JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION is a refereed publication for the academic exploration of the task of religious education in modern society. The journal helps disseminate original writings and research in religious education and catechesis -- and in related areas such as spirituality, theology, moral and faith development, cultural contexts, ministry and schooling. It includes a variety of feature sections -- on contemporary educational issues, book reviews, conferences, resources and practical hints for teachers. Articles for publication on religious education in various contexts and on the related areas noted above, as well as on any of the feature sections are welcome. See the inside back cover for details.

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**JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**  
*Special Edition*  
*Contents*

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Australia, today, is very much a pluralist society in a globalized world. As such, aspects of Australian society and education cannot exist in isolation from the rest of the world. Instead, there needs to be an awareness of and response to new trends, issues, and other features that characterize the twenty-first century. This is also an important consideration in the field of religious education, particularly, Catholic religious education which needs to remain responsive to the living culture within which it resides. Accordingly, over the past few years, the special issues of the Journal of Religious Education have explored issues and concerns that have had relevance to both, Australian society as well as the global society of which we are a part and which, so often, has influence on our ways of being in and viewing the world. This special issue of the journal also moves in that direction. It focuses on the role of religious education in promoting social cohesion. Not surprisingly, this is a topic that has drawn a considerable amount of attention and research in many countries across the world where pluralism and tensions that accompany the exposure to and interaction with the otherness of Other have become distinctive features. Australia is in much the same situation. The rise of intolerance and hostility to Other, particularly the religiously and culturally different Other, has been the subject of news headlines, current affair programs and parliamentary speeches in recent times. A corresponding action has been the response from so many Australian individuals and community groups who strive, through various means and measures, to condemn and counteract such unacceptable attitudes and behaviour. The positive elements of these community responses is the coming together of religiously and culturally different individuals to present a united front and to act for a common purpose, namely, to make Australia an accepting and inclusive society where the Stranger is welcomed and made to feel at home.

A relevant international initiative in recent years examined the role of religion in society and led to the publication of The Toledo Principles (2007) published by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). The opening paragraph clearly sets the context for the publication of these principles:

Recent events across the world, migratory processes and persistent misconceptions about religions and cultures have underscored the importance of issues related to tolerance and non-discrimination and freedom of religion or belief for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In the OSCE region, and indeed in many other parts of the world, it is becoming increasingly clear that a better understanding about religions and beliefs is needed. Misunderstandings, negative stereotypes, and provocative images used to depict others are leading to heightened antagonism and sometimes even violence.

The aim and purpose is also clearly stated (pp. 11-12):

The Toledo Guiding Principles have been prepared in order to contribute to an improved understanding of the world’s increasing religious diversity and the growing presence of religion in the public sphere. Their rationale is based on two core principles: first, that there is positive value in teaching that emphasizes respect for everyone’s right to freedom of religion and belief, and second, that teaching about religions and beliefs can reduce harmful misunderstandings and stereotypes.
One of the conclusions presented in the document (p. 76) recognizes that a promotion of knowledge and empathetic understanding about different religions and belief systems amongst students leads to a corresponding improvement in social cohesion through the fostering of democratic citizenship and the appreciation of societal diversity.

This issue of the journal, then, raises further awareness of the role that education about religion may have for the promotion of social cohesion in contemporary societies that are made up of communities that are distinctly different from each other through their religious and cultural beliefs and practices. Accordingly, the first three articles present different perspectives on the religious education and multifaith studies in Australia. Des Cahill draws on his extensive experience in the field to present an overview of the movement in interreligious dialogue and education in Australia. He asserts that authentic religion is an important element in the successful functioning of a nation so that interreligious education is necessary to promote successful socially cohesive societies. Gary Bouma and Anna Hallafoff follow this by presenting a summary of the findings and recommendations for interreligious and multifaith education in Australia because they claim it would be in our national interest to recognize and invest in such educational programs which may be used to promote social inclusion and advance common security. The third view comes from Cathy Byrne whose research indicates that Australian educators and policy makers tend to shy away from the concept of religion or religious education in State based schools and, instead, they have focused on values and citizenship education which assumes a shared heritage and aims to promote uniformity. Byrne, correctly, points to the gap that occurs as a result of this attitude because not enough is done, then, to nurture a genuine understanding of social diversity that stems from religious beliefs and practices.

As mentioned earlier, the movement in Australia towards recognizing the importance of learning about different belief systems should not be viewed in isolation. Therefore, the next five articles come from educators in different countries where there is, clearly, a raised awareness and recognition of the need to respond to the changing pluralistic nature of their respective societies. Friedrich Schweitzer poses some pertinent questions about how religions may create divisions in society and discusses the need for a democratic or liberating understanding of social cohesion before arguing that religious education should enable individuals to communicate about (different) religious convictions and worldviews and respond to contexts that are characterized by the experience of difference. Coming from a different stance, Elisabet Haakedal explores how schools may promote understanding of religion and promote social cohesion through the way they celebrate religious festivals. From a European perspective, Peter Schreiner discusses the place of religious education in the movement towards integration through the Europeanization of education which has been largely driven and influenced by the European Union and the Council of Europe. Yaacov Katz discusses how religious and civics education have been used to promote social cohesion in Israel and finally, Carmel Mulcahy writes about an alternative education program in Ireland that aims to support diversity and acknowledge the changing aspect of Ireland’s cultural and religious profile.

The range of cultural backgrounds and research findings that are generated by the collection of articles in this issue provide a wealth of ideas for religious educators today. There is evidence that religion and its role in society has been gaining recognition by politicians and the media in many parts of the world. However, the movement in Australia is not so advanced and religious educators are in a position where they are well able to contribute to the public debate to ensure that any outcomes or possible solutions remain well informed. This is a challenge to religious educators and it has the potential to be a stimulating and rewarding one.

Marian de Souza
Editor
Religious education and interreligious education: 
Their context in social capital and social cohesion in Australia

Abstract:
Whilst religious educators operate in the metaphysical, mystical, sacramental and other-worldly aspects of religious education, increasingly they also operate in a this-worldly context. The related concepts of social capital and social cohesion are most useful in exploring and highlighting what authentic religion adds to the successful functioning of a nation and how interreligious education is becoming necessary in the creation of social cohesion in multifaith societies.

As well as describing the two concepts, this paper, based on a 2004 study for the Australian immigration department in the wake of 9/11 and the Bali bombings shows how the contribution of local and national faith communities to national social capital is substantial. The notion of social cohesion is built around five domains, and the paper concludes by relating them to the role and work of the religious educator who needs to oppose religious extremism. It also includes details of Australia’s National Action Plan, especially in relation to Australia’s Muslim communities.

Introduction
Whilst religious education has always found its ultimate raison d’etre in the metaphysical and the mystical, the current highlighting of and commitment to interreligious education has been embedded in global events of the last seven decades beginning with the Hiroshima and Nagasaki blasts extending through to 9/11 and beyond. In this paper, using Australia as a case study and drawing on our 2004 research for the Australian Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, I want to suggest that religious educators, including particularly the interreligious aspect of their work (Engebretson 2009), operate in a this-worldly context and for particular this-worldly purposes not immediately obvious in the narrow confines of the classroom. This, of course, is not to deny the metaphysical, mystical, sacramental and other-worldly aspects of religious education. Social capital and social cohesion are two very useful concepts for highlighting what authentic religion adds to the successful functioning of a nation and how interreligious education is becoming necessary in the creation of social cohesion in multifaith societies.

The Notion of Social Capital
Social capital as a concept has had its critics and it can appear to be amorphous. As John Montgomery has commented, social capital “is not displayed in almanacs, stock market reports or tourist advertisements; its presence has to be discovered through intuition or diligent rationalism. Yet it is ubiquitous; it is so often invoked to enhance desired behaviour in the present or to bring about purposeful change for the future” (Montgomery, 2001, p. 1). It is built principally around bonds, bridges, links and acceptance of the other; it
refers to the processes that facilitate individual and social well-being and build positive communal and societal outcomes within a nation or a group. A nation’s social capital is thus built on an accurate understanding of its past through, firstly, solid but flexible social institutions that are resistant to corruption, fanaticism and zealotry, are able to manage conflict when deeply felt values clash and are able to deal constructively with the multilayered national and international flows of ideas, finances, peoples, technologies and media images. Secondly, it is further constructed through facilitative modes of communication and association between and across individuals, organizations and collective institutions, all underpinned by (1) positive psychosocial characteristics such as openness to new challenges and ambiguities, the tendency to modernity and long-sightedness, the propensity for care, nurturance and honesty and the readiness to trust people and institutions and (2) positive cultural and religious values, norms and behaviours that produce success in economic, political, military, recreational and other endeavours (Inkeles 2001).

As a consequence, social capital is reflected in the stability and solidity of institutions; it highlights trust and its maximization in public life; it underpins and influences the flows of communicating and associating between individuals and collective entities like religious communities and ethnic groups and between nations; it encourages volunteering and positive bystander behaviour; it gives nations competitive advantages in the international economic race or in responding to international crises and national disasters; it can help to achieve social justice by improving distributive justice; it can foster and facilitate grassroots change and initiatives. But like the two-edged sword, religion can, at its worst, destroy all these things. Religious leaders, like educational and all other community leaders, can enlarge the stock of social capital and help choreograph social and ethnic cohesion in complex societies and across the world – but they can also wreck it.

The unifying idea of the 2004 study was the interrelationship between faith communities and the construction of social capital within Australian society. The contribution of Christianity and other world faiths to the social and cultural capital of humankind does not need to be documented here. Australia has been much influenced by the Christian patrimony in areas such as art and music with the lofty sublimity of Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater*, the Requiem Mass of Brahms and Salvador Dali’s *Crucifixion*. We can document the contribution of cathedrals and other worship sites to cityscapes and town-and rural-scapes around each nation, especially as Buddhist temples, Hindu temples, mosques, synagogues and Sikh gurdwaras are added to the nation’s skyline. For us, the key question is: what has been and continues to be the contribution of local and national faith communities to national social capital?

The conventional histories of religion published in Australia since the early 1990s (Breward 1993; Carey 1996; Thompson 2002) have included the relationship between religion and society in their purviews, yet the lack of a unifying concept such as social capital has partially hindered their attempts to explore fully the contribution that religion has made to the construction of an Australian civil society. In their own various ways, faiths have contributed to such construction but it has been insufficiently operationalised in current academic and general thinking.

It is widely accepted and undeniable that Christianity has been a central and defining strand in Australian society since 1788, yet there remains the failure to fully operationalise this contribution in relation to:

- The building and maintenance of the national character, its identity and spirit and to an understanding, interpretation and re-interpretation of the national past
- The construction of the nation’s governance structures and processes, and its basic institutions
- The communicative links and professional and social lubricants that enable complex societies to function effectively
- The capacity to react positively and creatively to national and international processes and events
• The underlying values, norms and ethical behaviours that are difficult to identify yet remain critical in challenging disvalues encompassed in corruption, cronyism, nepotism, patronage, fanaticism etc.

• The associated psychosocial characteristics that help a nation on its journey into the future such as respect for the dignity of the individual, mateship collectiveness, nurturance of the young, care of the old and disadvantaged, commitment to the family unit, the spirit of volunteerism, the preparedness for risk, hospitality and friendliness towards the other and the stranger, love for the beach and the outdoors etc..

Religion and Social Capital in Australia

Indications from the literature and the conclusions from our own 2004 data provide a platform to the conclusion that, on balance, religion in all its diversity has been and remains a constructive force in Australia. It must be admitted that some religious bodies can create some very negative situations (e.g. the sex abuse scandals within Catholicism). However, on balance, religion has made and continues to make a contribution that is core and continuing. As one major example, the core Protestant communities inculturated a Protestant ethic of thrift, hard work and individual discipline, encouraging their followers to accumulate wealth and invest capital, all of which can be compared to the social and economic performance of other longtime settler societies such as in Latin America.

Let us briefly examine Australia’s two largest religious groups, Catholicism and Anglicanism. In evaluating the contribution that Anglicanism had made, Fletcher (2002a) has made a notable attempt to link Anglicanism’s contribution to the nation’s social capital. Noting the advantage of the aura of establishment, if not actual establishment, and the sense that the British have been bestowed by God with divinely-ordained responsibilities, Australian Anglicans from the beginning saw themselves as possessors and transmitters of a glorious inheritance which needed implanting in colonial society. This legacy was and remains multifaceted, religiously, legally, administratively, etc. Their aim was to Christianise colonial society, including the Aborigines (Harris 2002) away from their perceived paganism. They were well-connected and influential in elite colonial circles. They were protective of the sanctity of Sunday and the need for recreational repose. They ensured attachment to Britain and its Empire which was seen to embody Christian values and, of course, they instilled veneration for the monarch and the need for a symbolic centralizing authority. Building on John Locke’s philosophy (Yarwood & Knowling 1982), they generated affection for the land and its cultivation amongst Australia’s bush farmers in imitation of the ‘sturdy English farmer’. The contribution of Anglicanism and of other faith communities to rural and provincial communities where traditional values are stronger is insufficiently recognized and studied except for the Royal Flying Doctor Service and the work of Reverend John Flynn.

Whilst the decision-making structures of Anglicanism excluded women and the poor, they were relatively open, modelling a democratic process at a time when other, more authoritarian Churches during the 1850s and 1860s were condemning such participatory structures. In fact, the lay voice was crucial, and the Australian Anglican Church was well ahead of its English parent in its appreciation of liberal democracy. Anglicanism wished to act as a moral leaven in society, especially through support of the family as the main pillar of society and marriage as an unbreakable contract. In fact, all faith communities have been solicitous and committed to the well-being of the family not just in their teachings but in their practical welfare work. Research would probably show an historical correlation down the decades between religiosity and family stability. The churches have in recent decades, led by Catholicism, pioneered the area of formal pre-marriage education which is increasingly recognized, through empirical research, as assisting marriage stability and is now government-supported. Anglicans and their Nonconformist colleagues have waged, at various times and with varying intensities, campaigns against such ‘social evils’ as gambling and drug abuse whilst the Catholics have focussed more on abortion and euthanasia.
Fletcher (2002a) notes that, unlike their Roman Catholic rivals, Anglicans did not provide an Australia-wide Anglican education system though they have been supportive of government schools through chaplains and religious education teachers. They sponsored schools for the more well-to-do families with the covert aim ‘to produce a colonial leadership imbued with Anglican values’ as well as university colleges. Australian leadership is a huge topic in itself, but the overwhelming majority of Australian political and social leaders have been religiously influenced, if not religiously motivated and faith committed.

Whilst its strength was in the middle and upper classes, the poor were not neglected and welfare work has always featured in Anglican pastoral care though diminished in recent decades by the emergence of the welfare state, the professionalisation of social work and the introduction of government agencies (Fletcher 2002b) – with the partial demolition of the welfare state, governments are again becoming reliant on churches and their organizations such as Anglicare, Uniting Care and McKillop Family Care.

In 2001 to commemorate the Centenary of Federation, the Melbourne Catholic archdiocese, the nation’s largest, produced a small document, The Catholic Contribution to Australia (Hart 2001), the Great South Land of the Holy Spirit, recalling the Spanish naming of Australia in 1606 by Captain Pedro Fernandez de Quiros as ‘Austryalia dell Espiritu Sanctu’ (Grassby 1983). It drew attention to the Church’s educational contribution, especially for the 100 year period from the 1870s to the 1970s when no government funds were received for Catholic schools which were maintained by the Catholic community with ‘heroic personal sacrifice’ – whilst now receding into the distant past, this government failure is still perceived as a grave injustice. During this period and even today since it costs the government significantly less to educate students in a private than a government school, the Church has saved the government and the Australian people many billions of dollars.

The same document highlighted the Church’s contribution to the building of a multicultural nation through its welcoming and integrating of Catholic immigrants as well as its defence of marriage, motherhood and family life against those who reduce life to the level of a commodity and demean the value of each individual life from the moment of conception. It drew attention to Catholic leadership in public life, James Scullin, Joe Lyons, Ben Chifley and Paul Keating as Prime Ministers, Tim Fischer as Deputy Prime Minister, Sir William Dean as Governor-General and Sir James Gobbo, Lenee Forde and Dame Roma Mitchell as state Governors among many others in politics and the professions, and not least B.A. Santamaria who led the fight against Communist infiltration. Attention was also drawn to the innovative leadership of women religious in the areas of teaching, nursing and social work, led by Blessed Mary McKillop. Catholic hospitals have led the way in care, welcoming all members of the community while the St. Vincent de Paul Society, unlike any other welfare organization, has people on the ground in every part of Australia, to help the homeless and the poor. Centrecare plays a different welfare role through its counselling work while other organizations sponsored by the religious orders such as the McKillop Family Services undertake work among distressed families and disadvantaged youth. In social policy, the Catholic Church has insisted on the centrality of social justice in addressing the inequalities between rich and poor, and, as other authors have pointed out, it had a special role to play in the formation of the Australian Labour Party (Hart 2001).

Coming into the contemporary scene, our 2004 data suggested that the contribution of local and national faith communities to national social capital is substantial. Religious personnel have assisted immigrants and refugees to settle, especially in their early years, and local religious leaders have defused ancient and less ancient hatreds and animosities. The churches have been at the forefront in the struggle for asylum seekers to receive their proper justice and to have their rights recognized, and they, except for the evangelical far right, have been solicitous of the plight of the Muslim communities after 9/11.

The sense of the spiritual, the transcendent and the moral remains necessary in all societies to counter the corrupting and debilitating influences of materialism, hedonism and selfishness. Despite all its faults, limitations and outdated religious discourse, religion has this capacity. As the hymn at the English service in a Chinese Presbyterian Church, as one of the case study churches, said, “Lord, I come to your awesome presence”. Religion, as was seen in the 2004 study, aims at personal transformation and conversion for, as
the preacher at this same service put it, “God wants to give us a new engine”; it aims as well to produce inner calmness of spirit. As a Cambodian Buddhist leader said, “the monk represents peacefulness and living”, and she related how she needed, not psychological or psychiatric services, but the soothing presence of faith to heal the psychic wounds of the killing fields – across Australia, there are thousands of religious houses, monasteries, places of worship, chapels, mosques, temples, synagogues, presbyteries, vicarages and manses where the mundane meets the absolute, where the spiritual challenges the material and the prophetic challenges the superficial, and where the devotee challenges the consumer. Religion brings reconciliation and forgiveness for, as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, has said, “the future is reconciliation”; a Vietnamese Catholic chaplain whose torture was so horrific from the communists that it had at one stage reduced him to despair was working for reconciliation in his own Vietnamese community.

Case Study Results

Across the data, the evidence was scattered randomly, yet cumulatively, aside from the various religious education programs to inculcate altruistic values, it added to an impressive total as can be seen in the case studies:

1. on the metropolitan perimeter, an Anglican Church had built a village for poor and disadvantaged families, while in other metropolitan areas a Hindu temple and Serbian Orthodox church had, according to their own religious traditions, created a sense of belonging to Australia.

2. in a provincial city, the Lutheran community had established its own school attended by Lutherans and non-Lutherans alike, and its social contribution to the whole local area had been extensive since the beginning of European settlement.

3. in a disadvantaged outer suburb, all the Christian faith communities were working to assist in the settlement of poorer, disadvantaged immigrant communities and creating and cementing their sense of belonging to Australia while the multicultural Catholic primary school was catering for these children from struggling migrant backgrounds. Some of the local councillors had been drawn from the Christian communities.

4. in an inner city suburb, the Anglican Church was hosting a divided Maori congregation, assisting them to settle into and identify with Australia, while the Catholics were retaining a sense of a religious presence in an area vacated by the other faith communities as well as sponsoring their local primary school; the Anglicans were catering for young people with jazz celebrations and were hosting a Jean Vanier Catholic community serving people with intellectual disabilities.

5. in a middle class suburb, the Jewish synagogues had provided a sense of solidarity and security as well as a sense of social space to community members recovering from the trauma of the Holocaust; the Anglicans had a child exercise program while the Church of Christ had a pre-school mothers group and a youth group while offering public seminars on topics such as grief management and diabetes.

6. in a provincial town, the Presbyterian Church was providing service not only in this town but to four small rural communities scattered across bush Australia, and this community’s focus was very much on family support to break rural isolation, including through family life education.

7. in an isolated rural town, the Catholic shire president was a religiously committed person as had been her predecessors while the Baptist community with its convention centre brought economic capital into the town to help keep it afloat as well as sponsoring an annual drug-free, sex-free youth festival. The Baptists also provided playgroups for mothers, craft groups and youth activities as well as a parenting program. The churches had worked together to provide crisis accommodation and they also encouraged a tolerant attitude to the Muslim and Aboriginal communities even if fundamental issues
were avoided. A Pentecostal Church provided a focal stable point of reference for the local Aboriginal Christians in a town that was not accepting of them.

8. in a poorer suburb, the Muslim community in its own small enclave was assisting its members to integrate, helping them to construct their identities as Muslims and as members of a distinctive religious community and, with its school, it was reinforcing the historic presence of Islam in Australia as well as educating its children in accordance with normal curriculum requirements.

9. in a large metropolis, the Catholic migrant chaplains were assisting their immigrant communities to adjust as well as defusing past hatreds and animosities; the Chaldean chaplain stressed his community’s philosophy as ‘faith, family, work’; the chaplains helped to bridge the communication and social gaps between their own community and both the broader Church and the wider society.

10. in a middle-ring suburb, the Jehovah’s Witness preacher focussed on the danger of spiritual complacency which was likened to a spiritual sleep; the community had raised funds for disaster relief but involved itself in no other social activity. The nearby Salvation Army congregation expressed its commitment to the poor and the disadvantaged, including overseas.

