The Future of Religious Education: Three Pathways to Explore

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Choosing a Pathway

Three pathways present themselves to religious educators intent on pursuing options for future theory and practice in their discipline. This article attempts to explain and evaluate these pathways. My intention is to offer those concerned with the future of religious education in Lutheran schools some foundational ideas with which to converse as they explore an appropriate pathway for their own work.

The whole world stands at the beginning of a changed era; religious educators are not immune from these changes. Among those present realities pushing changes I would name three, while recognising the multiplicity of other forces. The first is massive population shifts unparalleled in human history, leading to increasing numbers of multicultural and multireligious communities. The second major factor is the decline in the influence of the Christian Church, at least in the Western liberal democracies. The third is the constant shifting of guiding economic theory, currently pushing globalisation strategies and competitive market theories.

These factors are having profound effects on the Australian community; religious education also feels the heat when these massive cultural shifts occur. For religious educators in Church-related schools, the particular focus becomes the nature and purpose of the classroom religion program. The following three pathways are the responses of contemporary theorists to the challenges of the present and future for religious education.

Forming Faith

Aims and Key Theorists: In Australian religious education discussions, theorists who favour a faith forming pathway have achieved a preeminence. These theorists have laid firm foundations for approaches which seek directly to enhance the Christian faith of students. Amongst faith forming theorists, some may place greater emphasis on nurture and socialisation within a Christian community; others have emphasised the need for critical and reasoned appropriation of the Christian tradition. Faith forming educators embrace a spectrum of conservative and radical viewpoints within the boundaries of the Christian tradition. In the Lutheran tradition, Ruth Butler (1998, p. 57) has provided a contemporary estimation of the goals for faith formation in Lutheran school religion programs:

> We Lutherans harbour no illusions that our teaching will *necessarily* result in the nurturing of faith, because that work is done by the Holy Spirit. We continue to trust, though, that the word that is faithfully spoken "will not return to us void". The divine message will be sent and received by some despite the interference of teachers' failings, students' resistance and the curriculum's deficiencies.

These approaches aim to conserve the traditions of the Church and bring about the liberation of all the world. Participants are invited to reclaim the Christian story, appropriate the vision of the Church community and continue the work of the Church. As a consequence of this, participants are also invited and challenged to change the world. It is not sufficient that this style of religious education transmit or hand over a set of traditions; it must lead to a change in the way things are if it is to reflect more closely the aims of the Christian tradition. Phrases such as education for responsible citizenship, liberation, conversion and

transformation are commonly employed in the language of these theorists, especially those with a more radical orientation. Mary Boys (1989, p. 203) has described this dual purpose as making accessible the tradition and the transformation of the social and public world. She argues that:

> However important, the community's traditions are not ends in themselves: they are to lead to its renewal. A community draws upon its traditions not merely for maintenance, but for transformation. Traditions should offer the pattern that enables the community to recognize God's involvement with creation. Consequently, they summon their adherents into the process of ongoing conversion. Without conversion as their end, traditions become idols. Hence, my belief, in my definition of religious education, that there is an "intrinsic connection between traditions and transformation".

These theorists commonly speak of forming, informing and transforming those who participate in this way of religious education.

Major Discipline: The guiding discipline for those who favour a faith forming pathway is theology. Most of the influential contemporary theorists prefer a liberal, even radical, statement of Christian theology. Theology provides the majority of the content of a religion lesson. The activities of the faith forming classroom can be described as a form of rudimentary theologising. The task for students is to understand Christian teachings and apply them to the diverse experiences of life.

A further discipline relied upon by these theorists of the past three decades has been the social sciences, particular humanistic and developmental psychology. Many have relied on the insights of researchers in these disciplines for the language and structures to describe the ways in which students can meaningfully engage with the Christian tradition. Researchers such as James Fowler, Lawrence Kohlberg and Erik Erikson have provided maps for faith forming theorists to understand the processes of intellectual, moral and faith development in humans. Using these maps, theorists aim to conform classroom activities to students' faith development needs.

