

Religious Educators leading understanding in a multi-faith Australia

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Abstract

Religious educators are taking a leading role in preparing students to live and operate effectively in a multifaith world. Religious educators in Catholic schools are challenged to continue to teach Christianity in a way that students have a strong and well developed understanding of the home tradition and also a working knowledge of the major world religions. In many ways religious educators are establishing some of the foundation stones for building and leading conversation about religion in multifaith Australia. This paper will explore some of the challenges facing religious educators as they develop appropriate pedagogical practices for multifaith education.

Introduction

As Australian society becomes more diverse there is an increasing need for students to learn about the religious worlds of others. Religious educators have for some time been teaching world religions either as part of Religious Education or through Studies in Religion. As the need to learn about the religious worlds of others increases so too does the need to have a developed and sophisticated understanding of Christianity. This paper traces the shift in the Catholic church's attitude to religions other than Christianity and then explores how the teaching of Catholicism in Catholic schools can be complimented and enhanced through a study of the world's religions, particularly Judaism. It acknowledges the significant lead taken by religious educators and challenges them to continually critique and analyse their teaching of Christianity in an increasingly multi-religious society.

Shift in attitude

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church's changed attitude to religions other than Christianity has been remarkable. In the space of forty years, the Church has moved from the position of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, "no salvation outside of the church", to a position which recognizes the religious plurality and diversity of today's world. The Catholic church's relationship to non-Christian religions was formally expressed in the Second Vatican Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate* promulgated on 28 October, 1965. While some commentators have described it as a hasty exercise in updating Roman Catholic thinking, this brief document, only four A4 pages, is nonetheless one of the most significant documents to emerge from the Council. Instigated by Pope John XXIII and entrusted to Cardinal Bea for drafting, the document was originally intended to address the 'Jewish question' particularly Christianity's historical relationship with Judaism and it was to have a particular focus on the Shoah (Holocaust). After more than four iterations the final

document, much to the disappointment of Jews, did not mention the Shoah. It did however, include a small section on Islam and a brief mention of Buddhism, Hinduism. *Nostra Aetate* concentrates on the Catholic church's relationship with Judaism and explicitly states that the church "...draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild roots, the Gentiles" (NA 7). Until recently *Nostra Aetate* has had little impact on teachers and on the teaching of religious education schools, it has virtually remained unnoticed for many within the church and only a few people are aware of subsequent documents which open up and expand the original text, the *Guidelines for Nostra Aetate* (1974) and the *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis* (1985). Together these documents call on Catholics to study Judaism and to learn about essential traits of how Jews define themselves and to carefully examine what they say, preach, pray and teach about Jews and Judaism. The documents caution Catholics not to juxtapose the Hebrew Scriptures with the Christian Scriptures and to pay particular attention to the selection of liturgical readings, preparation of homilies and translations of liturgical texts. They even ask Catholic Universities to establish Chairs in Jewish Studies. The importance of *Nostra Aetate* is that it represents a shift in theological thinking and awareness. It encourages us to take the first step with regard to other religious traditions and it states that the first step on this journey should be education related to Judaism.

Nostra Aetate's powerful call to "recognize, preserve and promote those spiritual and moral good things" (NA 2) found among people of other faiths necessitates that we also pay particular attention to Christianity in the way that it continually engages with the world. While *Nostra Aetate* acknowledged religious pluralism, it did not provide any real guidance for how we were to engage with religious pluralism. The task of contemporary religious educators, aware of *Nostra Aetate*, is to teach in a way which not only acknowledges the plurality of the world but also teach with a deep commitment and understanding of Christianity.

Following the release of *Nostra Aetate*, theologians and scholars of comparative religions began to trace the shifts that had taken place in Christianity's relationship with other faith traditions. The language most commonly used to describe the shifts has been that of the three-fold theological paradigm of Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism. While the terms are familiar to many people they are not always useful and in many ways can be a gross simplification of highly complex issues which "force diverse materials into easily controlled locations" (D'Costa in Barnes, 2002, p. 8). Exclusivism privileges one's own faith tradition against all others, "our own community, our own tradition, our understanding of reality, our encounter with God, is the one and only truth,

excluding all others (Eck, 1993, p. 168); Inclusivism seeks to 'include' non-Christian communities in fulfillment of God's plan of salvation and while it says that there is good in other religions and 'includes' them as 'anonymous Christians' it is nonetheless patronizing of other traditions as "lesser or partial versions of what is realized in only one" (Barnes, 2002, p. 8). Pluralism according to Eck (1993), assumes both openness and commitment "it does not mean giving up our commitments; rather, it means opening up those commitments to the give-and-take of mutual discovery, understanding, and, indeed, transformation" (p. 168). The most significant difference between the inclusivist and pluralist is according to Eck (1993)

...self-consciousness of one's understanding of the world and God. If we are inclusivists, we include others into a worldview we already know and on the terms we have already set. If we are pluralists, we recognize the limits of the world we already know and we seek to understand others in their own terms, not just in ours (p. 169).