11. in a coastal city, the Assembly of God leader wanted his community to work towards ‘reconstructing our city for Christ’, and this took the form of a child care centre, breakfast program at a government high school, their own high school, youth camps, four houses for reforming drug addicts, a welfare group and a foodbank.

12. in an upper middle class suburb, the Greek Orthodox lay people spoke of how religion was a solace in troubled times, lessening stress. The women had formed a benevolent society to help the poor, the disabled and the aged.

13. in an outer suburb, the Christian, Buddhist and Muslim communities worked in a new, lower middle class area; the only group with a fulltime school were the Catholics who also had a large St. Vincent de Paul centre; the Lao abbot not only initiated the young boys into Buddhist teaching but he also taught them regard and care for old people amongst other Buddhist core values.

In many of these instances gathered systematically from across Australia, reference was made to trained religious personnel being involved in crisis and grief counselling, pre-marriage education and marriage counselling as well as general welfare such as answering knocks at the door by the destitute.

In the consultations with leaders and the electronic public consultation, it was found that religious leaders had some difficulty grappling with the notion of their faith’s contribution to the nation’s social capital. Among the themes that emerged:

• Christian communities had built schools and other special educational institutions such as kindergartens, schools for the disabled and impaired and university colleges to educate millions of Australian students down the ages.

• Many hospitals, aged care facilities and welfare agencies, including the delivery of innovative programs, had been initiated by the major Christian denominations in all parts of Australia, and they were involved in the delivery of innovative programs as well as acting as lightning rods for emerging social problems because of their grassroots network.

• In the words of a Jewish leader, religion is the backbone and support of the value of altruism and of altruistic behaviour – as one submission put it, “throughout history, religion has been one of the most powerful sources of vision, values and social progress. The faith communities which collectively
represent the majority of Australians share in common the eternal spiritual principles of love, justice and hope”.

- Religiosity has helped to develop moral character, including integrity, and provided an antidote to criminal, unethical and self-destructive behaviour.

- Faith communities, more than other institutions, emphasized the ethic of care within the philosophy of ‘good works’, and the erosion of religiosity would lead to a decline in the ethic of care and long-term commitment to the disadvantaged.

- Faith communities emphasized the dignity of the individual person, including the young and the aged, the useless and the disturbed, as well as highlighting family cohesion and a sense of justice.

- Volunteering, as ‘the sacrifice of self’ for the common good was the basis of religious communities, and its example flowed right across society in the form of civic duty and national responsibility.

- Religious education encouraged the observance of the law and respect for the other, as well as social equity.

- Life’s *rites de passage*, basic to individual and family growth, were celebrated or mourned solemnly in religious rituals that link the past with the future, and, in the cases of dying, death and tragedy, religious ritual and faith allow victims or relatives to cope with the unpredictability of life and with psychological scars.

- Faith provides a purpose for living a committed life and gives reasons as to ‘why we are here’.

- The business notion of the triple bottom line with its emphasis on social justice and wealth distribution had been promoted with the help of religious groups.

- Faith communities with their global networks can provide information to Australian leaders about other societies.

- The capacity to lobby and pressure the three levels of government on key national and local issues as well as global matters.

- Faith communities have been very supportive, if not formative, of international aid agencies.

- It was acknowledged that not all faith communities do all these things in equal measure, and that some are encapsulated within their community cocoon, even being opposed to the state, which is their right in terms of religious freedom. Comments showed that social capital could be destroyed by:
  - A continued emphasis on one religion being superior or the correct one as holders of the total truth
  - The refusal to co-operate or interact with other faith communities
  - The upsurge of religious and ethnic extremism, and the encouragement of religious sectarianism
  - The demeaning of women as not in practice equal to men in family life or in organizational structures
  - The anti-Islamic views of some extremist Christians
Practising and transmitting the faith are the core activities of faith communities, and from this flow any contribution to national social capital. A Uniting Church leader said there were many publicly untold stories in promoting social cohesion and in contributing to social capital through education. Whatever their faults, limitations and inconsistent or even scandalous behaviour, faith communities make an enormous contribution to social capital. They have evolved into solid and flexible institutions even if, at times, they may remain tied to the past and are slow to respond. As has been demonstrated throughout this section, faith communities have made and continue to make enormous contributions to Australian diversity and to social well-being.

Faith traditions with their focus on the ultimate and the absolute as well as the local and the universal have been key elements in the formation of Australia’s culturally diverse society. Religious groupings have been formative of core social and moral Australian values and of public service, welfare and philanthropic traditions. With their localised presence, their community ethic and their universalist outlook, most religious groups have made positive contributions to the construction of a multicultural society in Australia that is now recognized world-wide as a model and exemplar notwithstanding the various issues and problems that periodically arise with changing national and global circumstances, most recently and most emphatically, following the terrorist attacks in places such as New York, Bali, Madrid, London and Mumbai.

**Social Cohesion in Australia and its Five Domains**

In the aftermath of 9/11, it was perhaps inevitable that focus switched to societal or social cohesion which has a natural correlation with social capital, and to link them most particularly to the Muslim communities. The rise of religious extremism and of home-grown terrorism made this necessary. The Scanlon Foundation in association with the Australian Multicultural Foundation and Monash University published a collection of papers on social cohesion in Australia (Jupp, Nieuwenhuysen & Dawson 2007) and funded a major research project (Markus 2008). As with social capital, there are no agreed definitions of social cohesion but generally they revolve around a shared vision held by a well-functioning core group or community that acts in a continuous and interminable process of achieving social harmony. Andrew Markus (2008), for his work, based his notion of social cohesion on the following five domains:

1. **belonging** which incorporates shared values, trust and identification with Australia
2. **social justice and equity** as fundamental pillars
3. **participation** with regard to voluntary work and political and cooperative involvement
4. **acceptance** regarding newcomers and minorities and the lack of discrimination and
5. **worth** which incorporates people’s general happiness and life satisfaction and their future expectations.

According to this framework, social cohesion is firstly founded upon the sense of belonging to the nation, sharing and reinforcing a common national narrative and set of values and psychologically identifying with the nation. The religious educator aims to do the same in respect of his or own religious tradition, eliciting from the student a commitment to belong to and identify with the religious community. This, however, takes place in a national and international context. Both religion and nation are rooted in place inasmuch as a community’s place of worship and its other facilities are located within the nation’s boundaries as well as overseas. This sense of belonging relates to identity formation, personal, religious and national. However, this is not an argument for ethn�断alism where religion and culture become too closely aligned. The nation, as a community of communities, is home to many religious traditions; nation and religion are in partnership unless a religious community is marginalized and segregated. But at times, religion will have to adopt a counter-cultural stance to address the emerging ills and injustices within a society.

The second domain for social cohesion are the twin principles of social justice and equity which ought be foundational to the aims and methods of any religious education program and its ethical components. National cohesion and reconciliation cannot be achieved unless there is an unyielding commitment to social justice right across a government’s program and to the equitable treatment of all citizens, including special provisions for groups identified to have special needs. At the international level global peace is synonymous.
with social cohesion. Religious extremism has to be monitored by all religious moderates. Biblical, Qur’anic and all other fundamentalisms need to be monitored and the nation cannot be religiously neutral in the face of corrupted religion. The religious educator has a special responsibility here. Solutions need to be focussed around religious moderation and its support as faith communities are now encountering each other across Australia and across the world in multi-layered patterns in the streets, in factories and offices and in the marriage bed. Hence, the importance of interreligious dialogue at different levels, including at the highest level, for example, in the dialogue in Rome between Pope Benedict XVI and Muslim leaders in November 2008.

The final statement of this Catholic-Muslim Forum highlighted, firstly, that human life is a most precious gift of God to each person to be honoured in all its stages with human dignity derived from the fact that every person is created by a loving God out of love. Secondly, God’s humanity has two great aspects – the male and female human person, equal in human dignity. Thirdly, genuine love of neighbour implies respect for the person’s choices in matters of conscience and religion, and religious minorities are entitled to be respected in their own religious convictions and practices, including entitlement to their own places of worship. The joint statement also noted the increasing secularism and materialism across the world, and “we recognize that God’s creation in its plurality of cultures, civilizations, languages and peoples is a source of richness and should therefore never become a cause of tension and conflict” (par. 9). Both Catholics and Muslims need to provide sound education in values and in accurate information about each other’s religion, whilst renouncing oppression, aggressive violence and terrorism.

The third domain on which social cohesion is built is the sense and commitment to participation in the affairs of a nation, of its governance at whatever level; it is the space that is made available to all, majority and minority, to suggest and to dissent, to critique and to build. Participation includes the importance of volunteering, and it is well-documented that religiously inspired people are much more likely to volunteer for community activities. The religious and interreligious educator has a responsibility to encourage civic, social and political participation and to encourage volunteering as part of the ‘good works’ element of faith.

Fourthly, social cohesion cannot be well-grounded where there is prejudice, racism and discrimination and where the stranger and the newcomer and the exiled are not accepted and welcomed. Policies and mechanisms need to be in place to ensure their welcome and proper settlement, as well, to counter expressions of racism and discriminative behaviour. A moral code is central to any religious education program, and countering racism and welcoming the stranger is key to any such educational framework.

Lastly is the psychological and ontological notion of self-worth as a person, satisfaction with one’s life and its different aspects, a general happiness and well-being, and a sense of hope in life with realistic expectations. Most religious traditions place great store on this aspect ranging from their concept of the person to meditative and calming techniques. Perhaps in the past, many religious education frameworks have insufficiently placed emphasis on this aspect of religious formation though this is now changing.

Social Cohesion and the non-Christian Communities in Australia

Since 9/11, the concern for social cohesion has focussed around the Jewish, Muslim and Sikh communities. Since 2005, anti-Jewish and anti-Sikh incidents have risen. Between October 2005 and September 2006, 440 reports of violence, vandalism, harassment and intimidation were logged by the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ). The number of ‘attacks’, defined as incidents of assault, arson attacks, face-to-face harassment and vandalism was three times the previous average and the highest rate then on record. Threats and yelling abuse were recorded at five times the previous average though reports of graffiti were below the average rate. The rate of anti-Jewish e-mail was almost five times the average. The emergence of online communities, especially You-Tube and Facebook, has seen crude and intense anti-Jewish prejudice expressed ‘openly and unashamedly’.
In the following year (2006 – 2007), the number of incidents jumped to 638. For 2007 – 2008, the number rose again to 652. Amongst the incidents were:

- An Orthodox Jewish man was verbally abused and punched in the face whilst walking to synagogue while another one was hit by a bottle thrown from a passing vehicle
- A Jewish school student was hit by a can full of drink from a passing vehicle
- Bricks were thrown through the windows of a Jewish school
- Vehicles outside a synagogue were spray-painted with swastikas
- On numerous occasions, eggs were thrown at Jewish people walking to and from synagogue
- Threats and abuse of Jewish people, but not involving assault, were recorded at five times the previous average.

Another group that has been targeted have been turbaned Sikh males who it would seem are perceived as Muslims. Attacks have not been logged by the Sikh community; the major issue is the wearing of the kirpan or ceremonial dagger:

- The Sikh chaplain was refused entry to the Commonwealth Games Village in 2008 in Melbourne because of his kirpan
- During the Games, several Sikh men were refused entry to the Melbourne Cricket Ground
- At Brisbane airport, a group of Sikh men, after passing through the security barrier without sounding the alarm, were asked to remove their turbans
- On the South Island of New Zealand, a Qantas captain removed a young turbaned Sikh from the flight after passengers expressed concern about him being a terrorist

There was agreement, though not unanimous, that, in the wake of overseas events, Muslim communities needed special support at this dangerous time. There was much evidence to suggest that many Christian leaders had reached out after New York and Bali, and that the Muslim communities had, in turn, begun a more fruitful dialogue with the broader community.

Points and suggestions made in the various consultations were:

- Assistance in their public relations to combat biased opinions expressed in newspapers and talk-back radio
- Need to build a Muslim educational institution staffed by international scholars for educating their own imams and other community leaders for the Australian context
- Need to continue developing contacts between its 29 schools across Australia and other schools through exchange visits, debating contests, sporting contests etc.
- Need to better educate the Australian community on Islamic attitudes to gender equality, monogamy and polygamy and female genital mutilation
- Need to further develop mosques not just as prayer halls, but as local social and recreational centres in accordance with the centuries-long tradition of Islamic architecture
- Professional development programs for imams and other Islamic leaders to assist them in their leadership in a multi-faith society

**National Action Plan**

Approved in July 2006, the National Action Plan on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security has been designed to address marginalization, promote understanding and dialogue and build on existing programs in (a) education (b) employment (c) integration and (d) security. AUD$37 million were committed to implementation. The NAP statement, after encouraging interfaith dialogue and acknowledging the importance of faith leaders in strengthening community harmony, safety and understanding, acknowledged that Australians were at risk of being terrorist targets and young people were more likely to be involved in perpetrating such attacks, and the risk would continue for some time: “The NAP seeks to
address the underlying causes of terrorism, including social and economic factors that encourage radicalization and motivate extremist behaviour” (p. 9). The NAP will be evaluated in 2009 – 10.

In the education area, the NAP aimed (i) to extend Australian civics and values education in schools and address the isolation and marginalization of some young people (ii) to inform Australians about religious and cultural diversity and encourage all faith and community leaders to promote respect and mutual understanding (iii) to further educate religious leaders and teachers in Australia who had been inappropriately trained overseas, including those recently arrived in Australia, by providing professional development opportunities in suitable institutional settings. In the employment area, the NAP acknowledged that second- and third-generation Australians from some minority communities had great problems finding employment. The measures were designed (i) to commission research for the reasons for high employment (ii) to link job seekers to employment service providers (iii) to encourage local chambers of commerce and major corporations to work with these minority communities and provide employment and career opportunities and (d) to assist the community to develop solutions.

In the community area, participation in the wider society, particularly by young people in mainstream sporting, social and cultural activities, was seen as one of the two major aims and thus (i) to encourage participation by current and emerging community leaders (ii) to inform them about existing government mechanisms and services (iii) to provide mentoring and volunteering opportunities. The second aim related to improving the capacity of community leadership through training opportunities, including raising their capacity to be competent and assertive communicators to represent their community and culture and to counter biased and inaccurate reporting. The government committed itself to greater consultation, thereby building trust.

In the national security sector, the initiatives were (i) more research into the causes of extremism and the reduction of the potential for extremism (ii) enhancement of the cooperation between communities, law enforcement, emergency managers and security structures and organizations (iii) the improvement of community understanding of national crisis and emergency management planning (iv) improvement of community knowledge of lawful grievance redress mechanisms and (v) encouragement of communities and their leaders to publicly condemn acts of violence and confront signs of radicalization. In the implementation, a Muslim Community Reference Group met from September 2005 to September 2006. Another initiative has been state and territory Muslim youth summits conducted under the auspices of the Australian Multicultural Foundation between April 2006 and May 2007. The aims were to forge links between young Muslims, build leadership capacity, identify issues of concern and achieve an ongoing collaboration with the government. These have been more or less achieved with the young people highlighting their lack of a sensing of belonging to Australia, the need for positive role models and positive mentoring and their wish to do more volunteering (DIAC 2008).

The report recognized the importance of young Muslim youths whose lack of employment opportunities was built on problematic schooling acknowledged as such by the authorities in the process of mitigating the threat of home-grown terrorism. Hence, much of the funding was directed to employment programs in Sydney’s south-west. Other strategies addressed radicalization such as countering discrimination, reinforcing Muslim identity, counteringact so-called “rigid thinking” and preparing crisis management plans in the case of a terrorist attack and any possible violent backlash. “Better Connections” workshops were held to connect the Muslim communities into wider community networks, particularly in job finding.

National action was taken to link Muslim schools with other schools and there was a focus on educating and further professionalizing the imams themselves. One NAP initiative in 2005 – 06 was a successful pilot orientation program for a multifaith group of newly-arrived immigrant religious leaders such as Catholic priests, Buddhist monks and Muslim imams (Bouma et. al. 2007) but it has not been followed up. Also, as part of the National Action Plan, the Government funded a national Islamic institute centred on Melbourne University, to address the education and training issues within the Muslim Australian communities to ensure that imams are trained in Australia and Islamic lay people become more knowledgeable about their
own faith and the society in which it is now embedded. The NAP, therefore, led to a series of projects from 2005 onwards.

The Scanlon Social Cohesion Study – Preliminary Results

In the Scanlon study (Markus 2008), the initial results have been positive but cautionary. The overwhelming majority of a society-wide sample (96%) expressed a strong sense of belonging to Australia as did a similar number (94%) in having pride in the Australian way of life, a figure consistent with surveys over the past two decades. In other results, 89 per cent indicated they were happy with their lives and 80 per cent agreed with the statement that “Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run hard work brings a better life”. Markus concluded, “the key finding may prove to be that the level of disaffection and the threat to social cohesion is at historically low levels in contemporary Australia”.

But other results warned against complacency. In a series of targeted surveys in high migrant density urban areas, a minority of mainstream Australians harboured negative attitudes towards migration policy. Some ten per cent of overseas-born culturally and linguistically diverse respondents reported a discrimination experience at least once a month. They are half as likely to participate in volunteer activities and their political involvement is markedly less (Markus 2008).

Since the London bombings of 7th and 21st July, 2005, the social cohesion and religious extremism agenda has focussed very much on homegrown terrorism and Islamophobia. Yasmina (2008) built her research project around social exclusion and the evolving nature of Muslim identities as influenced by the international and Australian contexts and events. She interviewed 221 Muslim males and females and 110 non-Muslims, all living in Perth. The dominant feeling among the Muslims is of relative exclusion with the non-Muslims less accepting of the compatibility of being Muslim and Australian as felt by the Muslims. The Muslims blame the media for its sensationalism in covering issues dealing with Islam and with terrorism. Other factors are the non-Muslims’ lack of knowledge of Islam and the negative or insular attitudes of some Muslims. This lack of knowledge is reinforced in the minds of non-Muslims by the images of oppressed Muslim women as depicted when wearing the hijab and the violence in Islam though some Muslims do have more nuanced and positive attitudes towards Islam and Muslims.

To counter these growing feelings of exclusion, Yasmina (2008) has suggested a series of strategies for Australian Government leaders to adopt a new inclusive discourse on communal harmony, and to actively engage not just moderate Muslims but all those wanting to engage in moving beyond the symbolic. The engagement strategies need to be rethought beyond the emphasis on Muslim women seen as different and young Muslims as potential militants which has had the unintended consequence of creating a double exclusion amongst Muslims and, amongst non-Muslims, and which has legitimated their anger towards the symbols of Muslim identity e.g. women wearing hijabs. The emergence of Muslim schools has organizationally fostered Muslim identity but reinforces the idea of difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – Muslim schools need to be engaged in joint projects with other schools and they need to be rewarded for promoting moderation and this needs to be extended beyond school age with Muslim and non-Muslim adults working together on projects, creating joint ownership of Australian citizenship. Countering the negative sense of the Muslim other ought to be achieved through the curriculum and education generally.

In conclusion, these developments since 9/11 in fostering social capital and facilitating social cohesion reinforce the notion that the religious and interreligious educator, especially at the youth and adult levels, is operating in a very different context; he or she cannot be oblivious to the details of this context. Religious educators have now a more focussed responsibility to ensure that their own students are well-grounded in their own faith tradition, understanding it to the appropriate level and able to defend it; they also need to have a sophisticated understanding of the other major religious traditions combined with an openness and acceptance towards the other. The challenge is to be able to do it efficiently and productively. As we know from the studies of multicultural education (Cahill 1996), knowledge about the other generally leads to a positive appreciation of the other……. but not always.
References:


*Des Cahill is Professor of Intercultural Studies at RMIT University and has been one of Australia’s leading researchers in the areas of immigrant, cross-cultural, interfaith and international studies for almost three decades. His many publications and research projects have focussed on immigrant and multicultural education, ethnic minority youth, immigrant settlement, ethnic community development, intermarriage and, more recently, religion and globalization.*
Gary Bouma and Anna Halafoff

Multifaith Education and Social Inclusion in Australia

Abstract:

The rise of religious diversity as part of the lived experience of most people calls for the inclusion of multifaith education in school curricula. This paper provides a summary of findings and recommendations regarding religious and multifaith education from Australian studies and conference proceedings between 2004 and 2007. We review some of the demands for education about religions, some of the approaches to delivering such education and make recommendations for the implementation of programs designed to prepare students to work in and contribute to a world characterised by religious diversity and revitalisation. We argue that as religions are playing an increasingly prominent role in the public sphere, there is a growing need for education about religions for all Australian school children in order to counter ignorance and advance a greater level of interreligious awareness, respect and understanding. Finally we argue that for Australia to continue to be a harmonious culturally and religiously diverse society, it is in our national interest to invest in multifaith education as a strategy to promote social inclusion and advance common security.

Introduction

In the course of our research whenever we have conducted consultations with religious communities in Australia, and for that matter, overseas, the most frequent request we have received is for education about religions to be included in the curriculum from the first years of schooling (Cahill, Bouma, Dellal, & Leahy, 2004; Bouma, Pickering, Halafoff & Dellal, 2007; Cahill, Bouma, Dellal, & Leahy, forthcoming). Religious communities, particularly minority religious communities, want others to know who they are and how they are religious and spiritual. In a recent conversation with a religious leader it became clear that he and his community felt that they understood their own faith and how it worked for them, but they knew little of the workings of the faith of Muslims, the practices of Buddhists, or the spiritualities of Pagans. They felt the need to be educated, to be introduced to the ways various groups are religious.