Image of Student and Teacher: Faith forming theorists view the student as a Christian believer, or as someone who potentially could make a decision to become a Christian disciple. The student is one in whose life God is already present and active. Classroom activities allow for that understanding to be made apparent and to encourage a response in faith from the student. The classroom teacher is a model for the Christian life. The teacher is one who shares his or her Christian faith with students as a means of enhancing their faith. The teacher is a companion with the students on a journey of faith, a "leading learner" and a "co-learner" along with their fellow Christians (Groome, 1991, p. 450), and a "sponsor, or model, of what committed faith looks like in real life" (Flynn, 1979, p. 198). These theorists and practitioners are inclined to describe their classroom teaching using the language of Church ministry. The expectation is that teachers and students in the compulsory classroom will engage with each other in activities that will assist them all to enhance their commitment to Christian discipleship.

Contributions: The faith forming pathway has a long history of acceptance, particularly in Lutheran and Catholic schools. It should be noted, however, that the most recent forms of faith formation which emphasise attention to students' life experiences and the critical appropriation of the Christian tradition are of a more recent vintage, no more than thirty

years old. The more recent and sophisticated forms, especially Thomas Groome's shared Christian praxis, are the best and most useful conceptualisations of the process of faith sharing and nurture.

In any Church-related school, a number of occasions exist within the life of the school where a faith development process is welcomed and desirable. When school retreats and prayer and reflection days have been conducted with due regard for students' freedom of participation, many practitioners have found an approach such as Groome's shared Christian praxis to be appropriate and helpful (Harrison, 1989). School staff who work with students in voluntary faith response groups or in personal counselling contexts may benefit from the processes of action and reflection outlined by faith forming theorists.

Limitations: Criticism of faith forming approaches as the basis of classroom religion programs has grown over the past two decades. The perception of diversity and doubtful readiness for such programs among increasing numbers of Australian students has caused questioning of the appropriateness of foundational assumptions. Many teachers and theorists challenge whether Australian school students are ready, willing and able to engage in a process of Christian faith formation within the confines of the compulsory classroom. An approach which relies upon a student's predisposition and openness to Christian discipleship will encounter resistance among students who are not prepared to accept this invitation.

These approaches to classroom religion programs are unacceptable to State and Federal government authorities who have shown little enthusiasm for mandating courses which promote narrow or particular interests of Church or religious groups in Australian schools. This has meant that faith forming theorists have had little impact on discussions to broaden the access of Australian students to religious education in public and other independent schools.

Finally, faith forming approaches are experiencing increased pressure from multiculturalism. These approaches offer fewer options for ways to respond to the greater awareness and sensitivity towards other religious traditions. Because this pathway in religious education is principally concerned with building up the life and faith of a particular Christian group, less emphasis is placed on how to relate to those who do not share that particular tradition. Post-modern pressures to consider plurality and otherness will intensify the pressure on faith forming approaches as the basis for the classroom religion program.

World Religions

Aims and Key Theorists: Ninian Smart (1989) is the preeminent theorist of a descriptive and comparative approach to studying religions. Drawing on several strands of the European philosophical tradition, especially philosophical phenomenology, Smart has set a pattern which others have adopted and applied to Australian school programs. His description of seven dimensions which are shared by religious traditions - doctrinal, mythological, ethical, ritual, experiential, social and material - has established a foundation for the content and method of the religion class. Australian theorists Basil Moore and Norman Habel (1982) built upon Smart's work to outline a classroom-friendly approach to comparative religious studies which identified types or foundation stones in all religions which could be used as the building blocks for students' religious understanding. Other Australian religious educators have enthusiastically embraced the comparative religious studies approach, most notably Terence Lovat (1995) and Patricia Malone (1996).