Religious Education

The American religious educator, Mary Boys poses three significant questions regarding living and teaching in a diverse religious world. She asks:

- What sort of education and formation in faith enable people to participate intelligently in a religiously pluralistic society?
- What sort of education provides people of faith with the grounding to engage in religious questions with people of other faiths?
- What sort of education prepares people to draw upon their commitment of faith in the public square in order to foster the common good? (Boys, 2006, p. 74).

I would like to use these questions as the lens through which to examine religious education in Catholic schools and in particular the teaching of religious education as it embraces the teaching of the major world's religions in the Catholic School setting.

Let us begin with the first question.

- *What sort of education and formation in faith enable people to participate intelligently in a religiously pluralistic society?*

In many ways Mary Boys offers some guidance in this area. She invites religious educators to address the content and meaning of *Nostra Aetate*, as well as the subsequent documents such as the *Guidelines* and the *Notes* so that they embrace the teaching Judaism in an authentic way. She is firmly convinced that a sound knowledge of Judaism is necessary if we are to truly understand Christianity. She dares religious educators to take up the challenge of religious pluralism and not to leave questions of religious pluralism solely to systematic theologians,

scholars of comparative religions and philosophers. She also challenges teachers to examine carefully the teaching and learning materials they use with students and particular pedagogical approaches appropriate for the religious education classroom. She said that “we must ask how we might educate within our own communities of faith so that our adherents might engage with those who are religiously other in order to contribute to the building of a world where strangers are neighbours” (Boys, 2002, p. 10).

The contemporary multicultural nature of Australian society makes addressing the context of ‘otherness’ immediate. We do not live in the same world of our parents or grandparents. The religious landscape of Australia has changed dramatically within the last twenty-five years. On many levels inter-religious exchange happens in a variety of contexts in our urban environments: at the local shopping centre, in our neighbourhoods, and in our Catholic schools. Contemporary Religious Education then should assist people to operate effectively in a religiously plural world. Religious education in one’s faith tradition not only provides the foundation for self-understanding as a member of that tradition, but it also shapes attitudes, either negative or positive, about the religious other. How teachers interpret the fundamental or sacred narratives of religions may result in negative or reeducational portrayal of the other. Boys uses an example from the Baltimore Catechism to illustrate her point.

Question: Why did the Jewish religion, which up to the death of Christ had been the true religion, cease at that time to be the true religion

Answer: The Jewish religion, up to the death of Christ had been the true religion, ceased at that time to be the true religion because it was only a promise of the redemption and figure of the Christian religion; and when the redemption was accomplished and the Christian religion established by the death of Christ, the promise and figure were no longer necessary.

It is obvious from this question and answer that inter-religious issues were of no concern. This Catechism answer provides a snapshot of Catholic Church’s teaching about Judaism prior to the Second Vatican Council: it was a teaching which fostered oppositional identity where Catholics defined themselves over and against Judaism. This attitude toward Judaism was also reflected in the prayers we said at the Easter liturgy where we prayed for the conversion of the Jews. Today we need to teach about Judaism in a way that acknowledges God’s continuing and lasting Covenant with the Jews. Christians need to understand Judaism since Christian origins are inextricably bound up in Judaism. But we have to move beyond teaching about Jews as “Hebrews of old” (Boys, 2006, p. 10) and begin to teach about Judaism as a living religion and to teach about Jews as they define themselves not as we define them.

Boys' second question, *What sort of education provides people of faith with the grounding to engage in religious questions with people of other faiths?* is even more challenging. In response to this question she suggests that religious educators ought to teach for "religious particularism and pluralism" (Boys, 2002, p. 13). Both components, "particularism and pluralism must be held in fruitful tension" (Boys, 2002, p. 13). When speaking of particularism she refers, not to a superficial investigation of the home tradition, but to a 'textured particularism' which involves a deep knowledge of the complex images, texts stories and practices of that tradition. Such a textured particularism acknowledges the finitude of the tradition and encourages critical examination (Boys, 2006). Boys (2004) states that "Critical...refers not to one's attitude toward the content...but to ways of thinking that enable us to recognize the assumptions and bias that we...might impose...Critical scholarship means self-critical scholarship" (p. 150). Textured particularism is not insular particularism which can be parochial and superficial and it is not adversarial particularism which diminishes, caricatures or even demonises the other. A textured particularism develops a "religious identity that is simultaneously rooted and adaptive, grounded and ambiguous – that is one that allows for engagement with the religious other" (Boys, 2006, pp. 9-10). Those involved in this type of religious education learn to define themselves in the context of other traditions rather than over and against them. In understanding ourselves we learn to understand others.

Classrooms are places where students learn about worlds through socially constructed texts. The texts we present to students are 'received ideas' and we select, distil and organise information on behalf of students. We rarely invite students to engage in critical analysis and we seldom provide them with texts that present other than a mainstream view. Even when we do, we hardly ever ask students to analyse where the text is from, who wrote it and from whose perspective it is written. While many of us use a hermeneutic of suspicion when reading biblical texts, few of us apply the same hermeneutic of suspicion to text books and information related to teaching religion. Rigorous development of critical thinking in the area of religious education is essential if we are to engage effectively in inter-religious conversation and debate.