In addition, many people have been raised without involvement in a religious community, even if they identify with one. Thus not only are they ignorant of the ways others are religious, they are not familiar with the way their own background religion works. Consequently, we argue that as religions are playing an increasingly prominent role in the public sphere, there is a growing need for education about religions for all Australian school children in order to counter ignorance and advance a greater level of interreligious awareness, respect and understanding.

Ignorance about religion in general and about the religions of our neighbours makes possible the denigration of religion in general, the despising of those who are religious by those who are not, the demonisation of those who are not religious by those who are and the vilification of those who are religiously different whether within the same group or of another group. These actions tear at the social fabric and reduce the capacity of a society to deal creatively with change, to meet the needs of all citizens and to relate meaningfully to the wider world. In short ignorance about religions leads to the kinds of disrespect that greatly undermines social cohesion and places our common security at risk.

The need for education about religions is gradually becoming accepted among education policy makers.
The question that arises is how is this to be done? This paper reviews some of the demands for education about religions, some of the approaches to delivering such education and makes recommendations for the implementation of programs designed to prepare students to work in and contribute to a world characterised by religious diversity and revitalisation.

**Increases in religious diversity and revitalisation**

The last twenty years have not witnessed the exit of religion from social life and public policy. Migration, together with the global movement of ideas and cultures including religions and spiritualities, has changed the religious profiles of nations and cities around the world. Once largely mono-cultural, urban areas have become again thriving cosmopolitan centres of diversity where cultures, ethnicities and religions live intermingled, sharing daily contact and interaction at work, school and as they shop. Table X.1 documents the rise of this kind of diversity in Australia (Bouma and Ling 2008; in press).

Table X.1: The number and proportion of selected Australian religious groups in the 1947, 1971, 1996, 2001 and 2006 Censuses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Identification*</th>
<th>1947 000s</th>
<th>1971 000s</th>
<th>1996 000s</th>
<th>2001 000s</th>
<th>2006 000s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHRISTIAN</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>2957</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>3953</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>3903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>1570</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>3443</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>4799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPCRU**</td>
<td>1678</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>2199</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCG***</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>683</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Christian</td>
<td>6,673</td>
<td>88.0</td>
<td>10,990</td>
<td>86.2</td>
<td>12,583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUDDHISTS</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HINDUS</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JEWS</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUSLIMS</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER****</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>617</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desc</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>856</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>2949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Religion</td>
<td>825</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>1551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>7,579</td>
<td>12,756</td>
<td>17,753</td>
<td>18,769</td>
<td>19,855</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

* Only those Christian groups larger than 1% and other groups 0.4% and larger in 2006 have been included.

** MPCRU combines the data for the Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational, Reformed and Uniting Churches. The Uniting Church was formed in 1977 in a merger of Congregational, Methodist and about half of the Presbyterians.

*** OCG – Other Christian Groups less than 1%.

**** Other religious groups less than 0.4% of the population

Similar tables could be produced for most cities and countries of the world. Like Australia, the USA, the UK and many European countries have experienced the emergence of significant religious communities that
comprise over 1 per cent of their population. These are not just congeries of religious individuals, but communities with worship centres, cultural centres, social services and schools. They call for respect and acceptance as part of the societies into which many have been born and for access to government services, social security and the chance to make a contribution to the life of the larger community. The extent and composition of religious diversity from country to country varies considerably and the policies about and degrees of openness to diversity vary even more. However, the fact of religious diversity remains an undeniable, irreversible fact of twenty-first century social life.

With the rise of religious diversity has also come the revitalisation of religion, the return of religion to public policy discourse. Diversity alone makes religion and religious identity more interesting. There is little salience to religious identity if all are the same. Some religious persons wear distinctive clothing, others follow religious identity declaring dietary regimes, others need to pray at intervals unfamiliar to their friends and neighbours, and the list could go on. Religious diversity also contributes to the rising contestation of religious voices in the formation of public policy (Habermas 2006). The facts of increased diversity in the lived experience of most people, certainly of most within Western democratic societies, make education about religion necessary to provide the skills and attitudes necessary to conduct oneself successfully as a citizen in a cosmopolitan world. Managers need to be sensitive to the religious and spiritual needs of their workers, educators need to be respectful of religion and spirituality, counsellors need to know how religion works in the healthy person and not treat religious belief as evidence of disorder or delusion. An appreciative understanding of religions is an invaluable skill set in an increasingly interconnected world where religion plays a significant role in the public sphere.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations from Australian Studies and Conferences 2004-2007

The following summary draws on the findings and recommendations of Australian studies and conference proceedings between 2004 and 2007. While not all of these publications were focussed primarily on religious education, each contained specific recommendations regarding religious and multifaith education in Australia, a summary of which is presented thematically below. Throughout this paper, we use the term multifaith education to denote the study of multiple religions, spiritualities and world views as distinct from religious or interreligious education.

Calls for Multifaith Education

While several recent Australian studies have recognised the central role that education plays in building a socially inclusive and secure multifaith society (Cahill, Bouma, Dellal, & Leahy, 2004, p. 126; Erebus International, 2006, p.109; Bouma, Pickering, Halafoff & Dellal, 2007; Halafoff and Wright-Neville, in press) religious education in Australia has been described as “lagging behind other nations” (Byrne, 2007, p.45 citing Rossiter, 2001). According to Byrne (2007, p.46 citing Lovat, 2002), the United Kingdom is the leader in the field of multifaith education. Since the 1988 British Education Reform Act, “world religions education” has been compulsory for government school students 16 years and under thereby contributing to the personal and intellectual development of students and their understanding of community cohesion (OFSTED, 2007, p.25 cited in Byrne, p.46).

Recently several reports have recommended that multifaith education be introduced in Australia. The Erebus International (2006, p.109) study concluded: “There is no doubt that all schools have an important role to play in creating a cohesive and harmonious Australian society, through developing greater intercultural understanding”. The main challenge that Erebus International (2006, pp.112-113) cited was to ensure that all Australian students be provided with high-quality intercultural and interreligious education. To this end Erebus International recommended that all Australian Governments “commit to increasing interfaith and intercultural understanding as a national priority for schooling”.

Culturally, religiously and linguistically diverse (CRALD) communities in Victoria and Queensland also emphasised the need to encourage tolerance, respect and understanding of cultural and religious diversity at a young age. Participants in the Global Crisis Events Study viewed education as “a key factor for any
sustainable change to prejudiced or ignorant attitudes”. One respondent stated, “it was time for governments to take religious education more seriously”. Consequently CRALD communities recommended more teaching about religions in Australian government schools and for multifaith education taught by qualified teachers to replace religious education as currently taught by volunteers. This would, thereby, ensure “balanced views and representation from Australia’s diverse faith communities” (Bouma, Pickering, Halafoff & Dellal, 2007, pp. 78-79, 86).

The Problem of Exclusion: Concerns about current Religious Education and Values Education in Australian Schools

The Religion, Cultural Diversity and Safeguarding Australia (RCDSA) report documented that religion and religious leaders have played a significant role in the construction of social capital in Australia through contribution to: the formation of values; education; health care; welfare; aid; philanthropy; social justice; multiculturalism and family cohesion. It also stated that Australia’s social capital and community security could be threatened by exclusion promoted by religion; religious extremism and intolerance; gender inequity and anti-Islamic views (Cahill, Bouma, Dellal, & Leahy, 2004, pp.11, 72-73).

Disturbingly, CRALD communities in Victoria and Queensland have reported rising Islamophobia, migrantophobia and attacks on multiculturalism following the events of September 11, 2001. However, religious communities have been far from passive in their responses to the impact of these events by initiating dialogue and educational activities in an attempt to dispel negative stereotypes and attitudes. These communities raised concerns that, as religious education in public schools was taught predominantly by Christian volunteers, it was not inclusive. Participants reported that, conversely private schools, particularly Catholic and Islamic schools, had successfully implemented multifaith education programs that were genuinely representative of diverse faith traditions (Bouma, Pickering, Halafoff & Dellal, 2007, pp. 4-6, 78-79, 32-33).

Byrne has recently echoed these concerns while tracing the development of Religious Education in NSW and Queensland. Byrne (2007, pp.33-34, 29, 13, 15) expresses grave concerns about what she calls “Australia’s Christian privilege” in religious education. She argues that “special access rights” enable “groups to bring an exclusivist, mostly Christian emphasis” to studies of religion “provided by non teacher trained representatives of religious groups”. Byrne concludes that outside of the private sector there is little pluralist religious education in Australia and that “broad based comparative religious education is yet to be widely accepted”.

As most studies in the area of religion and education funded by the previous Commonwealth Government targeted immigrant communities, particularly Muslim communities, these findings indicate that perhaps more emphasis should be placed on addressing the above concerns regarding religious education in Australian government schools. It may be that host communities are actually more in need of multifaith education to promote interreligious understanding than are immigrant communities.

The findings of the Erebus International, (2006, p. vi-vii) study add further weight to these assertions. The study, which contributed to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) National Action Plan, focussed on Muslim youth identified as being at risk of alienation. It investigated “what schools, systems and sectors are currently doing to encourage the message to Islamic youth that Islam is compatible with, and can live alongside, other faiths and Australian values”. Erebus International reported that while existing State curriculum frameworks recognise the importance of promoting intercultural and interfaith understanding, “the extent to which individual schools take up this challenge has not previously been systematically evaluated. Anecdotal evidence suggests that while good work has been done in some places, there is scope for further effort in others”. Stakeholders mentioned that a catalyst, such as a high proportion of cultural diversity or of Muslim students within a school, was required for schools to take action to promote interfaith and intercultural understanding. Conversely, largely mono-cultural schools usually regarded such initiatives as unnecessary. Islamic schools were also noted as being more actively engaged in programs of interfaith and intercultural understanding “to develop strategies to live harmoniously in the wider
Australian society”, in response to “discrimination and marginalisation” of Muslims, and “to inform others about the Islamic faith”. Catholic, congregational and other schools with a “strong sense of social justice” were also listed as more likely to include multifaith education.

On issues of harmony and security, Erebus International (2006, pp. xii-xiii) raised concerns regarding the alienation of Muslim youth in Australian society. Education and employment were cited as strategies that could assist in preventing alienation and thereby potential vulnerability to radicalisation and extremism. Erebus International stated that previous immigrant communities had faced similar issues and that over time “to a large extent these things have been worked out”. They also stated that assisting Muslim communities with integration and feeling “connected to the mainstream community” were “essential for ensuring extremism is rejected in Australia, and to help Australian Muslims just get on with their lives”. Multifaith education, particularly programs including interschool cooperation, were described as “a sound starting point”.

As the Erebus study illustrates, in recent years calls for multifaith education have often been linked with values education. Many Australian scholars and practitioners have recently advocated expanding current values education programs to include more emphasis on values derived from multiple faith traditions and for new resources to be developed to facilitate this inclusion (UNESCO, 2005, pp. 242-244, 523; Pascoe, 2005; Toh & Cawagas, 2007, p. 372; Erebus International, 2006).

However, Byrne (2007, p.30) cites prominent religious education scholar Robert Jackson (2007) to argue that citizenship and values education should not be viewed as replacements for religious education but rather as “complementary areas of study”. This argument is validated by the many calls, listed above, from communities and scholars for religious education to include more focus on religious diversity. Given religions’ prominent role in global issues in the 21st century, a more comprehensive study of the social significance of religions in contemporary society, beyond the role they play in the formation of values, is advisable.

In addition, values education has been associated with promoting a narrow nationalism under the former Commonwealth Government (Bouma, Pickering, Halafoff & Dellar, 2007; Halafoff, 2006). According to Byrne (2007, pp.37-38), under the Howard government “[f]or school children, the ethnic food festivals and intercultural projects have been replaced with participation in ANZAC Day, a National Flag Day and singing the national anthem” alongside a push for Australian Values education. These developments affirm the need to emphasise an intercultural and interreligious approach to values education to prevent it from becoming a vehicle for exclusion and, thereby, potential alienation and radicalisation of youth. It also calls into question whether values education is, in fact, the best way to introduce multifaith education into Australian schools, and whether in time values education, strongly associated as it is with the divisive rhetoric of the former Commonwealth Government, will be replaced by a different strategy.

These concerns and recommendations are consistent with issues raised and strategies promoted by Victorian scholars and policy makers in the field of counter-terrorism and social inclusion. Exclusive and divisive discourses, promoting Christian values over and above the values of other faith traditions and over universal values of tolerance and inclusion are liable to increase alienation and thereby possible radicalisation of youth in minority groups. They are also liable to legitimise racial and religious vilification in host communities, as was disturbingly witnessed during the 2005 riots at Cronulla beach in Sydney (Halafoff, 2006). Promoting an inclusive multicultural and multifaith Australia is likely to minimise alienation and thereby contribute to more harmonious societies (Halafoff, 2006; Halafoff and Wright-Neville, in press).

Following on from these assessments, allowing a potentially narrow religious message to be taught to young Australians could sustain interreligious ignorance and heighten social tensions among Australian communities. Consequently, the promotion of a more inclusive multifaith curriculum can be seen to be in our national interest.
Efficacy of Multifaith Education: Local and International Examples

The Erebus (2006, p. vi.) report included six ‘best practice’ case studies from government, Catholic and Islamic schools in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. They found that programs that pervaded the entire curriculum were more likely to be successful than isolated activities. A ‘whole of school approach’, including parent cooperation, was also cited as important, as was the need to provide opportunities for students to be reflexive and to discuss their own and others’ beliefs. Engaging in community service projects was also deemed critical in encouraging intercultural understanding. School visits, real or virtual, were also reported as highly advantageous in breaking down barriers and promoting greater awareness of religious practices. Students commented that small group discussions enabled them to counter prejudices and negative stereotypes while forming new friendships that have at times proved long lasting (Erebus International, 2006, pp.viii-iv).

As cited above, CRALD communities in the Global Crisis Events study also mentioned the success of Catholic and Islamic schools in implementing multifaith programs that incorporated visits of religious leaders to schools from multiple faith traditions and also visits for students to diverse places of worship (Bouma, Picketing, Halafoff & Dellal, 2007, p.79). This correlates with findings from the recent Australia Deliberates study which found that prejudice, fear and negative stereotypes, in this case towards Muslim Australians, decreased with contact and knowledge about the ‘other’ (Issues Deliberation Australia/America, 2007, p.8).

Calls for Future Research and Curriculum Development

Several recent studies have stressed the need for further research regarding religious education in Australia. As education was not the central focus of the RCDSA study, it called for more research in this area. The report stated that while much debate in the media had “focused unfairly on Muslim schools ... all schools, whether government or private, religious or non-denominational, need to be asked about their treatment of religious issues in their curricula, and in the case of religious schools, about their treatment of other world faiths” (Cahill, Bouma, Dellal, & Leahy, 2004, p.126).

The Erebus (2006, p. vii) report stated that while existing State curriculum frameworks recognise the importance of promoting intercultural and interfaith understanding, “the extent to which individual schools take up this challenge has not previously been systematically evaluated. Anecdotal evidence suggests that while good work has been done in some places, there is scope for further effort in others”. Erebus International (2006, p.xi) also noted that with regard to interfaith and intercultural education, while the Australian Government had recently funded the development of the Big Beliefs book by the Asia Education Foundation, there was scope for “increased professional development nationally”. The Erebus (2006, p.109) study concluded that while there were existing resources, opportunities for professional development and case studies of best practice models in intercultural and interfaith education, there was also “clearly scope for further work in this area”. It thereby recommended “that a comprehensive project be commissioned to examine the broader issue of the role of schools nationally in promoting social cohesion through interfaith and intercultural understanding” in Australia.

The Erebus (2006, p.109) report recommended interschool cooperation and the need for more funding for curriculum development, including trialling of existing material such as the Asia Education Foundation’s Developing Intercultural Understanding: An Introduction for Teachers and revising it to incorporate an equal emphasis on interfaith understanding. Erebus International also highlighted the need to provide modules on interfaith understanding in pre-service teacher education and to provide opportunities for further professional development for educators in this field.

Byrne’s (2007, p.21) summary of international debates regarding interreligious education also concluded with stressing the need for further research in this area, stating that “the role of a broad-based study of religion in schools is yet to be effectively evaluated in Australia” (Byrne, 2007, p.74).
Future Recommendations

While Byrne’s (2007) study contains an impressive bibliography and review of literature that could well form the basis for future inquiry, a comprehensive and concise review of literature investigating multifaith education as a social inclusion strategy, in and beyond Australia, is yet to be completed. In addition, research into the efficacy of multifaith education, in Australia and internationally, is currently slim and there is an urgent need for further research in this area. The difficulty with much evaluative work in this field is that it often includes comparisons of programs that vary significantly in content, pedagogy, and context, making any conclusive assessments regarding the efficacy of such programs extremely difficult. Existing evaluations also concentrate on immediate effects of programs, and not their long term efficacy.

Given the success of the Deliberative Polling method, as demonstrated by the 2007 Australia Deliberates: Muslims and Non-Muslims in Australia, Final Report Summary referred to above, there is a need for more evaluation of the kind that measures levels of interreligious understanding in surveys conducted before and after participating in multifaith education activities. There is also a need for more longitudinal studies in this area including follow up interviews with participants six, twelve, thirty-six and seventy-two months after training, measuring not only levels of interreligious understanding but also levels of engagement in community activities that encourage interfaith understanding. Participants’ experiences could be measured against a control group who did not take part in multifaith education.

In addition, as with the previous Commonwealth Government programs such as Living in Harmony and the National Action Plan which targeted immigrant communities, particularly Muslim communities, it is important to assess whether it is indeed immigrant communities that are most in need of multifaith education. As yet, no comprehensive study has been conducted into existing levels of interreligious understanding among Australian students in primary and secondary schools. Evidence of this kind would enable more equitable and effective targeting of communities thereby avoiding the prejudice inherent in the previous Commonwealth Governments’ funding priorities. There is no doubt that Muslim communities were in need of particular assistance in combating negative stereotyping following the events of September 11, the Bali and London bombings. However, the lack of corresponding emphasis on education directed at those communities that generate the bulk of the acts of discrimination and violence towards Australian Muslims also needs to be addressed. As prejudice against newly arriving communities has been recorded amongst not only Anglo-Australian communities but also among older immigrant communities including, European and Asian Australians, evidence suggests that all Australian communities could benefit from multifaith education. A comprehensive study of Australian children and youth investigating levels of prejudice and interreligious understanding however, is yet to be conducted.

While there is no doubt that further research is necessary, we believe there are sufficient concerns expressed in existing research to recommend a re-evaluation of the way religious instruction and education are currently being taught in Australian schools, particularly regarding their largely exclusively Christian orientation. Indeed, as described above, CRALD communities have called for a more inclusive model of religious education. Given that the UK has developed and implemented multifaith education for several decades, it is well worth examining the UK model in conjunction with best practice models of multifaith education in Australian schools, as documented in the Erebus study, in order to develop a more inclusive model of religious education in Australia.

In addition, we hold the view that values education should not replace religious education in Australian schools, rather values education should include more reference to diverse religions and spiritualities as sources of values. Values education and multifaith education should be seen as complementary areas of inquiry. Given the prominent role religion plays in contemporary societies, for Australian students to be genuinely prepared to be global citizens, an understanding of religion is critical to address many of the challenges of the modern world. This cannot be achieved by values education alone.

Furthermore, as discussed throughout this paper, for Australia to continue to be a harmonious culturally and religiously diverse society, investing in multifaith education as a strategy to promote social inclusion is
in our national interest. With a new Commonwealth Government and the release of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008), which prioritises the need for appreciation and respect for religious diversity, we believe that the time to act is now.

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References:


Ideas about faith and revelation from Believing in a revealing God: The basis of the Christian life (2009) by Gabriel Moran

For many Christians, the notion of faith means believing in a set of revealed truths given to the church by God through Jesus. Similarly, revelation was regarded as the deposit of revealed truths which became complete at the death of the last possible; and it has been the role of the church to promote and defend these truths ever since. The following are some quotations from Gabriel Moran's recent book, believing in a revealing God, which sets out to look at the notions of believing and revealing as active relational activities -- more in tune with new Testament Christianity.

"Believing in a revealing God," is a simple idea: it is the relation between divine activity and human response. . . .It is not surprising that in Christian history faith and revelation have so often been treated as two separable things. They are taken to be essential building blocks in the foundation of Christian theology, church authority, and Christian instruction.

The choice is a simple one. Either faith is a thing directed to something in the past called revelation, or faith is an act directed toward what is revelatory in the present. In the first case faith is imagined as a "cognitive" question: that is, its concern is with assent to truths. In the second case faith engages the whole person and is concerned with today's life. The first version of faith, as I have described it, no longer has many defenders, but if one really wishes to get free of it one has to be ready to live with the consequences of believing-revealing.

The phrase "the Christian revelation" was coined in the late sixteenth century and ever since then it has been a major obstacle to thinking about both faith and revelation. "Revelation" in a religious context is a claim of God acting: a revealing of the divine. Whatever can be put into human speech is not divine revelation. At best it is a human response to that divine activity.

"Believing in a revealing God" means thinking through some phrases and claims that surround the ideas of faith and revelation. Many of these phrases are assumed to be traditional when in fact they are recent accretions that distort the power of the tradition. The process of recovery is not best imagined as stripping off a cover to discover the pure kernel of faith. That metaphor assumes that there is an unchanging core that holds answers for today. There are no fixed answers from the past; every formula needs to be critically examined. A truth from the past may need to be restated in the present simply to preserve the same truth.

No individual is wise enough to engage in such reformation by relying on his or her lights alone. The Christian church needs dialogue within itself as well as beyond itself with other religious institutions. Dialogue sometimes involves vigorous debate, which has not been a notable feature of the church.