All of these theorists aim to describe a classroom curriculum which does not presume a confessional commitment on the part of students or teachers; no one would be required to demonstrate belief in any particular religious tradition as a prerequisite for entrance to these courses or in order to complete them successfully. No one religion would be championed or favoured over and against another religion; all religions would be studied with dispassionate fairness. Ultimately, the aim for these comparative religion studies is enhanced understanding of and tolerance for the broad range of the world's religious traditions. As Ninian Smart (1990) has observed:

> Many people are searchers, realising that the truth is not monolithically laid down, as Sunday School might lead us to think. We emerge into the adult world realising that there are varieties of living worldviews: and these increasingly have become living options. This has been especially obvious since the 1960s. In fact this is the chief contribution of the 60s to modern awareness. In searching we may also be looking for a global outlook to go with the emerging global civilization (Smart, 1990, p. 300).

Major Discipline: Most of the religion studies curriculums which presently exist in Australian schools are derived from philosophical phenomenology. This stream of philosophical thought has found favour among some sociologists and anthropologists. It is these disciplines which provide much of the methodology, shape and flow for the classroom religion program.

A key feature of philosophical phenomenology is the insistence on the bracketing of personal evaluation of data gathered through the senses. The attempt at reciprocal fairness aims to allow teachers and students an unfettered opportunity to understand each religion on its own terms. Moore and Habel (1982) describe bracketing in this way:

> As we proceed with the study of religion it is often important to "bracket out" a whole range of admittedly important questions, such as, "Does God exist?" "Do harvest-increase rituals actually work?" "Is there a life before life or after death?" "Is religion an illusion?" But we bracket these questions out not in order to ignore them or dismiss them as irrelevant. We do so in order to gain an understanding of the phenomena or traditions from the point of view of the believers. Later we may return to these questions in a larger context and with a more complex understanding which will enable us to explore them with a greater sophistication (Moore & Habel, 1982, p. 63).

Image of Student and Teacher: Both teacher and students are dispassionate searchers seeking to gather information about a broad number of religious traditions. They allow the various aspects of religious traditions to speak to their intuitions, but attempt to suspend their own judgments about the validity and worth of the religion they are studying. Both teacher and student may exhibit a fascination with religion as a cultural artefact as they come to understand and appreciate the rich variety of traditions which exist among the world's people.

Contributions: Teachers involved in study of religion courses attest almost universally to improvement in their own levels of satisfaction in teaching, in the interest and engagement of students and in the quality of students' work. Among the reasons for this increased satisfaction is that these courses are seen to "count" towards students' final scores for university entrance and senior certificates; the courses mandated by State Departments of

Education have the same standing as other curriculum areas. They have generally been well resourced with appropriate and relevant texts and other teaching and learning materials. The content to be studied is clearly defined; students and teachers can gauge their progress and achievement of course objectives in a much clearer way than in many other religion programs. Students do not feel that their senior secondary level studies are a repetition of the same topics which they have previously studied. There is a strenuous effort to disclaim any attempt to influence students' personal faith responses. This allows students - often for the first time in their schooling career - an opportunity to study religious themes without the pressure to provide responses which are deemed to be acceptable to school authorities or which are overly personal.

Many of the positive anecdotal reports of teachers' experiences of teaching study of religion courses emphasise the freedom and possibilities allowed to them in these programs compared to other religion programs. Teachers report an increased respect from colleagues for their work as a consequence of the increased status which is accorded to a Department of Education registered and accredited course. Many teachers have discovered a renewed sense of their professional vocation in teaching study of religion courses. McGrath (1996) reports his impressions from working with a number of religion studies teachers. He observes that some teachers say their students find opportunities for greater reflection on their own tradition and beliefs, from studying those of others. McGrath suggests that in an "open, inquiring classroom environment students are able to freely reflect on their beliefs and values. Some report a particular commitment to the study and mellowing among students who were previously openly antagonistic to the Church" (1996, p. 23).

