing is possible. "What about the Buddhists and Hindus when they pray?" a nine year old girl pressed her Sunday school teacher.

Implications for the future

I had assumed the place for 'owning and grounding' faith statements was in school religious education, but as a clergy in a congregation educating both adults and children, I now find it essential to watch my language as I talk about faith. It causes major arguments with fellow clergy who want to be dogmatic and decisive in drawing boundaries on truth. I believe more interfaith education is desirable within our own faith communities as our people search for meaning in our multi-religious world. Many members of the more senior congregation I serve are as eager to learn about other faiths as the younger congregation cared for by my colleague. I personally find it necessary even with the five and six year old children in my school RE class, to mention other faiths and the diversity within Christianity as I teach the 'prescribed' curriculum and try to make it relevant to these children's lives.

Once you see a bigger picture, it is hard to go back to a more restricted one. Sadly, very few students in government schools in Australia are now receiving interfaith religious education as described above. A few doing the equivalent of a “Studies in Religion” course for their final two years at secondary school may find a teacher interested in more than the ‘comparative religions’ approach. The vast majority of voluntary teachers for elementary schools lack the training in this method, even if they could see the benefits.

However, a variety of forms of interfaith religious education are practised by many professional religious education teachers in independent or church-related schools in Australia, especially those connected with the Australian Association for Religious Education. It is a response both to the diversity of the faith communities of students in the classrooms and to the needs of our society for more harmony and tolerance, more understanding and respect for religious differences. Teachers and national curriculum designers, politicians and some parents, desire educational programs that will prepare students to be contributors to the future of the world. I commend the developments and hope new teachers will learn from what was attempted in the past.

NOTE: Due to copyright restrictions, examples of curricula mentioned cannot be published here but will be on display at the conference in Dallas.

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