"Believing in a revealing God" contains two distinct but inseparable poles: "believing in" and "revealing God." In order to examine each of the elements it is necessary to break the relation into two parts. However, the reader should keep in mind that each side implies the other. Most of what I say about "believing in" makes sense only in its relation to "a revealing God." The sequence cannot entirely avoid the danger that faith and revelation may be understood as two separable things instead of one relation composed of two actions.

The term "faith" is more commonly used than "revelation." In secular writing, "faith" is regularly used for anything to do with religion; in church writing, faith is often used where revelation or doctrine would be a more accurate term. Not much progress in understanding is possible if the word is used so indiscriminately. The short, old words in the language—such as person, freedom, love, life, faith—are usually ambiguous. It is their ambiguity that makes them so rich in connotation.

(Selections from pp. 3-15)
Public school religion education and the ‘hot potato’ of religious diversity

Abstract

Religiously marked intercultural conflict is on the rise in Australia (HREOC, 2007; Dreher, 2006). In addition, intolerant and religiously discriminating sentiment has re-emerged in Australia’s debate on migration (Schech & Haggis, 2001; Cratchley, 2007). However, inter-religious education as a remedy is not a high priority. Independent and governmental reviews recommend intercultural and interfaith education to address ignorance and intolerance (Erebus, 2006; HREOC, 2004). Australia appears more focused on the development of values and citizenship courses which assume shared heritage and promote uniformity (Halafoff, 2006). In public education, religious diversity is a ‘hot potato’ – no one wants to touch it.

In stark contrast, some European and British approaches see multi-beliefs education as a potential tool for social cohesion (de Souza et al, 2006; Weisse, 2007). This article explores the social benefit claims of multi-faith world religion and beliefs studies and Australia’s reticence to examine their potential.

Religion studies and social cohesion – perspectives from outside Australia.

Education in or about religion raises difficult questions for plural democracies: Does a secular government have a responsibility to educate children about the multiple beliefs of its populace? Do inter-faith school activities remove or reinforce stereotypes? Are teachers adequately equipped to navigate students through complex geo-political-religious issues? Does the belief of the teacher affect their pedagogy? Does such education support or hinder social cohesion? These and many similar questions drive research and experimentation outside Australia.

For clarity (and taking historic confusion into account), I use the term ‘study of religion’ to indicate a multiple faith, non-denominational approach to world religion and beliefs – the teaching about various world views. The term ‘special religious education’ is used within NSW schools to refer to denominational, confessional teaching into a single faith.

British and European studies (REDCo, 2008a) indicate that children with some education about religion are more tolerant than those without such instruction. Jackson (2004) & Miedema (2006) have shown that study of religion helps to develop inclusive attitudes towards cultural difference. This challenges earlier research linking the teaching of religion to increased prejudice (Evans & Kelly, 2004; Bentley & Hughes, 1998). However, results vary depending on pedagogy. The RedCo research project aims to ‘seek dialogue with all that can aid us in preventing conflict and supporting peaceful coexistence in a multi-religious society’ (REDCo, 2008b). Much European and British research uses the term ‘religion/religious education’ in the non-denominational sense. For example, a study by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (2005) shows empirical support for the claim that ‘the lesser the degree of religious education, the greater the potential for religious difference to be instrumentalised as a tool for political mobilisation’. Hasenclever (2003), (following Appleby) extended this claim, noting that ‘a positive correlation between religious education and political conduct can be shown’.

This linking of a multi-faith study of religions to social cohesion was supported by Hobson & Edwards (in Jozsa, 2007) who, in examining the issue in France claimed that, due to France’s lack of multi-faith religion education, its inability to manage its relationship with its Muslim population was heightened. As a result,
French education strategy now recognises that ‘religions are too important a social factor to allow them to be monopolised by clergy’ (Willaime, 2007, p. 95). Weisse (2007, p. 9) also finds a ‘positive correlation between (multi-faith) religion education and democratic conduct’.

Religion’s contribution to social cohesion and values development is being explored in many western democracies. For example, on the question of whether religion, although an historic justification for war, can also act as a ‘pillar for civility’ (Weisse, 2007, p. 9), the ‘yes’ case is put by: May (2006); Diez de Velasco (2007); Miedema (2006); Nord (2007); de Souza et al. (2006); Yablon (2007); Selcuk (2006) and Jackson and O’Grady, (2007). These scholars support the argument that study of religion offers a bridge to peace education and the promotion of responsible citizenship. The ‘no’ case is put by those who unyoke morality from religion such as Onfray (2007), Dawkins (2006), Harris (2006) and Hitchens (2007). Barnes & Wright (2006) argued against the assumption of a self-evident good in multi-faith education and called for more research into outcomes using a critical realist framework. However, Barnes (2008, np) also commented that ‘education in a single faith is educationally irresponsible’.

A parallel set of debates addresses whether study of religion helps or hinders interreligious understanding. Knowledge and attitudes can exist independently and formal education is not the only path to increased understanding. Jackson noted: ‘There will always be extremely well educated racists’ (2007, np). Similarly, highly tolerant people may know little of different religions.

In the UK and Europe, research on the debate receives inter-governmental assistance, academic support and general media attention. Willaime (2007, p. 98) noted that a critical perspective on religion in society contributed to citizenship education by placing religion ‘into a space of collective examination’. It is the role of educational institutions to foster critical thinking about and encourage debate on alternative views of religion’s place in the public sphere. The Council of Europe (2005, p. 1) declared that education is:

‘essential for combating ignorance, stereotyping and misunderstanding of religions; ... that schools should teach all major religions... to fight fanaticism and develop the critical democratic faculties of future citizens’.

This view is supported by Ali (2003) and Trinitapoli (2007). Similarly, the Pew Global Attitudes Survey (2006) noted that developing familiarity is an important step to reducing prejudice and that education has a significant role to play in building opportunities for dialogue. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE, 2007, p. 9) found that ‘ignorance increases the likelihood of misunderstanding, stereotyping and conflict’. Subsequently, guidelines for the teaching of religions and beliefs were developed by the European Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

Australia’s religiously marked social conflicts (such as the 2005 Cronulla Riots, the 2006 rejection of Sudanese refugees, ambiguous comments by then Prime Minister Howard connecting Muslims to extremism and Pauline Hanson’s 2007 senate campaign calling for a ban on Muslim migrants) present a rationale for developing similar guidelines but there are no signs of such a move. A study into Religion and Cultural Diversity by the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (Cahill, Bouma, Delal, & Leahy, 2004) reported that Australian faith adherents’ knowledge about other faiths was ‘often negative’. Forty percent of Australians believe some ethnic groups do not belong in the country and one in ten express outwardly racist views, particularly towards Muslims (Dunn, 2008).

This situation has not generated a European-style liberal education response. Instead, limited discussion in Australia mostly takes place in religiously supported forums, restricting debate. Research is often limited to empirical measures such as counting references to religion in the texts of other disciplines (Bouma, 2006; Vitz, 1986). It is difficult to find Australian religion research that looks specifically at social outcomes.

**Religion, knowledge and cultural diversity capability: a study inside Australia**

During 2007 I conducted a small study into the attitudinal outcomes of year 11 students undertaking the comparative Study of Religions (SOR) course (Byrne, 2007). The course included in-depth studies of more than
one religion and a basic introduction to several world religions. 117 students from two NSW public schools and three Queensland Christian girls’ schools were surveyed to assess the impact of the course on their attitudes to cultural diversity. Pre- and post-tests examined the level of comparative religion knowledge (informational understanding) and cultural diversity capability (active tolerance of cultural difference).

The results emphasised the complexity of the relationship between education and social tolerance - while pedagogy is important, other variables (such as gender, socio-economic factors, level of exposure to cultural difference, academic aptitude; and the religiosity of both teacher and students) also play a role. However the findings included some positive effects of the course on students’ ability to honour religious and cultural diversity, supporting the theory that study of religions can contribute to social cohesion.

Most participants felt that the course had challenged their attitudes to religious and cultural difference and made them ‘more tolerant’ (Byrne, 2007, p. 72). A clear distinction was made by students between the multi-faith STUDY of Religions (SOR) course and the single faith approach of Special Religious Education (SRE) which is denominational. This distinction emphasised the historical pedagogical differences, with SRE generally associated with a confessional approach. Comments included that: ‘SOR doesn’t shove it down your throat’ and ‘SOR actually makes you remember things. It’s so different to SRE because we actually learn stuff’. One student pointed out that senior high school was ‘practice for stepping into the world... we’ll need to be more understanding about different people and SOR helps that’ (p. 74). Such a pluralist vision assumes a function for the study of religions beyond purely cognitive learning. It claims a connection between multi-faith study of beliefs and social cohesion.

**Intercultural Education in Australian public schools – the rhetoric and the reticence.**

Then NSW Premier, Morris Iemma launched his government’s Rights and Responsibilities policy by stating that:

> Schools are the place, above everywhere else, where our future is rehearsed. Schools are the engine rooms of multiculturalism and integration (Erebus, 2006, p. 107).

If racist assumptions can be challenged in schools, then religious, citizenship, human rights and peace education all have the potential to address forms of racism that focus on religion and culture. Despite the potential link between ignorance and prejudice, efforts in interfaith programs are limited. The Tolerance and Social Cohesion through School Education report acknowledged a clear mandate for government schools ‘to actively promote intercultural and interfaith understanding’ (Erebus, 2006, p vii). However the report also noted the need for additional catalysts other than policy directives and found that there is little opportunity for the implementation of programs in interfaith and intercultural dialogue (p. xi). Rymarz (2006, p. 22) pointed out that while the value of teaching religion in public schools gained momentum in the 1970s, ‘there has been little real government effort’ to encourage it.

In the mid 1980s, the Studies of Religion (SOR) course was the ‘fastest growing subject in the NSW Higher School Certificate’ (Lovat, 2002, p. 84). By the 1990s, all Australian states had developed senior elective study of religion courses. However, the popularity of the course was short-lived. By the end of the century, ‘these courses were not being implemented in anything more than a handful of state schools across the country’ (Rossiter, 2001, p. 1) and were ‘seen as a new and little supported option’ (Rossiter, 2007). In 2007, no Queensland government school was teaching the state-accredited SOR course. This reversal of fortune for study of religion illustrates an underlying tension in the relationship between secular schooling and religion generally. British religion educator Peter Vardy (2008, np) goes so far as to claim that: ‘Religion is anathema to Australian governments. It is taboo’.

The NSW Department of Education and Training Cultural Diversity and Community Relations Policy: Multicultural Education (2005) aims ‘to respond to and reflect cultural, linguistic and religious diversity’, but falls short of its purpose with limited measurable objectives. Rather than raising the cultural and religious awareness of teachers and students generally, the policy focuses on English literacy and numeracy targets and completion rates for culturally disadvantaged children. The resources and strategies to implement a state-wide ethos embracing cultural diversity are not evident. There are no targets for teachers or students
to undertake cultural awareness, bilingual development or interfaith training. The noble aims of the policy are ill-served by its culturally-hegemonic evaluative measures. In effect, the Anglo-Celt Christian perspective expressed in the policy aims to teach ‘other culture’ children, not to teach cultural awareness in all schools, to both teachers and children (Byrne, 2008).

Although there are some interfaith programs in public schools, these are not mandatory activities and, due to limited funding, are mostly offered in urban centres where multicultural exposure is already high. One such program, the Together for Humanity project, delivers anti-prejudice workshops in schools. However, these workshops are partly content-controlled by religious organisation and offer only Abrahamic religious perspectives. There are no eastern religions or non-religious philosophies included. There is little in the way of Departmental initiatives in multiple beliefs curriculum development or teacher training.

In fact, in some Australian cultural study courses, religion is missing as a specific focus. Marsh (2005, p. 160) noted that ‘beliefs’ was removed as a specific strand area in the Australian Education Council’s National Statement in 1990. He noted that while a growing emphasis on values education may help to break down the barriers between the divisive stances of ‘secular and religious’ (p. 15), the minimisation of religion in various syllabi, where religion and beliefs have been ‘explicitly excluded’ (p. 158), shows that Australia has entrenched boundaries when it comes to religion in public schools. Australia appears reluctant to handle the religion education ‘hot potato’. One significant barrier is the rarely acknowledged Christian privilege (Kameniar, 2005; Forrest & Dunn, 2006).

Multi-faith study of religions may challenge Christian privilege in Australia.

Christianity is entrenched in Australian public life. Christian religious organisations deliver publicly-funded employment and counselling services. Volunteers delivering scripture classes into public schools are disproportionately Christian (NSW DET, 2007) and in some states, approval to access the volunteer program is vetoed by evangelical Christian organisations. Faith-school funding advantages Christian organisations with major school networks already established. Public figures from both major political parties overtly court Christian voters. Such public national faith alignment appears short-sighted when statistics reveal that Australia is home to multiple beliefs and that the nation’s faith base will continue to diversify.

Australia’s 2006 census shows that migrants represent 51 percent of the nation’s yearly population increase (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). In some urban areas, the long dominant Christian population has been measured at less than 35 percent, with rapid growth in the Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim populations. In addition, a general move away from organised religions has been measured in younger Australians, with 31 percent claiming atheist views (Mason, Singleton & Webber, 2007). Minority faiths and non-religious belief groups face overt and covert inequities in Australian public education.

In the context of increased cultural racism (Madood, 1997) and a ‘rise in migrantophobia, xenophobia and racism’ (Monash University, cited in Halafoff, 2006, p. 9), these trends are of some concern, particularly when occurring alongside claims by government leaders that Australia is a Christian nation (Costello, 2006). The election of a new Federal Government in 2007 has not led to any immediate change in the official stance towards religious diversity. In his first weeks in office, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, vocally Christian, participated in the Catholic World Youth Day by accepting Catholic icons on the 20-year anniversary of Parliament House. Since being elected Prime Minister, he has met with the Pope, but not the Dalai Lama. He has increased funding for chaplaincy in public schools – a largely Christian program, and he supports maintaining the Christian Lord’s Prayer as the ritual opening of Parliament. Regarding other faiths, Rudd’s record includes scheduling his 2020 ideas summit on the Jewish Passover weekend and opposing a Muslim employment and counselling services. Volunteers delivering scripture classes into public schools are disproportionately Christian (NSW DET, 2007) and in some states, approval to access the volunteer program is vetoed by evangelical Christian organisations. Faith-school funding advantages Christian organisations with major school networks already established. Public figures from both major political parties overtly court Christian voters. Such public national faith alignment appears short-sighted when statistics reveal that Australia is home to multiple beliefs and that the nation’s faith base will continue to diversify.

The New South Wales Education Department (2006) espouses apparently neutral policies. It aims to: ‘respond to and reflect cultural, linguistic and religious diversity’ (NSW DET, 2005, p. 1). However, systemic Christian bias is evident in some Departmental documents. For example, the Department provides guidelines for an Education Week ‘Order of Service’ (NSW DET, 2009a), which includes Bible readings and Christian prayers.
Unofficially, perhaps unknowingly, state agencies perpetuate Christian privilege. For some Indigenous Australians, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Atheists and communities of other religious or philosophical persuasion, the un-stated message is clear: Christian beliefs have government-sponsored priority. It has always been thus.

Christianity's historical privilege in Australia

Australian government schools have never prohibited the teaching of religion nor discouraged church involvement. Regulations of the 1848 Board of Commissioners for National Education stipulated that ‘a teacher should be a person of Christian sentiment’ (Rawlinson, 1980, p. 5). This follows the general history of religion in Australian public schools.

In New South Wales, the continuation of religious influence in schools was ensured by the 1880 Public Instruction Act (NSW Department of Public Instruction, 1912) which noted that ‘secular instruction shall be held to include general religious teaching’. The proponent of the Act, Sir Henry Parkes, aimed to limit the impact of divisive Christian sectarianism but supported the teaching of ‘such religious knowledge as was common to a Christian people (and) such a knowledge of the Bible as all divisions of the Christian Church must possess’ (Rawlinson, 1980 - Section 5.65). While the Act distinguished non-denominational teaching from ‘dogmatical or polemical theology’, it clearly privileged Christianity over other traditions. Since this 19th century legislation was passed, there has been a constant struggle between pedagogical approaches to religion. In recent years this has been expressed as a difference between the confessional and the non-confessional. In NSW, both the distinction (between approaches) and the privilege of Christianity remain.

The priority of dogma

Contemporary analyses of religion pedagogy (Cahill, Bouma, Delal, & Leahy, 2004; Lovat, 2002; Rossiter, 2001 and Jackson, 2004) maintains the distinction between formational, confessional, single-faith instruction into one religious tradition and non-confessional comparative education about many. Today NSW emphasises the confessional approach. All public schools provide a dedicated time period each week for single-faith, denominational Special Religious Education (SRE) for all students from kindergarten to year 10. Flew (cited in Thiessen, 1984, p. 27) noted that this approach generally included ‘the effort to teach the truth of specific doctrines’ and thus described it as ‘indoctrination’. Public schools generally know it as ‘scripture’. This is delivered by religiously-sponsored volunteers, with no state control of content. In some regions, scripture class choice is limited to Christian or none. General Religion Education (GRE) also retains an historic Christian association. There is no formal junior primary multi-faith curriculum. Rather, GRE at the junior primary level might be considered part of the hidden curriculum. Christian GRE begins with Easter hat parades, Christmas pageants and in some schools, Christian school prayers. Few public schools recognise non-Christian holy days and even fewer dress their rooms in Hindu or Buddhist icons or Quranic verses. The argument that this situation reflects a public desire for moral, religiously grounded education does not negate the argument for a multi-beliefs approach.

In senior primary, GRE has developed along more pluralist lines inside social science curricula. Haynes (1999, p. 3) highlights the key focus of this approach as (italics in original):

Academic, not devotional... striving for awareness of religions, not acceptance of one religion... study about a diversity of religious views, not the promotion of any particular view... aims to inform students about beliefs, not to conform students to a certain belief.

This non-confessional approach is taken in Britain, with all children taking compulsory multi-faith education. In stark contrast, Australia’s limited time allocation for social sciences generally, and for religion as a small component of this curriculum, means that children have very limited education in religious diversity unless they elect the senior school Study of Religion course. By senior school, attitudes towards the religious ‘other’ may have significantly influenced identity development and prejudicial tendencies. The
potential for study of religion to contribute to Australia’s social cohesion can hardly be tested, let alone realised in the current scenario.

I suggest that the privileging of Christianity in Australian public schooling is linked to both the emphasis on Special Religious Education and the lack of a comprehensive junior school multi-beliefs program. The question arises, why does confessional, single-faith religious instruction have priority in a plural society? Rossiter (2001, np) claims that the hesitancy to oppose this priority results from a ‘fear of offending the churches’. Despite its recent multicultural history, Australia clings to its colonial Christianity.

Australian religion education and international law

The UN Religion Declaration, declared to be Australia’s relevant international instrument in 1993, aimed to eliminate all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief. Despite this, some religion education practices in public schools are discriminatory. There are recent incidents of children who opt out of scripture classes being assigned to cleaning duties (Edwards, 2007). In addition, logistical issues can discriminate against non-religious children. Those enrolled in the ‘non-scripture’ option, particularly in small country schools are often the first to go unsupervised when teacher numbers are down. Some schools encourage parents not to take the non-scripture option to minimise those class numbers. Minority religious and non-religious groups are unable to compete – indirectly through lack of resources or directly because the SRE authorising process is vetoed by religious organisations themselves (Fergusen, 2007).

The barriers to junior school studies of religion, limited availability of minority faith scripture and exclusion of non-religious alternatives are subtle forms of coercion. Foucault refers to these barriers as “small acts of cunning... - subtle arrangements, apparently innocent but profoundly suspicious” (1991 cited in Kameniar 2005, p. 53). Article 18.2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that ‘no-one shall be subject to coercion which would impair (her) freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of (her) choice’. Some schools drop the non-religion scripture option altogether, apparently contradicting the Declaration.

The Declaration also defends an adult’s right to ‘know exactly what they are getting into’ before joining a religious group. Such respect is not offered to children when scripture options are chosen on their behalf. In many cases, parents are unaware of what happens in scripture classes and as such; do not know what they might be signing their child up for. Even if a parent nominates a non-Christian religion at enrolment, their child may still end up sitting in a Christian scripture class. The requirement for professionalism in a policy vacuum

Teachers of other subjects are generally highly qualified individuals who undergo significant scrutiny before being given the responsibility of moulding young minds. When it comes to scripture teachers, few have teacher training. There is no monitoring of student numbers, volunteer qualifications or theological fervour. The NSW DET has no requirements regarding content, pedagogical approach or outcomes and considers the program ‘outside its jurisdiction’ (NSW DET, 2009b). Even the assurance that volunteers are not criminals is outsourced to the sponsoring religious organisation. Majority and minority faiths must all make do with the skills and perspectives of whoever cares to volunteer.

It is ironic that religion in the public system is outsourced to religious organisations via a mechanism that appears to lack accountability. Berlinerblau (2005, p. 2) claimed that the term ‘secular’ derived from the Latin saeculum and referred to ‘living in the world’ or ‘being of the age’. This meaning highlights an implied responsibility of education policy to adapt to the multicultural composition of the 21st Century. A ‘secular’ education thus requires an acknowledgement of religious (and non-religious) plurality. The NSW policy mechanism side-steps the government’s secular duty to educate about the nation’s many beliefs.

The Department acknowledges the occasional use of SRE for proselytising or evangelising – which is against DET policy (NSW DET, 2008). However, when the policy is written in such a way that the state takes no
liability for control of content, then nothing is against the policy. In effect, anything goes. Anecdotal reports include children being told: that Hindus are ‘cows’; that not reading the Bible daily results in damnation to hell or that they might like to ‘sit on old Charlie’s knee’. Responsibility for such education in a secular, multi-faith society may need a rethink.