Limitations: Critics of phenomenological approaches have questioned the personal relevance of these courses for the students. Since these programs require a dispassionate study of religious phenomena, the amount of material studied which merely describes the various functions and forms of religion can lead to boredom or lack of interest in students who do not learn best in analytical or descriptive ways. While many teaching plans, texts and resources manage successfully to engage students' interests and motivation, still the foundation upon which these studies are based precludes too much involvement of the personal in favour of dispassionate study. This criticism raises the further question of whether study of religion courses as they are presently conceived even belong under the banner of religious education at all. With their heavy emphasis on the methodology of social science, such studies may be more at home under the banner of social studies. This may be especially apt for those curriculums which are almost indistinguishable from a sociological or anthropological investigation of human phenomena. To the extent that study of religion courses deal only with descriptive content - that is, when they attempt to do no more than provide a descriptive account of major religions or world views - it may be more accurate to see such courses as a sub-set of social studies, rather than religious education.

A fundamental dilemma has confronted, even confounded, a number of Church-related secondary schools who offer both study of religion courses and other kinds of religious education programs at the senior levels: What is, or should be, the relationship between a religious education program and a study of religion course at the senior secondary school level? How can a Church-related school communicate particular perspectives on moral and religious questions while honouring the demands of the religion studies courses? Patricia Malone (1996) argues that it is "unwise to make *Studies of Religion* a compulsory course; students should be able to choose between the Board course and other school based religion programs" (1996, p. 14). Adam Taylor (1993) agrees, suggesting that if study of religion is made compulsory in a school, "it is bound to import all the negative attitudes that existed in

any former compulsory course" (1993, p. 20). He argues that these courses should be part of a whole school approach which gives emphasis also to liturgy and prayer, voluntary faith groups, retreats, and the fostering of a positive school climate in order to foster the total religious development of students. The study of religion courses alone provide insufficient scope to achieve this.

Educational Approaches

Aims and Key Theorists: While there are a number of significant progenitors of an educational rationale for the classroom religion program, for Australian religious educators none is more significant than Gerard Rummery. His research in the mid-1970s opened up the possibility of a distinction between faith forming approaches and classroom religion teaching. Rummery raised the question of the extent to which "teachers consider that they, in their educational relationship with pupils, may presume that they have a context of shared belief" (Rummery, 1977, p. 268). He proposed that the basis for an approach to religious education in schools should be one which is "relevant to the pluralist society which exists in Australia", rather than one which borrowed ideas formed in overseas conditions which may not exhibit the same degree of diversity as in Australia (Rummery, 1977, p. 279). Other prominent Australian supporters of the direction established by Rummery are Marisa Crawford and Graham Rossiter (1988) who have been at the forefront of scholarship in this area. They have directed much of their research to the theory and practice of secondary school religion programs. In these programs, they argue, students can "explore the meaning that religion, particularly their own tradition, has for people; they can reflect on contemporary religious and social issues; they can see how the study of religion makes a valuable contribution to their education and personal development." (Crawford & Rossiter, 1985, p. ix).

Overseas, key religious educators who have led research and reflection on this approach are Gabriel Moran (1989) and Maria Harris (1987; 1989; 1998). Their work in religious education has principally been directed to locating the meaning of religious education more broadly than simply maintenance of the Church. Moran has argued that the field or discipline of religious education "is composed of two sharply contrasting processes: (1) teaching people religion and (2) teaching people to be religious in a particular way" (1991, p. 249). This dual process requires a critical understanding and appreciation of a religious tradition or religious way with which a person is most familiar, as well as an empathic understanding and appreciation of the religious ways of others. This empathic understanding assists religious people to enhance and enrich participation in their own tradition. The best place to gain this empathic understanding is a school classroom since it is the place specifically established for the purpose of enhancing human understanding of subject matter. A deeper level of inquiry is usually more possible in a school classroom than outside it since tolerance and civility are goals in most classrooms. For Christians, as for those belonging to any particular tradition, a number of other agencies exist to teach people to be religious in a particular way, according to Moran. Among them are the family, the local parish, prayer groups, service groups and so on.