The flip side of textured particularism involves receptivity of religious pluralism. Our self-understanding hinges on our understanding of others. If we educate in ways conducive to religious pluralism we must, says Boys (2002), pay particular attention to difference. We should value difference rather than merely see it as a curiosity. Pluralism is more than toleration;

pluralism requires deepening our knowledge and learning from difference. According to Eck (1993),

pluralism can only generate a strong social fabric through the interweaving of commitments. If people perceive pluralism as entailing the relinquishing of their particular religious commitments they are not interested...The pluralist...stands in a particular community and is willing to be committed to the struggles of that community even as restless critic (p.195).

In respecting difference, religious pluralism challenges us to find ways to be distinctively ourselves in relationship to others, to be clear about differences and affirming our similarities. It does not mean neutralizing all commitments (Eck, 1993). Religious education which respects and values difference opens up vast new horizons of understanding and includes learning about the religious other. Balancing textured particularism with pluralism is in the words of Rabbi Sacks “a test of faith” because we have to make space for difference (Boys, 2006, p. 10).

Boys' third question, *What sort of education prepares people to draw upon their commitment of faith in the public square in order to foster the common good?* challenges not just religious educators but all involved in education. The place and role of education, and in particular religious education, in the public arena is attracting considerable attention. Looney (2006) believes that the place of religion in the public square can be explored on three levels. The first level is one which considers the relationship between religion and education in general; the second concerns the ongoing conversation about religious education which necessitates exploring definitions of religious education, particularly those which focus on the educational task of religious education rather than considering religious education only at the level of faith development; and the third considers the contribution religious education might make to debates about teacher identity (p. 950). While her survey of the place of religious education in various countries is comprehensive it nonetheless provides no definitive answers. For example, she refers to Kieran Scott from the UK who believes that religious education belongs in schools where religious literacy and the cultivation of religious understanding can and should be promoted (p. 953) and then immediately she refers to John White, also from the UK, who states that there is no philosophical justification for religious education in schools in the United Kingdom (where currently it is a compulsory subject). Such disputes, she says, point to the contestation over the place of religion in the public space, a place where religious freedom is exercised. Therefore she is insistent that religious education must necessarily take its place within the public space. She states that “religious education...may play a critical role in the formulation of what globalization theorists generally call

the cosmopolitan identity...” and that “...Religious Education [is] important for the formation of global citizens, at home with diversity, and at ease in a range of cultural spaces” (p. 964).

Religious Education, as it is evolving in Australia offers a potential site for developing students for a multi-faith world. Teaching Christianity in a world of many faiths forces teachers to cross new boundaries whether they like it or not. Teaching about the religious faiths of others not only extends existing teaching approaches and methodologies but also creates new ones which may in fact challenge existing teaching and learning paradigms. Passionate, engaged religious education for a globalized world is just one of the possibilities for making religious education a catalyst in the public space (p. 965). It may even be that religious educators will develop a religious discourse which plays a significant part in the process of building a harmonious pluralist society.

According to John D’Arcy May (2004)

in the new global public sphere...we are all *ipso facto* pluralists, because in virtually every social and cultural context, even formerly closed or monochrome ones like China or much of the Muslim world, we are constantly being confronted with new and unfamiliar ways of ‘being religious’ (May 2004, p. 8).

May says that the religions should be used as ‘spiritual resources’ and be brought into the world conversation if solutions to humankind’s problems are to be found. He speaks of developing and working for an ‘inter-religious ethic’ an extension of Hans Küng’s ‘global ethic’ and Mary Robinson’s ‘ethical globalism’ and he challenges religious educators to consider inter-religious learning as one way of contributing to the development of such an ethic (p. 9). For Paul Knitter and Hans Küng, inter-faith dialogue and inter-religious encounters are built on sound educational foundations.

As schools address the growing multicultural nature of Australian society they must also address the multi-religious nature of Australian society and in specific ways they have to engage with religious pluralism. The Catholic church in Australia is one of the most multicultural examples of Catholicism, but it is only now beginning to engage with religious pluralism. Crotty and O’Donogue (2003) have observed that “in schools where there is a great deal of religion in the curriculum, there is often little multiculturalism and in schools where there is a great deal of multiculturalism, there is often little religion” (p. 19). Surely this has to change. Such a change, according to Boys, “involves a commitment to building a society in which we care about the viability and vitality of the other’s tradition as well as our own” (p. 13).

Conclusion

In many ways religious educators have been leading the way in preparing students to live in a multi-faith world through their teaching of world religions. The challenge for the future is that they continue to teach in ways that develop a textured particularism as they begin to engage with religious pluralism. One way this can be achieved is for teachers to become familiar with key documents from the Catholic church dealing with religious diversity. The documents *Nostra Aetate*, *The Guidelines* and *Notes* are first step on that journey. A subsequent step involves shaping and re-shaping robust religious education programs that involve the teaching of world religions and that have as one of their aims the development of a critical religious literacy which is content rich, culturally appropriate, reflective and critical. Such critique is essential if we are to participate effectively in our multicultural and multi-religious world and if religious educators are to continue to leading the way in inter-religious education.

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