Exclusion of the non-religious

Departmental rationale for disallowing a non-religious ethics or philosophy alternative includes the argument that it might be popular. This raises the logistical concern of ensuring that enough volunteer teachers are available to meet the demand – an ever-present issue with even the smaller, religious classes. Another argument is that ‘if the Humanists are allowed in, then so are the Scientologists, and then… who’s to stop the Satanists?’ (NSW DET, 2008). This is a fear driven, restrictive approach which could be managed in a more transparent manner if the British model of studying multiple beliefs (including Humanism) was running in parallel. However, SRE in Australian public education receives many bizarre privileges.

Religion is the only subject in which (only some) parents can limit their child’s curriculum. Parents do not have similar ability to limit their child’s exposure in politics to only a liberal view. Nor are parents able to specify only free market theory in economics. The current practice which limits a child’s religious education by offering only one set of beliefs may actually contravene Article 5.3 of the Declaration which emphasises the need for children to develop ‘a spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship among peoples… (and) respect for freedom of religion or belief of others’. Religion is also the only subject in which non-religious parents are explicitly discriminated against. This educational exclusivity regarding non-religious beliefs is echoed in the broader society. Australia’s general attitude to non-believers was recently illustrated with the banning from public buses of an atheist advertising campaign which had previously run in England and Spain. Non-religious perspectives are particularly absent in public school beliefs education. Despite efforts for more than two decades, Australian Humanists have been unable to access the SRE ‘right of entry’ program for teaching beliefs to their children. Schools wishing to run ethics alternatives to scripture have been stopped.

The Victorian Humanist Association’s attempt to change this situation has met with significant resistance. Partly responsible is the confusion over the term ‘secular’. I would argue that the Victorian Education Reform Bill poorly defined ‘secular’ as ‘outside of religion’ to defend the argument that religion studies in public schools is inappropriate to a secular society (Parliament of Victoria, 2006, p. 5). This argument was a legitimate stand against the bigoted preaching of the 1950s but religion education, pedagogy, research and the spiritual understanding of young people have all moved on (de Souza et al., 2006; Jackson, 2004). Such an argument limits the possibility for education to contribute to social cohesion and removes opportunities for discourse about religion in the public realm. Internally contradictory, the same Bill insists on providing access for the confessional-style of Special Religious Education. The bias in this Bill, disguised as secularist, is inherently religious and shows how a faux secular argument is used to ensure religious advantages.

In the mid 1960s, NSW educators attempted to foster in pupils ‘tolerance of, and goodwill towards, people of races and religions … other than their own’ (Lovat, 2002, p. 85). A syllabus was developed that included the goal: ‘by sixth grade, children should have an awareness of the beliefs and moral values taught by the great religions of the world’. An alliance of the Christian churches and the ‘very secular forces dominant in public education at the time’ ensured that such pluralist sentiment was ‘roundly rejected’. Although the Act stated that schools were to be ‘free, secular and compulsory’ (NSW, 1912), for a long time many of those running the system were evangelical Christians. In England and many parts of Europe, study of religion includes an exploration of non-religious perspectives. The approach is to understand, not to ignore.

In the 1970s, Christian influence in the NSW education system was re-cemented by the establishment of a Consultative Committee for the Education Minister made up entirely of conservative Christians (Rawlinson, 1980). Parkes’s old issue of managing inter-Christian rivalries continues but the larger picture of multi-faith representation is yet to be put on the agenda. This Christian influence is still held today. The NSW DET Director General’s Consultative Committee on SRE has eight Christian representatives. While the Jewish
Board of Education has one representative on the committee, there are currently no active Muslim representatives and no provision for representatives of many other traditions (NSW DET, 2009b).

The nation’s reticence to address Christian privilege contributes to a divisive and polemical discourse which pits a secular, critical education against a religious call to faith. It appears that Australia suffers from its 19th century commitment to a confused secular (but religious) education.

‘Secular’ versus ‘religious’: an outdated, unhelpful polemic

According to Lovat (2002, p. vi), secularisation has left many Australians with the view that any religion in public institutions is problematic. He acknowledged ‘confusion among educators’ regarding comparative courses: ‘in public education circles they are sometimes characterised as an unwelcome intrusion by religious forces while, in religion circles they have sometimes been attributed to an unwelcome intrusion by the forces of the state’. Lovat said Australia is ‘yet to come to terms with its position on religion education and oscillates between ambiguous, at times exclusive viewpoints’.

The distinction between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ was emphasised by Berger’s (1967) secularisation theory which said that religion was becoming irrelevant. In light of the 21st century’s strengthening of religiosity, secularisation and plurality, Berger retreated from the theory and stressed the importance of democratic nations engaging with religious ideas in the ‘open discourse of the culture’ (Berger, 2005, np). Indeed ‘open discourse’ may be a requirement for an analysis of religion education’s contribution to social cohesion. Habermas (2006), once a proponent of Berger’s original theory, now sees the bridging of religion and secular society as an important issue. In his article ‘Religion in the Public Sphere’, he noted that not only must believers tolerate other traditions and philosophies but secularists must also appreciate religious conviction.

Berlinerblau (2005, p. 3) claimed that the ‘secular’ versus ‘religious’ dichotomy oversimplified and misrepresented a complex issue. The term ‘secular’ is not opposed to the sacred. It was used in the 18th century to differentiate secluded monks from clergy with worldly duties (Keane, 2002, p. 30). In Australia, the lack of focus on studies of religion has led to an apparent lack of alternatives to the all-or-nothing, religionist versus secularist views. For educators and policy makers this polarity undermines the possibilities of a multi-beliefs approach and limits the opportunity for research on its potential impact. Moderate discourse supporting multiple beliefs education may bridge these extreme viewpoints and encourage exploration of study of religion as a tool for social cohesion.

Extreme views from either camp are not helpful. Daily paper letters pages often carry the plea to ‘keep religion out of our secular schools’. Opposing this, Cardinal Pell’s address to the Catholic Education Conference included the claim that the increasingly prominent sin of ‘not believing that only one religion is true’ can be blamed on ‘comparative religion courses…, (which have taken) young Catholics ‘beyond tolerance and ecumenism and towards muddle’ (Catholic Resources Limited, 2006, np). Pell’s reminder that ‘the one true God acts through his Church, the Catholic Church and the other Christian churches and communities’ (Pell, 2007, np) hints that Catholic religion education has little room for a study of Hindu philosophy or Buddhist environmental ethics. This exclusive approach, sometimes a public school’s only experience with religious perspectives, makes it harder for multi-belief studies to gain a foothold. Such exclusivism also removes the potential for discovering the connections between study of religion and its potential social outcomes of inclusion and cohesion.

Conclusion

Recent measures of Australians’ religious illiteracy and intolerance do not augur well for a nation intent on engaging with Asia (Rudd, 2008) and the wider world. As the nation’s belief demographics change and a federal Freedom of Religions or Beliefs Act is considered (HREOC 2009), approaches to teaching religion will need to be viewed in light of their potential social outcomes. The development of interfaith and intercultural understanding is recognised as ‘one of the foundations of social cohesion’ (Erebus, 2006, p. 2). The potential of studies of religion to contribute has highlighted a range of education strategies. Lagging
behind other western democracies, Australia appears reluctant to explore this option. It is yet to evaluate a multi-beliefs approach or to adequately address its confused secularism, its traditional Christian bias or its lack of commitment to implementation.

Religion and the state have long held hands in Australian public schools. The relationship, overdue for review, continues much as it has done since the 19th century, largely dictated by Christian religious organisations. Until the fact of this relationship is acknowledged and the benefits and limitations of its history explored, religion in Australian public education will continue to be a potato too hot to handle.

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Catherine J. Byrne is a PhD student at Macquarie University, Centre for Research on Social Inclusion.

1 Mr Rudd met with the Dalai Lama as Opposition Leader but not as Prime Minister. He refused a request to meet the Tibetan Leader during a visit in the lead up to the Beijing Olympics.
2 Australian state systems are similar regarding their approach to religion. This paper draws on policy and practice examples from New South Wales, though other states have similar general structures and face similar issues.
3 Non-Christian parents must request in writing that their child is not to take religious instruction. If they require instruction in their own faith, the faith must be approved by the Department (at the discretion of the Minister) and a parent must find a willing volunteer (ICCOREIS, 2008).
4 From initial interviews with retiring and current teachers for current PhD research.
5 The NSW Buddhist Council was invited to be represented on this Committee only in May, 2009.

Some thoughts from the encyclical letter Caritas in Veritate of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI to the bishops priests and deacons men and women religious the lay faithful and all people of good will on integral human development in charity and truth...

Another important consideration is the common good. To love someone is to desire that person's good and to take effective steps to secure it. Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of “all of us”, made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society[4]. It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it. To desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity. To take a stand for the common good is on the one hand to be solicitous for, and on the other hand to avail oneself of, that complex of institutions that give structure to the life of society, juridically, civilly, politically and culturally, making it the pólis, or “city”. The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them. Every Christian is called to practise this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation and according to the degree of influence he wields in the pólis. This is the institutional path — we might also call it the political path — of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbour directly, outside the institutional mediation of the pólis. When animated by charity, commitment to the common good has greater worth than a merely secular and political stand would have. Like all commitment to justice, it has a place within the testimony of divine charity that paves the way for eternity through temporal action. Man's earthly activity, when inspired and sustained by charity, contributes to the building of the universal City of God, which is the goal of the history of the human family. In an increasingly globalized society, the common good and the effort to obtain it cannot fail to assume the dimensions of the whole human family, that is to say, the community of peoples and nations[5], in such a way as to shape the earthly city in unity and peace, rendering it to some degree an anticipation and a prefiguration of the undivided City of God.

(Excerpt from the Introduction # 7).
Religious Education’s contribution to social cohesion: General perspectives and the need for research

Abstract

This paper starts out with the difficult legacy of religious education from the past concerning power and nationalism. The author argues that only a critical approach to social order can be in line with Christian perspectives on education. At the same time, recent discussions are taken up that point to the need for a democratic or liberating understanding of social cohesion. Moreover, the author discusses the question to what degree religion and religious education can have divisive effects for society. In this context, a number of research questions and projects are reviewed, concerning values education, ecumenical and interreligious education, social interaction, and the acquisition of abilities to communicate about (different) religious convictions and worldviews in a situation that is characterized by the experience of difference.

In my understanding, religion and religious education can contribute to social cohesion in many ways. Yet I am quite aware that this understanding is not to be taken for granted. In contemporary multicultural societies, the contrary assumption—that religion and religious education are divisive—is gaining more and more support. Moreover, concerning the past, many critical analysts point to the legitimizing role that religious education has played in relationship to social order and, more specifically, to non-democratic forms of government. From these perspectives, religious education’s contribution to social cohesion must be questionable from the beginning.

In this article, I want to focus on the relationship between religious education and social cohesion from a number of different vantage points. I will start with some historical remarks concerning what many contemporary educators consider religious education’s difficult legacy from the past, especially the legacy of nineteenth and twentieth century nationalism and its relationship to religious education. While nationalism still continues to be a challenge in many parts of the world, in central Europe where I work and write, other aspects of social cohesion have become equally important, especially in relationship to religious education. This is why I will focus on values education, ecumenical and interreligious education, on social interaction, and the acquisition of abilities to communicate about (different) religious convictions and worldviews in a situation that is characterized by the experience of difference. At the same time, these topics also play a role in the ongoing research of my research team at the University of Tübingen and I will present some of the respective research perspectives by introducing readers to our work. In this way it can become visible that religious education’s role in terms of social cohesion must be scrutinized empirically. It is not enough to theoretically claim this role but it must also be examined critically, theoretically no less than empirically.

Religious Education and Social Order: A Difficult Legacy

That religious education should contribute to social cohesion was a widespread assumption in Germany especially during the time period between the early nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century. The understanding of social cohesion prevailing at that time was clearly different from today. The background was first of all the German monarchy and the rise of the German nation state.Politicians expected religious education to support personal virtues and social values that were closely tied to the general expectations of the government for loyalty and for civil obedience. Often it was said in this context that religious education should foster “piety”. This term did not only refer to religious attitudes in the narrow sense—faith in God and pious behavior in religious matters. It also included the relationship to the worldly authorities—most of all to the king or the Kaiser—authorities that should be respected without any
reservation or critical questions (examples for such expectations have been documented by Nipkow & Schweitzer, 1994, pp. 78-91, 98-106).

In other words, politicians expected religious education to support social cohesion as it was embodied in the existing social and political order. They considered religion as providing one of the most important bonds, to God no less than to the existing social order and its worldly representatives. There was no place for critical attitudes in this understanding. This is one of the reasons why political authorities expected religious education to stay away from critical theological thinking, like, for example, historical critical exegesis that was emerging at that time. They feared that criticism vis-à-vis the religious and biblical traditions would easily carry over to social and political criticism that could be detrimental to the maintenance of the traditional social order.

From today’s theological perspective, this kind of education for loyalty must be highly suspicious. It shows to what degree religion and religious education can be used—and abused or functionalized—as instruments for political aims that clearly contradict Christian ethics, at least in the sense of current ethical understandings. It is an open question if this kind of relationship between religious education and social cohesion is limited to the past or if still plays a role in our contemporary world, especially in situations where the political authorities are trying to draw upon religion’s legitimizing power for their own interests.

The second part of what must be described as difficult legacy from the past concerns the relationship between religion and nationalism. In the history of German religious education, this relationship was especially prominent in times of war. Most of all, the beginning of World War I brought about attitudes that fused nationalism with religion (cf. Schweitzer & Simojoki, 2005, pp. 77-98). In this view, the war was a just cause, not only for political reasons but also on religious grounds. The religious identification with the political leaders at that time was enthusiastic and, in many cases, unlimited. Another example is the beginning of German national socialism in 1933 when many religious educators considered it their national, as well as, Christian duty to support the new regime (for the general background see Rickers, 1995). The new authorities seemed to make an end not only to what was considered undue political liberalism but also to the religious liberalism that many religious educators perceived as the major cause for religious decay.

It is easy to see from such historical examples (that most likely, in one way or another, have their unfortunate parallels in other countries) that today’s religious education cannot follow the plea for social cohesion without critical reservations. Until today, conservative attempts of restoring society by basing it on what is considered the ‘true’ German tradition continue to draw on religion. Christianity is then treated as one of the sources for a so-called German Leitkultur—a leading or rather hegemonial kind of culture that all others must come to respect, especially immigrants with their ‘foreign’ or ‘non indigenous’ cultures (for a critical discussion cf. Gottschlich & Zaptcioğlu, 2005).

There can be no serious attempt of understanding religious education’s contribution to social cohesion that does not include the critical awareness of this difficult legacy and of the continuing danger for religious education to be functionalized for purposes of power and nationalism. Yet at the same time, it can also not be overlooked that the more recent discussion in religious education as well as in other disciplines offers a different and, most of all, more democratic or liberating understanding of social cohesion.

**Beyond Divisiveness: Religion as a Resource for the Common Weal**

The understanding that religion is divisive has become quite widespread. Today’s discussions in European politics often exclusively emphasize this aspect. In many cases, the understanding of religion in such discussions is quite limited. Religion is identified with fundamentalism and with worldviews that have no space for respect for the other or for other convictions that are different from one’s own.

Consequently, many politicians have tended to argue for treating religion as a strictly private matter. The most obvious example in recent times is the French decision to ban all ostentatious religious symbols from the grounds of state schools. According to this view, the public sphere should not be disturbed by the
divisive influence of different religious outlooks. It must always be clear that French schools symbolize the unity of French citizenship based on the undivided unity of the nation.

Contrary to the influential assumption that peace depends on keeping religious differences within the parameters of private life and of making sure that the public sphere will be untouched and undisturbed by such differences, more recent developments especially after 9/11 have led to a certain new awareness in European politics for the need of addressing religious issues in public. Since the strategy of privatizing religious conflict clearly does not work as remedy against fundamentalism, the idea of educated religion has gained much plausibility (cf. various contributions in Schreiner, Eisenbast & Schweitzer, 2006). It is now assumed that religious education might in fact counteract fundamentalist attitudes by introducing young people to critical insights in religion.

Another consideration that has also lead to a new appreciation of religion and religious education has to do with the idea of civil society and commitment to the common weal. Democracies are based on the idea that the state should not—and actually cannot—be allowed to form its citizens, at least not in the sense of inculcating certain values or ideals of the good life. If the state did so, it would necessarily and automatically cease to be a truly democratic state. Rather than allowing the people to shape the state—the very idea of democracy—the state would shape the people which clearly is a totalitarian perspective. However, the question remains how democratic societies can function, most of all socially and morally, beyond the model of the free market. How can social attitudes of responsibility and commitment to the common weal be fostered if the state can do so only within strictly defined limits? This is where many analysts tend to foresee a new and important function of religion in society—as a resource for the common weal (for additional theoretical arguments cf. Osmer & Schweitzer, 2003a; 2003b). This understanding forms the background of my own work to which I will turn now.

Values Education

It is a common assumption that religious education should contribute to values education. In a number of European countries, primary as well as secondary school students have to make a choice between either taking part in religious education or in ethics that is taught as a so-called alternative subject. This mandatory choice testifies to the view that religious education covers values education (even if it sometimes goes by other names like ‘ethical education’ or introduction to ‘norms and values’). In other countries or regions in Europe, traditional religious education has been replaced altogether by a subject that either has values education as its center or at least refers to values as a central part of the subject.

In the understanding of Christian religious education, i.e., my own background as a Protestant religious educator, values education is closely linked to issues of social cohesion. The basic values in question—peace, social justice, human rights, ecological values, solidarity, tolerance, global awareness, to only mention the ones considered most important in the contemporary discussion (for example, Lachmann, Adam & Rothgangel, 2006; Mokrosch & Regenbogen, 2009)—decidedly go beyond the sphere of individual life. Moreover, they also refer to attitudes that are not limited to some kind of Christian or denominational in-group but are of a universal nature. They apply to all human beings and to the world shared with others, independently of their religious backgrounds.

So far, however, not much research has been done on the actual practice of values in religious education. The general emphasis has clearly been on introducing ideas and theoretical understandings, not on the empirical reality of religious education. Yet it is obvious that this reality must receive careful attention if children and adolescents should actually incorporate the respective values. This is why we have started a research project with videographic studies of lessons in religious education. The focus of this project is on a specific part of German schools, the so-called vocational schools. These schools can roughly be described as non-college track schools that cater to a part of the population that is often considered to be especially vulnerable to nationalist and xenophobic attitudes. The students are either preparing for practical training in a certain profession—technical, economic, or social—or they are attending school on a part-time basis.
while spending the other part of their time with practical training in industry, commerce, or in social professions. We are interested in two questions: What kinds of values are actually addressed in religious education? And in what manner does values education proceed in the classroom situation? Since this project has started only recently, we cannot yet offer results. It is obvious, however, that, in this context, religious education’s contribution to social cohesion strongly depends on both, the kinds of values addressed as well as on the actual effects of the educational process that should lead to the appropriation of such values by the adolescents. Empirical research in this area will support religious educators in their attempts to make values education more effective. Moreover, it will show if and in which ways religious education does in fact promote values of social cohesion rather than, for example, supporting individualistic kinds of achievement motivation.

Ecumenical and Interreligious Education

The terms ‘ecumenical’ and ‘interreligious education’ can be used in different ways. In our own work, we distinguish between ‘ecumenical education’ as referring to Christianity in its different denominational forms, and ‘interreligious education’ as referring to learning processes that involve different religions (cf. Schweitzer & Biesinger, 2002; Schweitzer et al., 2006). In Germany, interreligious education is related most of all to the relationship between Christianity and Islam (according to recent estimates, there are up to 4.5 million Muslims living in Germany, i.e., more than 5% of the total population) but also Judaism and Buddhism or Hinduism. In both cases, with ecumenical as well as with interreligious learning, the aim is to teach for tolerance and mutual respect by supporting mutual awareness and knowledge of each other. Moreover, including the level of attitudes, the aim is to support the development of the ability to live with difference—cultural as well as religious differences in one’s own society as well as at a global level.

Ecumenical and interreligious education have strong theological implications. They must include the self-understanding of the different denominations and religious groups in order to allow for encounters based on equal rights and on respect informed by knowing the other. Moreover, since tolerance and respect cannot be reached by forcing people into them from the outside—a common mistake of western attempts of, for example, ‘civilizing Islam’—there is a need for identifying the sources for tolerant and respectful attitudes within the different religious traditions themselves (Schwöbel, 2003).

In our own work, we have coined the formula Strengthening Commonalities—Doing Justice to Differences as a guideline for this kind of education (Schweitzer & Biesinger, 2002; also see Schweitzer & Boschki, 2004). Theologically, the relationship between commonalities and differences is not the same within Christianity and beyond Christianity. Yet we are convinced that while being in need of refinement and adjustment to different denominational and religious contexts, the approach can still serve as a basic model in ecumenical as well as interreligious education. There always are commonalities and differences, be it with different Christian denominations or be it with different religions, and it is always important to become sensitive to both aspects.

In our empirical work, we started out by researching possibilities of what is called cooperative religious education in Germany (for accounts of these studies in English cf. Schweitzer & Boschki, 2004; Schweitzer, 2009). Cooperation in this case means that denominational groups that are traditionally taught in separate groups for religious education in German schools, should come together and work together at least for certain periods of time—for the purpose of shared projects, for certain lessons or larger topical units or even for whole school years. Independently of how cooperation is organized—we found it most helpful to leave this decision to the individual schools and their creativity—the key element for cooperation is that some kind of dialogical encounter must become possible. In other words, Protestant and Catholic children, for example, should not just be taught together but they should have a chance to understand what they have in common and what is different between these denominations. Moreover, they should come into dialogue with each other about the meaning of such commonalities and differences. The same idea applies to learning groups that bring together, for example, Muslim and Christian students—a possibility that has
not been used as much as we would wish it to be used, mostly due to the still uncertain position of Muslim religious education in German schools.