An educational approach resists the reduction of religious education solely to concern with Church matters or maintenance of a Church community: the "ultimate goal is to assist people to think, feel, imagine, act and grow religiously in an intelligent manner" (Scott, 1984, p. 336). While this requires a close and disciplined study of a person's own tradition, the whole of religious education is a much broader project than this aspect alone. For religious educators working in Lutheran schools, a critical distinction must be kept in mind:

The whole of religious education is not a terribly complex project. It requires that those of us who appropriate the term "teacher" know which of the two processes we are engaged in at a particular time and place. The tragedy would be that, for lack of clarity about this distinction, institutions end up doing neither: their academic inquiry is not challenging enough and their formation is not particular enough (Moran, 1991, p. 252).

Major Discipline: The shape and flow of the classroom religion program is conditioned by the disciplines of education. Theology is seen as a modest contributor to the enterprise of religious education: it is not the dominant form of content or method for the religion classroom. The goal of the classroom religion program is understanding, not the capacity to theologise. Gabriel Moran (1997) argues that a particular understanding of revelation drives the classroom religion curriculum, since God remains mostly hidden to humans:

Human beings remain mostly ignorant of God and creation, which is why they have to listen carefully to one another, to whatever wisdom has been gathered through the past centuries and to a divine voice that still commands, promises, threatens, and comforts in the events of daily life (Moran, 1997, p. 28).

Accordingly, the search for wisdom in Lutheran school religion classrooms includes a consideration of the wisdom that has been gathered in historical and contemporary communities and subjecting it to critical scrutiny for its personal and communal relevance.

For these religious educators, education is seen as a life-long and life-wide concern. Education is a process which extends from birth to death, that is, life-long; it is not only an activity conducted by adults for children in schools. While it includes this form, education does not cease with adolescence; it becomes increasingly rich and more complex as a person moves into adulthood. Education also occurs in a great variety of contexts and events, such as in families and other communities, in solitude and despair, in work, rest and leisure. That is, education is a life-wide concern. In the Church, education is not confined to specific classes or seminars about the Christian life. The educational curriculum of the Church is more extensive than just schools and classrooms. In this sense, the Church does not *have* an educational curriculum; the Church itself *is* an educational curriculum (Harris, 1989). All activities of a Church community educate the people who participate in its life. The Church's liturgical life educates people about memory, solidarity, corporate responsibility and much more besides. The communal prayer life of the Church educates people to contemplation, silence, praise and the need for justice. The service and outreach of the community to others educates people to care, as well as to personal and social responsibility.

Image of Student and Teacher: For those adopting an educational approach, both teacher and student are characterised as intelligent inquirers. No presumptions are made about the personal religious commitments of teacher or student, even though some understanding and appreciation of religion is a necessary prerequisite for further study. The activities engaged in by teacher and students in a classroom are not directly aimed at enhancing belief in or commitment to a particular religious group.

While teachers' pedagogical knowledge is brought into play in more creative and imaginative ways, there is also an increase in expectations about teachers' content knowledge. This approach, since it demands that students become literate in the ways of religion and in particular religious ways, consequently demands greater levels of religious

literacy in teachers. This requires teachers to become well versed in a number of religious disciplines - particularly scripture, Church history, theology and other religions besides Christianity - as well as knowing how these content areas may be structured in the classroom to engage the interests and experience of students. Other disciplines which have the human subject as the substance of their subject-matter - especially art, literature and history - are essential allies in the search for wisdom in the religion class. The demands of teaching religion in the Lutheran school are the same as teaching any other curriculum area offered to students. For classroom teaching to be more than merely telling students what to believe and how to think about religious matters, creativity and imagination are required.

Contributions: One of the ultimate concerns of this approach is to assist the development of religiously literate and intelligent adults who can engage in religious reflection concerning important contemporary issues. In Lutheran school religion programs, then, the available content brought into dialogue with the Christian tradition is potentially limitless. Nothing from ordinary experience is beyond consideration in the religion class. The task for Lutheran school teachers and curriculum makers is to link the issues and concerns of the contemporary world with the riches of the Christian tradition. Also included in such study is a consideration, to whatever extent is possible, of the ways other religious traditions have reflected upon and acted in relation to the issue under consideration. This need for contrast and comparison requires a delicate balance. This approach to Lutheran school religion programs does not advocate a full-scale study of world religions. Such an analytical and comparative study of themes and ideas in the major world religions may be beyond the capacity and interests of most school students. Nevertheless, the possibilities for classroom study of a religious tradition in some depth in a way which does not presume personal acceptance of that particular tradition requires some consideration of the religious ways which are not like it. Appropriate comparisons and contrasts with other traditions can be made in the course of studying a familiar religious tradition. This comparison and contrast of divergent religious ways may even focus upon different religious ways within the same religious tradition.

This approach to religious education in Lutheran schools locates the contribution of the Lutheran school and the religion curriculum within the larger constellation of factors which influence a person's religious development. The religion class is seen primarily as a place of academic, disciplined study which is similar in approach to the way that other classroom curriculum areas are conducted. Previous approaches to religious education in Lutheran schools risked forming students who, in the words of Maria Harris, were "strong in the heart, but soft in the head" when it came to matters of religion. An educational approach seeks to grant the religion classroom its appropriate place in students' intellectual development. But it does not ignore the need for the nurturing of the personal and relational dimensions of religious understanding. The search for balance in these dimensions and the construction of appropriate contexts for them are central to this approach.

Limitations: For these theorists, much thinking and energy has been consumed by the quest for a viable classroom religion program; less attention has been given to describing and prescribing the way of religious education in the communal dimension of the school's life beyond the classroom.

The educational approach to religious education has caused some strong reactions in those committed to faith forming approaches. A lively correspondence has been conducted in Australian religious education journals and other publications since the mid-1980s. This correspondence has, at times, been quite robust. For some theorists and practitioners, the

description of the classroom religion program sounds too academic and not sufficiently religious. Critics question the lack of focus upon faith and nurture of students in Christian faith. For example, Eamon Murray, has asserted that the approach to religious education articulated by Rossiter promotes a narrow view of the intellect, marginalises the importance of inductive processes in classroom teaching, equates a teacher's faith witness with indoctrination, downplays the importance of the affective domain, does less justice to female students than it does to male students and tends to dichotomise knowledge and faith (Murray, 1993).

Gideon Goosen maintains that Rossiter's attempts to separate religious education and faith formation lead to confusion and lack of clarity in the aims and processes of classroom religion program. He wants "the aim of personal faith development to remain prominent for classroom religious education and for other activities under the religious education umbrella" (Goosen, 1992, p. 56). Thomas Groome, the originator of the shared Christian praxis approach to religious education, has voiced concerns about Rossiter's ideas, preferring to maintain the unity of faith formation and religious education. Groome judges the work of Rossiter and others who seek to separate religious education and faith formation as "unwise and misguided", suggesting that such a separation could be detrimental to both. He believes that classroom religion lessons would become dry and unengaging for students with too much stress on rational argument (Groome, 1992)..

The counter to these attacks has been to stress the limitations of the school in a person's total religious development. The school years are not normally the entire life span of a person and their religious development will continue far beyond the confines of a school program. Proponents of an educational approach argue that the school has an indispensable, important though limited role to play in a person's religious education.

Conclusion

Each conception of the classroom religion program described here can be distinguished by its foundational aims and purposes; each is attempting to achieve distinctive goals. Religious educators need to be aware of the differences between approaches. While I claim that there are three distinctive conversation partners in Australian religious education, presently evidence of grafting branch principles onto foundational trunks of rival approaches is apparent in many places. If these hybrid arrangements are to bear fruit, Australian religious educators need to be clear and speak confidently about their fundamental aims and dispositions.

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