In a recent project, we have also been able to include settings in preschool education, with a focus on intercultural and interreligious education with young children (ages 4 to 6). A pilot study was completed last year (Schweitzer, Biesinger & Edelbrock, 2008) and a larger representative study with kindergartens in Germany is currently under way. So far, it has become obvious that the tasks of ecumenical and interreligious education cannot wait until children enter primary school (in Germany, age 6 or 7). Their questions arise much earlier because, in many cases, they encounter children with different backgrounds on a daily basis in primary education. One of the critical results from the study, however, points to the fact that most preschool institutions in Germany have not started to become involved with issues of interreligious education. While our interviews clearly show how the encounter between children with different religious backgrounds plays an important role in the everyday life of many institutions, for example, with issues around appropriate and inappropriate foods or with celebrating different festivals, the teachers have not found ways of including this dimension with their work. According to their reports, they lack the training adequate for such tasks and they also lack the support from their sponsors which they feel would be needed in this respect.

Social Interaction

Modern or postmodern societies are characterized by a high degree of pluralization. While traditional factors like social stratification based on property and descendence have lost some of their former importance—it should not be overlooked, however, that more recent kinds of plutocratic stratification are still highly operative in many societies—functional differentiation has come to play a dominant role. Modern or postmodern societies are highly differentiated due to functional specialization. In addition to this, social, ethnic, and religious subcultures have developed that often circumscribe the parameters of possible social contact.

With its emphasis on social values, religious education encourages social interaction across different social spheres. At least to some degree, this emphasis is not only thematic or theoretical but also refers to social interaction within religious education itself. If learning groups are composed of children and adolescents with different backgrounds, the classroom situation can become the setting for integrative practices.

In our own work, we had occasion to study this kind of social interaction most of all in the context of non-formal religious education in parishes. We are currently completing an empirical study on confirmation work in seven European countries (Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland; cf. Schweitzer, Ilg & Simojoki, in preparation). In these countries, confirmation work is a program of the Protestant Churches that brings together substantial parts of the respective population (depending on the country, between approximately 30 and 90% of the total population). One core aspect is the experience of forming a group, and this experience plays a very strong role for many of the adolescents. At least to some degree, social interaction across different spheres of society can also be expected from religious education in schools. Future research should put more emphasis on how this interaction can work in classroom settings. It is obvious that social interaction is a prerequisite for values education as well.

A Language to Communicate About Religious Convictions and Worldviews

If social cohesion requires dialogue across the dividing lines between different cultures and different religious backgrounds and adherences, a basic requirement is language—not only in the basic sense of general communicative skills (as important as such skills must remain) but also in terms of specific abilities to express one’s own convictions in a manner that is understandable to others that do not share them. The same holds true for being able to understand others in their corresponding attempts of expressing their views and convictions.
In the beginning of this article, I suggested that democratic societies depend on resources that come from traditions—among others religious traditions—beyond the state itself. Such resources must become available to the public which is not possible without this kind of communication. This is why the acquisition of a language for communicating about different religious convictions and worldviews is not only important for individuals or for religious groups and institutions but also for society at large. At the same time it is easy to see that modernity and postmodernity are not likely to support the development or acquisition of such a language. Tendencies of religious individualization and privatization clearly work against it (cf. Schweitzer, 2004).

Religious education can play an important role for the acquisition of dialogical skills. First, by introducing children and adolescents to religious traditions, it gives access to a language that is suitable for expressing religious beliefs. Second, it brings people in contact with reflexive ways of addressing religious beliefs, for example, in theology but also—in most cases—with other theories or approaches from philosophy or the social sciences as well.

It is well known that the acquisition or development of communicative and dialogical skills in the area of religions and worldviews is not to be taken for granted in contemporary societies. Yet very little research has been done in this direction so far. Recent studies in Germany and other European countries indicate that the students themselves consider school religious education the major field for them to become acquainted with other religions (cf. Knauth et al., 2008). In our own research, we have started to look into young children’s abilities to speak about religious beliefs and practices, be it their own or be it of others. Since this is an ongoing project, I am not in the position to offer definite results at this point. Yet given our preliminary interpretations of the interview material, it seems safe to assume that many families do not equip their children with such abilities. Without religious education, the children—and later on, the adolescents and even adults—will remain at a loss with the task of communicating with others in this area of ultimate meanings and values.

Perspectives and Tasks for the Future

From my considerations above, it should be clear that I am not trying to defend religious education just on the basis of its theoretical aims. Good intentions are not enough, neither from the perspective of the critics nor for religious educators themselves. In my understanding, we must be open to critical questions about the reality of religious education, no less than in the case of other subjects or of different fields of education. The question if religion and religious education are divisive or if they really contribute to social cohesion cannot be answered without empirical evidence. This is not to say that other kinds of research—analytical or historical—would not be needed for the future. What has been said above concerning the ‘difficult legacy’ of religious education from the past clearly points to the need for critical analysis and for a corresponding critical attitude vis-à-vis all attempts to again functionalize religious education for purposes of power and nationalism. Yet it is easy to see that all of the aspects relating to social cohesion in the field of religious education have received a lot more theoretical than empirical attention in the past. The different research projects mentioned above indicate that such research is indeed feasible and can lead to meaningful results.

Moreover, there is a clear need to differentiate between different forms of religious education. Not all forms of religious education can be expected to equally contribute to social cohesion. Research in this field therefore can also serve didactic purposes by identifying strategies and procedures that can make religious education more effective. Interreligious education is a good example in this context. In the past, the key issue seemed to be that this kind of education should receive more attention and that the curriculum should give more space and emphasis to interreligious topics. The empirical study on the actual effects of this kind of education on students carried out by C. Sterkens (2001) indicates, however, that not all of the students profited from it to the same degree. Students belonging to a minority (for example, Muslim students) did not show much change in their attitudes towards other religions. Consequently it is not
enough to include interreligious education as part of religious education. We need to know how different groups of students can really be reached and how, for example, xenophobic attitudes can be changed.

I started out by saying that, in my understanding, religion and religious education can contribute to social cohesion in many ways. Given the critical questions concerning the divisive influence of religion in society, it is increasingly important to point out that this is indeed the case and in which ways religious education’s contribution actually works. At the same time, we ourselves, as religious educators, must be interested in strengthening this contribution, not for the purpose of fulfilling external expectations towards religious education but because religious education itself entails the vision of peace and justice as a basis for a good society.

References


Further thoughts from the encyclical letter Caritas in Veritate of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI to the bishops priests and deacons men and women religious the lay faithful and all people of good will on integral human development in charity and truth...

One of the deepest forms of poverty a person can experience is isolation. If we look closely at other kinds of poverty, including material forms, we see that they are born from isolation, from not being loved or from difficulties in being able to love. Poverty is often produced by a rejection of God's love, by man's basic and tragic tendency to close in on himself, thinking himself to be self-sufficient or merely an insignificant and ephemeral fact, a "stranger" in a random universe. Man is alienated when he is alone, when he is detached from reality, when he stops thinking and believing in a foundation[125]. All of humanity is alienated when too much trust is placed in merely human projects, ideologies and false utopias[126]. Today humanity appears much more interactive than in the past: this shared sense of being close to one another must be transformed into true communion. The development of peoples depends, above all, on a recognition that the human race is a single family working together in true communion, not simply a group of subjects who happen to live side by side[127].

Excerpt from Chapter Five: The cooperation of the human family # 53
School festivals, collective remembering and social cohesion: A case study of changes in Norwegian school culture

Abstract

How does a particular Norwegian primary school community interact while preparing and carrying through the festivals of Advent/Christmas, Easter and the National Day at the end of the first decade of the 21st century? Particularly, what is the relationship between the Principal and involved staff members regarding the school’s festival culture? How may possible changes in the school’s festival culture be interpreted and tentatively explained? A number of collective assemblies as well as lessons of religion and life view education were observed over a period of two years, and staff members were interviewed. Observations of festival assemblies over a period of nearly twenty years are included as a comparative context. The school’s collective festival periods are analysed by references to theories of collective memory. Contrasting and shared interests of school and ‘church’, of leaders, staff and cultural majorities and minorities are discussed. As for the school of the case study, the keeping up of the identity of its cultural majority group was concretized through ‘weak’ commemorative ceremonies. The festival periods were handled through current negotiations between actively involved members of both school and faith organisations. A final comment to the results of the study deals with the continued, though weakened, hegemonic character of the case school’s festival culture and its possible interactions with social cohesion processes.

Introduction with research questions

In this article I will present an overview of the ‘festival culture’ of Coaston primary school on the southern ‘Bible-belt’ coast of Norway at the end of the first decade of the 21st century as an example of a variety of schools’ festival cultures observed over two decades. During this period Norway has become a religiously plural and multicultural country although approximately 82 % of the population still belong to the Lutheran state church. With regard to the three conceptual phrases of the main title, the emphasis is on ‘school festivals’. I will not include a theoretical discussion of ‘social cohesion’ in this article, only comment briefly on a possible relationship between schools’ festival cultures and some aspects of social cohesion towards the end, referring to (crumbling) ‘collective remembering’ and contingent general values for public socialisation (Hervieu-Léger, 2006).

Life in a Norwegian primary school in some respects resembles life in general in the current Norwegian society. However, although a year starts after the Christmas/New Year holiday, the summer holiday, with July as the central month, represents the main division between the annual cycles of compulsory schooling. Special collective school assemblies and smaller arrangements may take place both at the beginning and the end of a cycle, just as there are smaller and greater occasions for festivity and solemnity during a school year. In fact, it is hard to find a sharp dividing line between times of ‘festival’ and ‘ordinary’ days. This particularly applies to the spring term, towards the end of a school year. I will concentrate on the month of December and on the collective school rituals of lighting candles in the Advent period before the mid-winter holiday. I will also touch upon other festive particularities, including assemblies before the Easter holiday and the festivities before and on the National Day (the 17th of May).

How does a particular Norwegian primary school community interact while preparing and carrying through the festival processes of Advent/Christmas, Easter and the 17th of May at the end of the first decade of the 21st century? Particularly, what is the relationship between the Principal and involved staff members regarding the school’s festival culture? How may possible changes in the school’s festival culture be
interpreted and tentatively explained? These are my research questions. Several juridical and otherwise normative texts certainly play a role in the issues, e.g. the Education Act of 1998 (Opplæringsloven), with later amendments), and the National Curriculum of 2006 (Kunnskapssløftet), in force1, as well as local curricular texts written by teachers of the school community, and ‘culturally mediated standard texts’ like the story of the Nativity in Luke chapter 2 and popular festival hymns. However, working contextually and emphasising culturally mediating tools (see below), I will rather search for other textual and bodily practices, i.e. codes for interaction generally taken for granted and learnt informally in the community. Such codes are central to the common value aspects of social cohesion.

Relevant phenomena like ‘services for school communities’ in the parish church (here shortened to ‘school services in church’) are ‘a hot issue’ in the mass media from time to time, particularly since the middle of the 1990s in connection with the many amendments of the compulsory school syllabus of religion and life view education and the related changes in the 1998 Education Act.4 Exactly because of the political tension and the controversial character of the phenomenon, there is good reason to dig empirically and theoretically a little deeper with regard to aspects of festival culture in primary schools.

Methodology, qualitative data and the relevance of collective memory theory

With an abductive methodology (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994, 43-46), chosen because of a long-lasting study, I will, in this article, primarily explore qualitative data constructed from observations of school culture while applying central concepts from collective memory theory as used in sociology of religion and in social psychology/theory of learning. ‘Abduction’ involves confronting inductively constructed data and tentative discoveries (including all acknowledged and ‘hidden’ pre-judgements) with a relevant theoretical position in an analysis aiming at an adequate interpretation which may also be evaluated by statistical methods (Haakedal, 2004, p. 51). By ‘school culture’ I mean the total and dynamic activity taking place in the central and peripheral space of a particular school and implying both real and hidden spiritual and material values and codes of practice.

The primary sample for analysis in this article consists of observations of collective assemblies at Coaston primary school (including ‘school services in church’) over two years (2007-2009), that is, certain days in the month of December and in mid-spring, and semi-structured interviews with ten staff members carried out in order to gain the teachers’ understanding of the assemblies. During the second year of observation, I also attended Flaten’s (another primary school) ‘Christmas service’ (in the local state church) and ‘Christmas journey’ (in a local free church) (see Jangaard & Lundstad, 2008). These two incidents of Flaten’s festival culture, as well as another twelve earlier observations of ‘school services in church’ will serve as my secondary sample, for comparative reasons. I have thus observed school festival culture for a period of nearly twenty years (1992-2009), including altogether fifteen ‘school services in church’ (Haakedal, 2007).

A two-stage approach is applied. Firstly, I constructed qualitative data from the observations and recorded voices at Coaston and composed descriptive sketches based on the transcriptions and ‘field texts’ like festival programmes. Secondly, I discuss elements from the sketches comparatively while drawing on my previously constructed typology of ‘school services in church’ (Haakedal, 2007) as well as the ‘synchronous’ observations of Flaten primary school in order to draw some conclusions about the characteristics of Coaston’s festival culture.

My ‘informed guess’ after the first year of observation was that Coaston, even with 5-10 % of pupils of ‘immigrant’ background, was quite a traditional school with some active teachers influencing the festival culture. This ‘traditional’ flavour made collective memory theories relevant. With regard to the concept of religion, the sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger underlines “the reference to the legitimating authority of a tradition as a general and distinctive characteristic of religious belief” (Hervieu-Léger 1998, 35). This definition “makes visible the chain which makes the individual believer a member of a community that gathers together all the past, present and future believers” (p. 35). Religion as a “chain of memory” is
Hervieu-Léger’s key concept to understand the trends of contemporary religiosity as well as the continued institutional secularising tendencies.

I use the following concepts and definitions from the theory of collective memory by the researcher of social psychology and culture, James V. Wertsch: ‘Mediated action’ is a general category of human action, like speaking and thinking, involving “an inherent, irreducible tension between agent and ‘cultural tools’ such as language and narrative texts”. Such tools do not determine human action, but they are strongly influential (Wertsch 2002, 6). ‘Text’ is understood as “a basic organizing unit that structures meaning, communication and thought” (p. 14), ‘voice’ as referring to unique, situational utterances aiming at being received and interpreted, as well as to contextually situated voice types generally being interrelated with unique utterances (p. 16). The verbal concept of ‘remembering’ emphasizes the ongoing, dialogical process of the mind, and collective (“unself-conscious”, p. 20) ‘memory’ is contrasted to (but always interplaying with) the category of analytical, critical ‘history’ (pp. 17-20). The influence of collective memory theories will be latent in the sketches while a fuller interpretive potential from these theories will be drawn upon in the comparative discussion of the research results.

**Sketches of Coaston’s festival culture**

*Collective time, space and central mediated actions in an annual festival cycle*

Time and space are central categories with regard to the contextuality of school cultures. Annual cycles (of schooling) exemplify the passage of time. Space is a more abstract category than ‘room’ or ‘location’. In my work definition of school culture, I distinguished between a school’s central and peripheral space. The music room was central to Coaston’s festival culture. As a location it was open to flexible usage, installations and decorations. It was not big enough to house all the members of the school community, so every collective assembly that took place in it had to be arranged twice. Also the sports hall sometimes served a collective function. Another central location was the staff room where the Principal once a week brought up matters of collective importance. Coaston’s playgrounds were multifunctional. There the different age groups practised parading before the 17th of May. A more informal walk from the school to the town centre took place each time the school community attended its ‘Christmas service’ in the parish church. In addition to time and space, I have focussed on ‘mediated action’, that is, interactions where all the members of Coaston, in one way or another, communicated through and with basic ‘cultural tools’ central to the festive events and thus with a high symbolic value.

The two largest and important annual collective festival events at Coaston were the ‘Christmas service’ in the parish church and the National Day programme. The other yearly collective assemblies were grouped around these two events.

An important function of the four collective Advent assemblies was to practice the hymns and songs to be sung at the ‘Christmas service’. The programme for each assembly had the following basic structure:

- Pupils enter while music is played
- Singing
- Candle lightening ritual
- Performance by a teacher
- Singing
- Performance by a particular cohort or group of pupils
- Singing

The songs chosen for the Advent assemblies and ‘Christmas service’, the two years of observation, included, both, popular traditional and modern Christmas carols, Advent songs and seasonal carols.

The ritual of lighting the Advent candles was handled by a small group of pupils. It was accompanied by unison singing. The element of the programme where there was most change from the first to the second
year of observation was the performance by a teacher. The main difference here was that during the first year, four staff members addressed the pupils, one for each Monday of December, while the second year only one of them, Siv Carina, a young female teacher, was responsible for all the four ‘teacher performances’. She used her dramatising skills, communicating in creative ways parts of the Nativity story. The performances by the pupils could be a choir performance by a whole cohort, a PowerPoint group work, individual pupils playing instruments, or self-made dramatic features by smaller groups of pupils. Generally there was an atmosphere of expectation during the Advent assemblies. The pupils seemed to be in a mood of festive participation, for example, by clapping enthusiastically after the performances.

The ‘Christmas service’ in the parish church took place on the second last day before the holiday. Although a particular member of the clergy (the ‘youth minister’) conducted the ‘service’, it did not include much liturgical language, in fact, only the Lord’s Prayer. Through announcing this item, the minister managed to let the individuals in the assembly have a choice of whether or not to ‘get involved’ by active participation. The ‘flavour’ of this ‘Christmas service’ pointed more in the direction of a seasonal performance by pupils and teachers than in the direction of a religious festival service. On the final school day, the fourth Advent assembly was held followed by a ‘singing around the Christmas tree’ in the sports hall. It was a shortened day for the pupils so that the staff afterwards could have their own end-of-term formal meal in the decorated staff room.

The second ‘great’ annual collective event was the 17th of May. For nearly 150 years a school children’s parade has been the main morning event on the National Day. Each school Principal receives practical information from the local 17th of May Committee regarding the parading. In recent years many schools have also developed their own neighbourhood traditions. However, the central collective parading is the peak of the day. At a certain location Coaston joined other schools with banners and brass bands, and parents and the general local population in their finery cheered along the route. As for Coaston, there was a festival programme in the school yard before the start of the parade:

- Welcome by the Principal
- Running up the flag by a group of 12 year old pupils
- Singing (a traditional national hymn)
- Poetry reading by a group of 9 year old pupils
- Singing (a traditional national children’s song)
- Short speech by a group of 11 year old pupils
- Singing (the National Anthem)
- Departure of the parade

The central symbolic action of this programme was the running up of the school’s big Norwegian flag. It corresponded with the waving of individual flags later in the parade. The parade route went along the small town’s central streets and finished in front of the parish church. There the teachers’ responsibility for the children ended and parents took over.

In addition to the 17th of May programme, there was another collective festival assembly of interest during the first spring term, i.e. the Easter assembly in the music room on the final day before the Easter holiday. This tradition, including the telling of the Easter story by the fully gowned youth minister from the parish church, had only been practised for three years. During the second year of observation, it was in fact exchanged for an ‘Easter musical’ directed by one of the teachers. There was, however, a certain line of symbols and activities connecting the first year Easter assembly and the 17th of May school yard assembly: The decorations in the music room at Easter included bouquets of birch twigs with multi-coloured ribbons in addition to daffodils and lighted candles on a table with a white cloth. There were also other Easter decorations in the room (eggs, chicken). Apparently, there had also been a tradition of using bouquets of leafy birch twigs together with the flags in the children’s 17th of May parade. Both assemblies involved singing traditional (religious/national) hymns. Warmer weather, sprouting green leaves, flowers, flags (with a blue and white cross on a red base) and all the ‘red-letter’ days of late spring (May Day/Labour Day, the
17th of May, and often also Ascension Day and Whitsun) signal the yearly change of seasons and thus the taste of freedom because of the ever closer summer holiday.

The assemblies mentioned above were all marked with symbolic icons on the poster of Coaston’s annual events which included more collective icons. These sometimes showed connections between the time of the school year and the ‘space’ of the local society, e.g. a ‘week of coastal culture’ taking place in late spring. Observations during lessons of religion and life view education gave examples indicating that the collective symbols and festival culture manifested itself also on the cohort levels of the school’s organisation. While teaching about Islam for the ten-year-olds, one teacher compared the Norwegian flag with flags from countries belonging to the Muslim cultural sphere. Another teacher practised Easter songs with the nine-year-olds and made a point of distinguishing between two types of days for flying the Norwegian flag: public holidays and religious (Easter) holidays.

The internal festival organisation, exemption practice and alternative arrangements

In the first year of observation, three teachers, Christian, Christina and Charlotte (with 20 to 30 years of practice at Coaston), were regular members of a ‘festival committee’ (FC) while Siv Carina was a substitute member. Christian (a teacher of fine arts) and Christina became my main informants. They agreed that the present, formalised organisation of an annual cycle, including its festival culture, had started a couple of years earlier, after the present Principal had been appointed. She had decided that every member of the teaching staff should have a position on one of the school’s several committees. Being a member of FC had become more formalised. The present form of the four Advent assemblies had also started some years earlier. Christina explained that the atmosphere of the staff room in December was special. Each Monday morning lilac candles were lit and a mulled non-alcoholic drink served. The staff had wanted the pupils to experience some of the same atmosphere of festivity and fellowship and therefore the consecutive collective Advent assemblies in the music room had been decided upon. It was also Christina’s idea to arrange a collective assembly in the music room and invite the youth minister from the parish church before Easter.

According to Christina and others, the main reason for dividing the school’s population of pupils into two groups ‘vertically’ and let one half take part in the first of two consecutive collective assemblies while the other half worked on various subjects or themes in their usual rooms (and vice versa), was to be able to take care of the pupils whose parents would claim exemption from certain activities. The ‘vertical’ organisation ensured that exempted pupils were always engaged in some educational meaningful activity together with their own age group even if they had to go to the room next door, that is, their ordinary room, during assembly time. Several teachers found this mode of organising assemblies better than an earlier ‘horizontal’ division with one performance for the younger pupils and one for the older ones. As claims of exemption were handled on the level of each cohort by its team of teachers and not reported to the Principal or Vice Principal, I did not get exact information about the amount of exemptions from the collective assemblies in the music room. The teachers generally reported that there were no exemptions for the Advent assemblies.

The parents were informed about exemption rights at the beginning of each school year. Some of the teachers stated that as long as assemblies and other arrangements and activities were held at school, parents’ would not exempt their child, but they would claim exemption from the ‘Christmas service’ in the parish church. For a couple of years the Vice Principal had asked Tuva (a tutor for the pupils with a non-native-speaking background) to be responsible for an alternative arrangement taking place while the school community attended the ‘Christmas service’ (cf. Gjefsen 2005). In the first year, she observed that, in the end, thirty-two pupils (a little less than 10 % of the pupil population) had been present at the alternative festival arrangement. The amount of exempted pupils had more than tripled compared with the year before. The second year, the group of exempted pupils was a little smaller but it was still more than double compared with earlier years. For the Easter assembly in the music room, there were some exemptions, but the numbers were not reported.
Remembering, interpreting and sharing thoughts about the future of the festival traditions

With slight deviations the interviewed teachers told the same story of how the annual collective festival assemblies had come to take the present form: The school community had a long experience of cooperation with the staff of the parish church about the ‘Christmas service’. Christian remembered the ‘old style’ of ‘the service’ (see the traditional type below). Because the pupils gradually had become more noisy and inattentive, the school staff had wanted a change and taken more responsibility for the ‘Christmas service’. This was how the ‘festival committee’ (FC) had come into being. As a consequence whole cohorts and smaller groups of pupils were now contributing to ‘the service’.

Christina did not report of any breaks in her long service in the FC. She kept her position there the second year of observation. Other members in the second year were Anna, Siv Carina and another young female music teacher. Christina thought most of her colleagues would not volunteer for this job, and despite the fact that it meant a lot of extra practical work she found the content and the values it involved too important to ask for a less strenuous task. According to Christina, for some years the collective Advent/Christmas traditions at Coaston had consisted only of the final day ‘Christmas service’ and the ‘singing around the Christmas tree’ (without the collective Advent assemblies). This was because, even earlier, more extensive traditions had exhausted the staff.

Ellinor had been a member of the FC together with Christina and Christian the year the present Principal had been appointed. Although Ellinor could not remember details about the decision making, there had been a change in the style of the Advent assemblies that year. The FC had decided that there should be a tight structure, but within it the performing teachers and pupils should have considerable freedom of action. Ellinor appreciated this agreement and thought the rest of the staff was pleased about it as well. None of the interviewed teachers reported any dissatisfaction. Christina, however, acknowledged that if there were discontented colleagues, they would probably not tell her about it. She thought that changes were being introduced ‘from above’, that is, from the central political level of the school system. She referred to the coming substitution of the compulsory school’s long established ‘Christian and ethical’ general objects clause with an objects clause representing a broader value basis (finally decided in December 2008), and this made Christina uneasy. “It’s a pity to let go of all our culture”, she said.

Several of the teachers expressed their hopes and expectations that the school’s festival culture would continue more or less as it was. When asked about the possibility that collective assemblies could contain elements from other major cultural traditions than the Christian-Humanistic ones, all the answers were negative. Festivals of other religious and cultural traditions might have a place on the cohort level depending on the background of the pupils. Only the Principal was a little more open in this matter. She acknowledged that she had some power with regard to the future festival culture. However, she respected the school’s traditions and acknowledged the influence of quite a number of staff who held a Christian philosophy of life. She agreed with her staff on the policy that Coaston should have a culture of singing and of pupil performances. She was pleased that some of the collective assemblies gave her opportunities to promote the Christian-Humanistic liberal values she saw as the school’s foundation and she believed in.

Several of the teachers involved in Coaston’s collective assemblies, welcomed opportunities to back up values they believed in. Anna’s chosen theme for her Advent contribution in the first year was ‘our responsibility for the environment/the creation’ of which she talked with commitment. Sara had gradually built up her status as an oral transmitter of Christian cultural festival texts during collective assemblies and performed at both the observed ‘Christmas services in church’. Siv Carina was, likewise, demonstrating her dramatising skills but choosing content from the central biblical Christmas story. Eva, who was responsible for religion and life view education for the two groups of nine-year-olds during the two years of observation, was also a music teacher and, as such, actively involved in the collective assemblies both years when her enthusiastically conducted choirs of young pupils were singing modern, rhythmic songs of Christian beliefs and values. In the second year, Eva came up with the idea of performing an Easter musical instead of inviting the local youth minister on the last day before the Easter vacation. Without much extra
work and re-using resource material from her earlier teaching experience, she took a central position in Coaston’s festival culture this year, relieving her colleagues in the FC.

Comparison and discussion

In my earlier research on the development of ‘school services in the parish church’, I constructed three types called the traditional, the modern and the late modern ‘school service’. The distinctive mark of the first type was the dominant position of the minister as liturgical leader and preacher and the corresponding passive ‘assembled’ pupils and teachers except for singing traditional hymns. The Principal often gave a little speech at the end of the service, thanking the minister for a good relationship and reinforcing taken-for-granted Christian-Humanistic virtues and values. The characteristics of the second type were more pupil performances including, often, a dramatization in addition to the minister’s sermon. God’s love and the value of caring were the central ideas transmitted in both these types. The third type was different because it showed more plurality with regard to form and content. Pupils, teachers, and even the minister, were involved in a variety of performances of singing, playing instruments, dramatizing, dancing and addressing the ‘audience’ who in turn gave spontaneous applause. The ideological messages within a single ‘school service’ of the third type could involve a spectrum of nuances, from the joy of gifts and Christmas decorations to an address by a teacher emphasising a volitional responding to God’s goodness. All though, there was overlapping of characteristics between the three types with regard to the three periods of research (1992; 1998; 2005), the observations in the early years of the 21st century did not include the first type (Haakedal, 2007, 42).

With the fourth period of observations (2007-2009), I will discuss some contrasting and shared interests of individuals and groups at the various levels of organisation of the major institutions involved. As an introduction to this discussion, I briefly describe Flaten’s ‘Christmas service’ as a contrast to the ‘Christmas services’ for Coaston. While the youth minister interacting with Coaston led the two services in a concise but everyday language, the minister conducting the ‘Christmas service’ for Flaten seemed to stress the liturgical language. The climax of this service was an extended dramatization of the Nativity story with large props and exquisite costumes. Pupils played the main parts but also teachers were involved in prominent, but, generally, silent roles. However, the minister’s voice was clear, both with regard to form and evangelical message. Coaston’s ‘Christmas services’ did not have one climax but rather consisted of rows of performances by individuals and small groups. Each voice, whether a pupil choir, a splendid storytelling teacher, or the minister’s clear but matter-of-fact sermon, was part of a communication of and about Christian-Humanistic cultural heritage values.

Using Hervieu-Léger’s definition of religion as a ‘chain of memory’, both schools’ ‘Christmas services’ contributed to keeping up the chain. However, one minister used a voice of outspoken institutional religious authority while the other represented culturally adapted, implicit religion. Both school communities interplaying with the two parish churches were involved in remembering by use of various cultural tools, but the degree to which each community was involved in ‘collective’ remembering was different. Placed along a continuous line between collective (‘unself-conscious’) memory and a (more or less consciously applauded) plurality of representations, Coaston was closer to the latter end than Flaten. I suggest that the way the Festival Committee functioned at Coaston, with a small group of teachers responsible both for the form and content of the school’s festival assemblies, and negotiating with the Principal and among themselves, was one reason for the rather low-voiced minister. The Principal herself was also engaged in a direct administrative dialog with him.

I then turn to another level of the organisational negotiations, this time with regard to the Coaston staff members involved in the collective festival assemblies. Through the interview with Christina, my impression was strengthened that she played a central role as a keeper of festival traditions. However, there were also signs that she felt the ‘traditionally Christian’ collective values threatened by the general secularising signals from the central school authorities. While Christina and more female teachers of her generation rather low-voiced steadily worked in favour of ‘collective Christian remembering’, Christian spoke out for a
Although the light practices, an values. Such songs were memorative practices with the aim of being centrally placed in Coaston’s ritual, it giving skills of the teaching staff. Without coming more influential national patriotic hymns in the National principal was winning of the freedom march of the Israelites and the traditional 17th of May parades cheering for national freedom after the union with Sweden and when the WWII occupation ended. The Coaston community only sang a few verses from these hymns. Other songs seemed to underline the new life of spring more than political freedom. For the pupils the building of school identity – along with the general freedom motif – may be a preparation for life in a liberal democratic society. It is an honour for a pupil to be chosen to address his or her school community on the National Festive Committee the second year may be a slight indication that a younger generation of teachers was becoming more influential. With her dramatising skills, Siv Carina could communicate the central Christian festival stories in an engaging way. Being involved in dramatising was popular with the pupils and understood by Siv Carina as an effective way of learning. This form of multimodal presentation was also central to Flaten’s ‘Christmas service’ and its ‘Easter journey’. The latter collective event was conducted by a youth minister of a local free church while he simultaneously performed as story teller and director.

Storytelling and dramatising may be characterised as examples of creative teaching and learning methods. They represent one way of dealing with easily bored pupils almost demanding to be actively involved or to be sufficiently entertained to keep their interest. Persons with dramatising performing skills are thus at an advantage, whether they are employed by school or ‘church’. School teachers may draw upon the resources of ‘voluntary cooperating organisations’. Many teachers seem to experience their daily tasks as becoming more and more strenuous. Thus, there is ‘a market’ for experience oriented and also involving educational techniques. The performance centred and entertaining forms and the spontaneous applause in the schools’ collective assemblies are part of this picture. However, some variations of these techniques may also be linked to habitual incorporating practices.

With regard to authority and ability to influence the development of a school’s festival culture, there is an interesting interplay between the Principal and the involved members of the teaching staff. Without an active support from prominent staff members, it seemed difficult for the Principal to carry through substantial changes in Coaston’s festival culture, even had she found this necessary. The appointment of a new Principal was, likewise, an opportunity for the teachers who were involved to introduce other elements into the festival traditions. Some of these elements may be seen as vulnerable due to general secularizing tendencies in Europe (Hervieu-Léger, 2006). With regard to changes in the Easter assembly from the first to the second year of observation, Coaston’s Principal stated that the form was altered but the content remained the same, and that she could approve of this.

The sociologist Paul Connerton (1989) discusses ritual actions and commemorative ceremonies as forms of collective remembering where there is quite a strong element of what he calls habit-memory. Above, I have focussed on two particular rituals, i.e. the Advent candle lightening ceremony and the early morning ‘flag ceremony’ on the 17th of May, each of them centrally placed in Coaston’s two greatest collective assemblies. However, these ceremonies are hardly controversial in the current Norwegian discourses about public school values and religion and life view education. Lighting candles may be interpreted in several ways. It is a common mediated action in many of the world’s religious traditions. Although the lighting of the four lilac Advent candles is a Christian cultural tradition, it takes place in many Norwegian homes regardless of beliefs and religious practices. Some relatively recent seasonal ‘candle songs’ for Advent lighting ceremonies only refer to universal human values. Such songs were used during Coaston’s assemblies. They may be seen as effective for social cohesion since pupils from cultural backgrounds other than the Norwegian Christian-Humanistic may come to appreciate the implicit values.

There is an intriguing relationship between the place and status in Norwegian primary schools of 1) particular religious commemorative practices, 2) the nation’s commemorative practices with the aim of constructing and sustaining a national identity, and 3) mediated action intended to support universal values of solidarity and caring. One may wonder what values Coaston’s 17th of May morning ritual and parade in the first decade of the 21st century signal. The texts of the traditional patriotic hymns suggest a parallel between the freedom march of the Israelites through the desert to ‘the promised land’ and the traditional 17th of May parades cheering for national freedom after the union with Sweden and when the WWII occupation ended. The Coaston community only sang a few verses from these hymns. Other songs seemed to underline the new life of spring more than political freedom. For the pupils the building of school identity – along with the general freedom motif – may be a preparation for life in a liberal democratic society. It is an honour for a pupil to be chosen to address his or her school community on the National.
Day. But general festival joy for new clothes and the freedom to buy sweets and hang around with family and friends is the main thing.

Through my years of observing schools’ festival culture, some changes are obvious. There is certainly a current tendency of individualization, for example, connected with the right of exemption from arrangements like ‘school services in church’. Part of an explanation for an increasing amount of pupils attending the ‘alternative festival arrangement’ instead of joining the ‘Christmas service’, I suggest, is that more contemporary children will claim a right to decide for themselves, and the parents will let them. There are also more opportunities for gifted and ambitious pupils and teachers to perform in front of large audiences. So, in one way the Coaston case study backs up Hervieu-Léger’s (2006) claim that the days of collective European Christendom are gone and instead a satiated, expressive individualism has taken over. However, in my study there are also elements which may correspond with her concluding remarks about a future commemorative function of the European heritage, moving in a more integrative, mutually respecting direction. School rituals which formerly had a clear religious profile may now be interpreted in several ways, including a stressing of universalistic values. Even so, social cohesion would perhaps be better served if the minority pupils had experienced that elements and values from their background festival traditions were made more visible by being given some place within the school’s collective festival culture.7

Conclusion

As for the Coaston school community, the identity management of its cultural majority group, which included annual preparations for the Christmas and Easter holidays and for the National Day, was concretized through commemorative ceremonies with rather weak incorporated practices and productions of habit-memory. The bodily elements involved could be interpreted in several ways. The festivals at Coaston were handled through current negotiations between the involved staff members, the Principal and some representatives of parents and local institutional and ‘communitarian’ life. The differences between the collective assemblies of Coaston and Flaten, particularly the ‘Christmas services’, indicate (individual and group) negotiation possibilities for both school and faith organisations. However, the observations reported and discussed above seem to testify to a continued, though weakened, hegemonic character of Coaston’s festival culture. A change in the direction of a more multicultural collective festivity, which could perhaps support ongoing processes of social cohesion in a more respectfully sustaining way, seems to depend on a stronger ‘mood for change’ among the school’s staff on behalf of the minority pupils.

References


*Elisabet Haakedal, University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway*

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1 ‘(Festival) school culture’ is defined below. Schools and persons in the article have fictional names.

2 The ‘Bible-belt’ refers to the coastal regions where traditional Christianity for a period of over a hundred years (ca. 1870-1970) had, and in certain respects still has, a stronger position than in the other regions of Norway (see Haakedal, 2004, 28-33).


4 In 1997 the dual system of an open-ended Lutheran Christian education and an alternative ‘life view education’ (the latter at its peak covered ca. 4 % of the pupils) was brought to an end in the compulsory primary and lower secondary school (ages 6-12 and 13-15) and a non-confessional subject was introduced, called KRL (Nor.: Kristendoms-, religions- og livssynskunnskap). The Education Act of 1998 (‘Opplæringsloven’) was altered in June 2008 causing the name of KRL to be changed to RLE (Nor.: Religion, livssyn og etikk). The Nor. concept of ‘livssyn’ may be translated as ‘life view’, or ‘philosophy of life’. A new syllabus for RLE was approved later the same month.

5 This would mainly be parents with a non-native-speaking background plus some belonging to religious minorities or the Norwegian Humanist Association.

6 Cf. Beckmann & Breistein’s (2006) qualitative study, based on interviews with twelve teachers from six schools on the southern coast of Norway, concluding that primary teachers were much more hesitant with regard to singing Christian hymns and songs than a decade earlier. Coaston seemed to deviate from this pattern.

7 See the interesting presentation and discussion of Palestinian-Jewish school ceremonies in Beckerman (2004). Although this context is very different from the context of Coaston, a comparison of the different school cultures serves to focus the hegemony processes at work in the Coaston community.
Peter Schreiner*

Social Cohesion and Religious Education in the Context of a Europeanisation of Education

Abstract

Social cohesion is one of the values and aims of European integration. It is also a strategic objective in education policy on the European as well as on the national level. In this article the discussion about social cohesion and religious education is embedded in the context of a Europeanisation of education. This term is used for investigating the ramifications of European integration for education and religious education on the domestic level. The discourse takes account of developments and initiatives of the European Union and the Council of Europe. Special emphasis is given to the place of religion in selected political documents and current activities of the Council of Europe.

Introduction

Social cohesion is used in social policy, sociology and political science to describe the bonds or ‘glue’ that bring people together in society, particularly in the context of cultural diversity. Social cohesion is a multi-faceted notion covering many different kinds of social phenomena. No surprise that education is a key area to support social cohesion however it seems a complex task to bridge the gap between political rhetoric and practical realization.

A link to religious education in schools can be fabricated through recognizing the orientation in RE syllabi on creating community, co-operation in projects and also through dealing with key values or key issues such as participation and equality. Aims of intercultural and interreligious learning are also very close to the general aim of social cohesion because they want to encourage dialogue and understanding as well as dancing with differences.

This article introduces some recent developments in Europe where social cohesion is a key issue in European integration and an objective of European education policy. This includes a remarkable shift of paradigm at the political institutions where religion is now more in the focus than it was earlier. The focus of the analysis will be mainly on the Council of Europe’s policy and documents that can support the role of religious education contributing to the complex aim of social cohesion in a diverse Europe.

Social Cohesion as a value of European integration and a strategic objective of education

In the process of European integration social cohesion is a key issue and an aim of different activities and political units. Existing diversity in Europe, not least concerning culture and religion, should not hinder to strive toward a harmonious living together by taking into account common values and also accepting existing difference to a certain extent. European integration is based on cooperation in economy but also on common values that should shape a European identity of its citizens in the 27 member states of the European Union and beyond.

A watchdog concerning common values such as human rights, democracy and the rule of law is the Council of Europe, found in 1947, an intergovernmental organization with 47 member states, including nearly all European states. The Council has a Directorate General for social cohesion (DG III) with the primary task “to foster social cohesion and to improve the quality of life in Europe for the genuine enjoyment of fundamental human rights and the respect for human dignity” (Council of Europe, 2009). Social cohesion is linked with human dignity and human rights that confirm equity and equal treatment of every human
being. Activities are mainly organized in the fields of social policy, health policy, population and demography as well as in migration and integration policies, and the situation of Roma/Gypsies and travellers. Education is implicitly mentioned in these activities. The Council has also organized many educational activities from the very beginning of its existence. Refer to some of these activities is found in the next paragraph.

Before that, a second example is introduced where social cohesion is closely linked to strategic European aims of education. This is the “strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (“ET2020”), adopted in May 2009 by the Council of the European Union (Council of the European Union, 2009).

In the strategic framework it is emphasized that

Education and training have a crucial role to play in meeting the many socio-economic, demographic, environmental and technological challenges facing Europe and its citizens today and in the years ahead.

Efficient investment in human capital through education and training systems is an essential component of Europe’s strategy to deliver the high level of sustainable, knowledge-based growth and jobs that lie at the heart of the Lisbon strategy, at the same time as promoting personal fulfillment, social cohesion and active citizenship (2009, 2, my emphasis).

The text underlines the twin track approach of European integration shaping also the collaboration in the area of education and training. It frames the further development of the European education systems under two general goals:

(a) “the personal, social and professional fulfillment of all citizens
(b) sustainable economic prosperity and employability, whilst promoting democratic values, social cohesion, active citizenship, and intercultural dialogue.” (2009, 2, my emphasis)

The promotion of social cohesion is linked with “democratic values”, “active citizenship” and “intercultural dialogue”.

The focus on social cohesion as a strategic goal of education is confirmed in the list of four strategic objectives that built a red line of the framework:

1. “Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality;
2. Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training;
3. Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship;
4. Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training” (Council, 2009, 3, my emphasis).

The explanation of strategic objective 3 includes the development of “job-specific skills and the key competences needed for their employability” and also the promotion of “intercultural competences, democratic values and respect for fundamental rights and the environment, as well as combat all forms of discrimination, equipping all young people to interact positively with their peers from diverse backgrounds.”

There is a tension between “employability”, lifelong learning and entrepreneurship as aims for education from the perspective of the economy and a more comprehensive understanding of education referring to the dignity of the human being. Where, on the one hand, European politicians and institutions underline the importance of education and the need of higher quality and effectiveness of the education system, some scholars analyse these trends as part of an increasing economization of areas of life, when quality and effectiveness in education are mainly oriented on “employability” and “human capital” (Meilhammer,
2009; Münch, 2009) and when other aspects of a holistic understanding of education are neglected or just mentioned rhetorically.

The initiatives toward social cohesion deal with the existing frictions and conflicts as part of the European society such as those related to the marginalized situation of migrants, the global financial crisis, discrimination, poverty and social exclusion. In part, political institutions are aware of these problems: “Some 78 million Europeans, or 16% of EU population, are at risk of poverty. Poverty strikes, in particular, the unemployed, the disabled and the elderly; women are disproportionately at risk” (Commission, 2008, 12). It becomes a quandary when these analyses are used to demand that education plays a crucial role in the solution for these complex problems in society.

The strategic framework documents the relation between social cohesion and education policy of the European Union. And it nurtures the need to look closer at the relationship between European integration and education. The existing treaties of the European Union give the EU only a supportive competence in education, specifically in encouraging mobility and contributing to quality and efficiency of the national education systems. While the responsibility for content and structure is with the member states, developments toward a European Education Policy EEP and a European Education Space have taken place during the last years (Dale & Robertson, 2009). These developments can be analysed through the concept of a “Europeanisation of education” that will be introduced in the next section.

**Europeanisation of education**

Europeanisation as an explicit focus of study has a history stretching over two decades now. It can be a useful entry-point for greater understanding of important changes occurring in politics and society. In a collection of articles about Europeanisation (Featherstone & Radaelli, 2003) a typology of ‘Europeanisation’ shows that the term is applied within four broad categories: (1) as a historic phenomenon; (2) as a matter of transnational cultural diffusion, (3) as a process of institutional adaptation; and (4) as the adaptation of policies and policy processes. Participation in EU institutions and processes is often linked to a domestic policy convergence or mimicry between member states. In education, instruments to promote this are benchmarking procedures or the open method of coordination, soft methods that do not need a change in the juridical system but can be rather effective. General aims are agreed upon with mechanisms of peer group review and yearly national reports.

Concerning mechanisms of Europeanisation, we can basically differentiate between a ‘vertical’ and a ‘horizontal’ Europeanisation (cf. Beck/Grande, 2005). Vertical mechanisms seem to demarcate clearly the European level where policy is defined (mainly European Union and the Council of Europe) and the domestic level, where policy has to be metabolized. By contrast, horizontal mechanisms look at Europeanization as a process where there is no pressure to conform e.g. to EU policy models. Instead, horizontal mechanisms involve a different form of adjustment to Europe based on the market or on patterns of socialization.

The penetration of the European dimension in national arenas of politics and policies can be clearly identified for those areas of policy where the EU has taken over full competence from the national level (tariff union, competition regulations of the common market, monetary policy, trade) or shared competence (social policy, agriculture et al.). It is less obvious – on first sight – in the area of education where the EU has only a supporting competence – supporting the member states to fulfil their national commitment better and to encourage exchange and mobility (see Schreiner, 2006). Key developments happen around creating a European Education Space and through an increasingly developing European Education Policy (EEP). The GENIE, the Globalisation and Europeanisation Network in Education, has published results of their research (2002-2005) that included 33 universities in 27 countries (Dale & Robertson, 2009). Their work is based on the fact that education systems are implicated in globalization and Europeanization in three key ways:
(1) Through new challenges as a result of the growing importance of knowledge, learning, new communication technologies and social inclusion both within Europe and in the global knowledge economy;
(2) Education systems are themselves greatly influenced by Europeanisation and globalization;
(3) Processes of Europeanisation and globalization are important curriculum topics.

When I use the term “Europeanisation of education”, I refer to dynamics of the European integration that links the aims of education more or less closely to targets of the political and economical discourse to make Europe “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. This has been expressed at the European Council in Lisbon 2000 and led to a number of follow up initiatives to make these aims happen. The mentioned strategic framework 2020 is the latest development in this context. It is in line with a number of activities that were implemented after the policy decision of the Lisbon summit in 2000 to integrate education and training more with the political aim of employability and to increase collaboration of the education systems through the method of a rolling agenda and the development of complementary EU-level tools, mutual learning and the exchange of good practice via the open method of coordination. This includes also benchmarking, guidelines and plans of action to raise quality of the national education systems. “Europeanisation” can be used to address the impact of European-level policies at national level. It discusses also the relationship between the local, national and European levels. Europeanisation happens not only from above but also from below through increasing exchange and mobility.

It is in this broader context where religion and religious education have been increasingly recognized not least by the European institutions. As said earlier this includes also the Council of Europe where education has been a key issue from the very beginning of its existence. This will be introduced in two steps. First, we will look on the changed perspective on religion by the Council and secondly we will introduce some remarkable documents that link this up with educational concerns.

Religion as a concern of the Council of Europe (CoE)

The mandate of CoE, its values and education

One can say that for over 50 years the most experienced provider of education for democracy in Europe has been the Council of Europe (47 member states). This is related to the organisational identity of the Council, determined by three fundamental democratic values: human rights, pluralist democracy and the rule of law. The collaboration with civil society works through 400 participating NGOs, active in different areas including education and human rights. The mandate of the CoE is not seeking to develop one education policy valid for all 47 member states but to define common guidelines and education policy principles based on the already mentioned fundamental values. Common principles or shared policy goals are expressed in Committee of Ministers recommendations, Parliamentary Assembly resolutions and recommendations or declarations from the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education.

Themes of the Council’s activities in education include, among others, Education for democratic citizenship and the European dimension with the following issues: European identity and European citizenship; student mobility, school links and exchanges; non-formal education; intercultural education; interfaith dialogue, in-service teacher training.¹

A change in the perception

For many years religion has not been an important issue for the Council of Europe and the European Union. If it was mentioned, it was mainly seen as a source of conflict that can foster international, social and national conflicts, religious intolerance, fundamentalism etc. There are two chief reasons for that. One is
that the concept of laïcité, the strict separation of state and religion, has been dominant in both of the European institutions. In this perspective, religion is seen as a strictly private matter that should not interfere in the public. The other reason is that religion (as well as education) is valued more as a national and not as a European concern. In education, the European Union has only a supporting competence while the responsibility for content and structure in education is with the member countries. This includes also religious education. When religion is strictly seen as a private matter politicians don’t want to deal with it and, if they have to, they do it without commitment.

Now there are several developments on national and European levels that have changed this perspective. Even in one of the most laic states of Europe, France, the issue of religious knowledge in schools has been in debate for a number of years. Thus there has been a significant development in documents of the Council of Europe about the perception of religion.

In 1993 the Parliamentary Assembly adopted a recommendation on “religious tolerance in a democratic society” (1202/1993) in which the phenomenon of religion is seen as merely negative (cf. Parliamentary Assembly, 2007). It is expressed that the meeting of differing religious beliefs could result in a strengthening of trends towards separatism and encourage fundamentalism (pt. 5). It is stated that religion often reinforces, or is used to reinforce, international, social and national minority conflicts (pt. 8). Also a “recognizable crisis of values” is stated (pt. 6). The main focus of the text is on “tolerance”, a well discussed term when it comes about “navigating in societies of increased difference” (Afdal, 2006). It identified religion as a problem and also that “inadequate attention has so far been given to promotion of religious tolerance” (pt. 7). Nipkow has analysed the recommendation from the perspective of religious education (1995) and stated that “Europe can expect from any approach to religious education that the secular basic principles of democracy and human rights, especially tolerance are respected and promoted” (1995, 370). In recent years the view of the Council of Europe concerning religion has changed toward a more differentiated perspective. I use two quotes to illustrate this:

First, the recommendation “Education and religion” (2005) is more differentiated and mentions the ambivalent character of religion (cf. Parliamentary Assembly 2007). In the text it is stated that

(12) The Assembly observes moreover that the three monotheistic religions of the Book have common origins (Abraham) and share many values with other religions, and that the values upheld by the Council of Europe stem from these values.

And the, secondly, the recommendation: State, religion, secularity and human rights (2007) includes the following statement:

(11) Governments should take account of the special capacity of religious communities to foster peace, co-operation, tolerance, solidarity, intercultural dialogue and the dissemination of the values upheld by the Council of Europe.

Many initiatives have been undertaken in the area of intercultural education. In 2002, the Council of Europe’s Steering Committee for Education (CDED) launched a project entitled The New Challenge of Intercultural Education: Religious Diversity and Dialogue in Europe. As part of a range of initiatives under this project a group of specialists in religious and intercultural education worked together to produce a document for teachers, teacher trainers, administrators and policy makers to deal with the issue of religious diversity in European schools. Results were published in a reference book for schools: Religious diversity and intercultural education (Keast 2007). This document provides a theoretical and conceptual basis for intercultural education that takes account of religious diversity, describes educational conditions and successful methodological approaches and also a whole school approach to this. Reactions to the book have been quite favourable to my knowledge but a more general problem comes up: the dissemination of resources and materials of the Council.
The White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue “Living together as equals in dignity” (WP) launched in May 2008 has set a clear course for intercultural dialogue (Council of Europe, 2008a). The document summarizes the Council of Europe’s work in the intercultural field and describes in detail conditions for establishing further intercultural dialogue. The section on ‘Learning and teaching intercultural competences’ includes a broad concept of education:

In a multicultural Europe, education is not only a means of preparing for the labour market, supporting personal development and providing a broad knowledge base; schools are also important for the preparation of young people for life as active citizens. (...) Within the formal curriculum, the intercultural dimension straddles all subjects. History, language education and the teaching of religious and convictional facts in an intercultural context makes available knowledge about all world religions and beliefs and their history, and enables the individual to understand religions and beliefs and avoid prejudice.

The White Paper includes a chapter on the religious dimension. It suggests five policy approaches to promoting intercultural dialogue (democratic governance of cultural diversity, democratic citizenship and participation, learning and teaching intercultural competences, spaces for intercultural dialogue, and intercultural dialogue in international relations) and contains for each of the approaches a set of recommendations and general policy guidelines.

The conclusions and recommendations of the WP need to be further monitored, and adapted if necessary also with religious communities as important stakeholders. With Recommendation No. 12 (2008) of the Committee of Ministers on “Dimensions of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education” (Council of Europe, 2008b), there is now a highly valuable document that underlines the importance of education to develop mutual understanding between peoples and that qualifies the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education. It takes account of the diversity and complexity of religions and non-religious convictions that exist at the local, regional and international level.

The text can be seen as a lighthouse that guides those who have a substantial interest in the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education. The first part of the text provides an excellent overview and summary about the activities of the Council in this field over the years. It documents a remarkable process initiated in the field of intercultural dialogue and education. The text provides a vitally and inspiring basis to continue activities within intercultural education that take into account the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions. And it lays the foundation of a more specific exchange with the religious communities.

The recommendation is aimed at a wide range of policy-makers, persons in charge of drafting curricula, and also teacher trainers and other categories of education professionals.

The paper summarizes, also, some main points of the mentioned project “The new challenge...” in the sense that it lists a number of things that the project “has made possible”. Governments are asked to “draw on the principles set out in the appendix to this recommendation in their current or future educational reforms”. Initiatives should be organised in the field of intercultural education relating to the diversity of religions and non-religious convictions. Among the scope and definitions in the appendix, it is significant that under principles, religions and non-religious convictions are seen as “at least ‘cultural facts’ that contribute, along with other elements (...) to social and individual life.” Also, an interdisciplinary approach to education in religious, moral and civic values is promoted and a list of objectives is provided. In sum the document continues the more differentiated view on religion although it is limited as a dimension of intercultural dialogue.

In comparing the documents one can say that although a more differentiated concept of religion has been developed, religion has not been dealt with an impartial view but instrumentalised for specific purposes.
Religious communities are seen as bearers of the values of the CoE and, surprisingly, it is also stated that the values of the CoE are rooted in religious sources.

The mainly negative perception of religion in the 1993 recommendation where religious tolerance was a main topic has been changed into a more differentiated view in the 2005 recommendation where religion is seen as an ambivalent phenomenon at least. Now religion is domesticated for the purpose of intercultural dialogue since it can no longer be ignored because it plays an important role in many societies. The context of education and religion in terms of methods and approaches is limited to knowledge of religions and teaching about religions. The way toward a comprehensive perception of religion that takes account of its ambivalent character is not yet complete. Further discussion is needed.

The official inauguration of the European Wergeland Centre in Oslo (www.theewc.org), the European Resource Centre for Intercultural Understanding, Human Rights and Democratic Citizenship at the end of May 2009 marks an important and successful development. The idea of such a Centre has been discussed for quite a time in the Council of Europe and is also mentioned in several documents such as the Volga declaration from the Council of Europe’s conference in Nizhny Novgorod in September 2006 or in Kazan in February 2006. Now the Centre exists, thanks to the Norwegian government and the Council of Europe. The Centre’s activities will include the active dissemination and discussion of the Council of Europe’s work in the fields of intercultural, citizenship and human rights education, including the dimension of religion in these fields. It will also play a major role in networking such as linking up groups across Europe for instance, research students working on research relevant to educational practice and policy as well as teacher trainers and policy makers.

Conclusion and summary

The relation between the ambiguous political aim of social cohesion and religious education as a school subject in nearly all schools in Europe is not a direct one but embedded in a complex web of the interconnectedness of the field - religion in education - in a European context. The analyses of documents and developments mainly of the Council of Europe gives proof to the changed recognition of religion and the increasing value of education for European integration. The questions that remains is about where these two areas meet. In response, some preliminary observations and conclusions are offered:

- Whereas in former years religion has been seen mainly as a source of conflict by the CoE now “considerable overlaps between the Council of Europe’s agenda and the concerns of religious communities” (Council of Europe 2008, 12) are mentioned. Human rights, democratic citizenship, the promotion of values, peace, dialogue, education and solidarity are expressed as common concerns.
- A regular and open dialogue has been started by both main political organisations, the EU and the CoE on the basis that “religions could elevate and enhance dialogue” (Council of Europe 2008, 12) to collaborate towards a “reconciled diversity in a united Europe” (M. Barroso) that includes also education as an important field of common activities.
- Education is seen as a key to deal with prejudices and for developing a democratic society. Dealing with religious diversity has become an integrated part of intercultural education in the European institutions, however, religion is considered only as a cultural fact.
- Religious education should be aware of its task to facilitate religious competence that includes a critical perception of an instrumentalised concept of education for political purposes. The promotion of a holistic concept of education should enable participation in political activities on the basis of a human scale.

References


Activities of the Council are mainly organized as conferences, involving policy-makers, colloquia with decision makers, stakeholders and experts, seminars with professionals and workshops involving practitioners and related publications. See www.coe.int for more information.

More thoughts from the encyclical letter Caritas in Veritate of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI to the bishops priests and deacons men and women religious the lay faithful and all people of good will on integral human development in charity and truth...

As a spiritual being, the human creature is defined through interpersonal relations. The more authentically he or she lives these relations, the more his or her own personal identity matures. It is not by isolation that man establishes his worth, but by placing himself in relation with others and with God. Hence these relations take on fundamental importance. The same holds true for peoples as well. A metaphysical understanding of the relations between persons is therefore of great benefit for their development. In this regard, reason finds inspiration and direction in Christian revelation, according to which the human community does not absorb the individual, annihilating his autonomy, as happens in the various forms of totalitarianism, but rather values him all the more because the relation between individual and community is a relation between one totality and another[130]. Just as a family does not submerge the identities of its individual members, just as the Church rejoices in each “new creation” (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17) incorporated by Baptism into her living Body, so too the unity of the human family does not submerge the identities of individuals, peoples and cultures, but makes them more transparent to each other and links them more closely in their legitimate diversity.

Excerpt from Chapter five: The cooperation of the human family #53
Religious Education in Israel: The Contribution to Societal Values and Cohesion

Abstract

The normative values accepted by Israeli society are those perceived as promoting a common basis for consensus and social cohesion within Israeli society. The major values earmarked by Israeli society as an imperative basis for religious and civics education in a Jewish and democratic society are social cohesion, humanistic values, and inter-sector dialogue and understanding. In addition values that are universal and accepted in most democratic countries are also an integral facet of the Israeli religious and values education curriculum.

The importance of the values emphasized in the Israeli educational system as permeating Israeli society is that they allow the heterogeneous and somewhat fragmented society to weave a values fabric that is consensually accepted by all, despite ethnic, ideological, national, and religious differences that characterize the various sectors in Israeli society. Thus, despite the heterogeneity and sectoriality inherent in Israeli society, religious and civics education school curriculum are designed to promote cohesion in a values oriented society and to form a solid basis for inter-sector understanding based on commonly accepted values.

The educational authorities are deeply aware that the most suitable platforms for the promotion of social cohesion and values education are the religious and civics education curricula and have mandatorily included these subjects in the lately implemented core curriculum. The educational authorities are sensitive to the dynamic changes that are deemed necessary in light of the development of new and modified values in countries viewed as a positive reference group for the Israeli educational system and these are incorporated into the Israeli religious and civics education curricula from time to time.

Israeli Society

Israel is a unique country in that its population has increased ten-fold since independence in 1948 and is composed of veterans as well as of immigrants hailing from over 100 countries throughout the world. In addition to the veteran-immigrant complexion of the population, there is a Jewish majority (80%) and an Arab minority (20%) aspect to Israeli demography. As such Israel has the characteristics of both a traditional and modern society at one and the same time in addition to having an extremely heterogeneous population, clearly divided into religious, cultural, national and ethnic sectors. Eisenstadt (1996), in his comments on traditional and modern society, indicated that one of the major differences between traditional societies, on the one hand, and modern and especially post-modern societies, on the other, is that which distinguishes between the striving for maximum cohesion and homogeneity in traditional societies as opposed to the promotion of individual communities and the tolerance of heterogeneity in modern and post-modern societies.

The founding fathers of the independent Israeli state adopted a national policy whereby state institutions, such as the state educational system, serve as social melting-pots and agents for the promotion of integration of the different religious, cultural, national and ethnic groupings in Israeli society (Katz, 2007a). This policy was best suited to the traditional society of the 1950s and 1960s. However, since the 1960s, Israeli society began to steadily move away from social traditionalism and the issue of individual civil rights, rather than the rights of the collective, have become a major societal goal, and the promotion of different sectorial communities with unique religious, cultural, and ethnic agendas has become increasingly more tolerated and acceptable in Israeli society. Since the late 1960s and the early 1970s, the different groupings
in Israeli society have become increasingly more determined to actualize their unique needs and have led to the transformation of Israeli society from one where traditional values of unity and integration were of utmost importance to one where sectorial, group and community values are perceived as legitimate and even desirable.

As a result of this move away from traditionalism to modernism and post-modernism, since the 1990s, it has become totally legitimate as well as socially acceptable to emphasize the different sectorial gaps and schisms in Israeli society. The different sectors in Israeli society have chosen to accentuate the religious, cultural, national, and ethnic gaps that characterize Israeli society in an attempt to promote the actualization of sectorial aims and goals so as to afford each sectorial group its unique path to self-actualization. The Israeli state educational system is perhaps the only state institution that addresses the different gaps and schisms in Israeli society in an attempt to promote the vital bases for social cohesion in a fragmented society.

State Education in Israel

The educational system in Israel enjoys the second largest budget of any governmental ministry (the Ministry of Defense is allocated the largest government budget) which allows for the development of facilities, school-based technology, teaching and learning methodologies, and varied extra-curricular programs for students at all levels in the school system (Gaziel, 1999). The level of teachers is considered satisfactory by international standards (Katz, 2005) with almost all teachers in the educational system in possession of a college degree and a teaching diploma. School facilities, such as classrooms, libraries, laboratories, computer rooms, and sports facilities are satisfactorily developed; achievement of students in matriculation examinations is, on the average, almost on a par with achievement in the average Western country; the average drop-out rate of students is low and, in general, parents express an interest in their children’s education.

The Israeli educational system consists of preschool, elementary, junior high and high school levels and is divided into two major sectors, namely Jewish and Arab Druze, which are administered by independent departments under the umbrella of the Israeli Ministry of Education. These educational sectors exist side by side and enjoy sectorial autonomy with inspectors, who belong to the different sectors, responsible for supervising the educational process in each sector. The Ministry of Education is responsible for the curriculum, examinations and teacher certification of all sectors and coordinates the educational processes that characterize the different sectors.

In order to understand the essence of religious education in the Israeli educational system and its contribution to social values and cohesion, it is vital to understand the framework within which religious education is delivered to both the Jewish and Arab school going populations. The following is a description of this framework (see also Katz, 2004).

State Jewish Religious Education in Israel

Volbe (1986) stated that the major idea behind state religious education in modern times is to inculcate the students with religious belief and knowledge of Jewish law in addition to the fostering of the individual’s responsibility towards the public and to the needs of others. Urbach (1986) added that the study of religion in state religious schools should address problems of religious belief as well as issues in the moral and ethical domains. Bar-Lev (1985) noted that religious education in the state religious school system should gravitate towards the internalization of Jewish religious belief, tradition, and morality and prepare students for fulfillment of the needs of society.

According to Katz (2004), parents choose the state religious sector mainly because they feel that the central feature of their children’s education is the religious emphasis placed on all facets of cognitive and affective achievements in this educational sector. In state religious education, emphasis is placed on achievement in the different subjects offered to the students in order to ensure success in matriculation examinations at the end of the school careers in addition to a range of religious subjects that are taught from a clearly religious point of view. Civic values that are concurrent with religious observance are imparted to the
students, and teachers are aware of the centrality of orthodox Judaism in the values presented to the students (Katz, 2007a). Therefore teachers are intent on inculcating a religious way of life perception in their students and view Western civilization and citizenship through the traditional religious Jewish prism.

State Jewish Secular Education in Israel

Aloni (1997) examined the ethos of the state secular education system in Israel and proposed that values and morals as well as good citizenship are part and parcel of the development of an indigenous Israeli culture. He presented a sociological definition of the term ‘culture’ which in his view represents a system of values, objectives, knowledge, skills and feelings constituting societal norms in different specific to an individual society. According to Aloni, cultural education is defined as the aspect of the educational process that is concerned with the feelings, values, beliefs, attitudes and emotional wellbeing of pupils. Thus the secular term ‘culture’ in the state secular school system displaces the term ‘religious belief and deportment’ in the state religious school.

Eisenberg (1989) discussed three major concepts characterizing religious education state secular schools in Israel. The concepts ‘acquired truth’, ‘freedom of thought’, and ‘modern’ indicate the driving forces behind secular education in Israel. Truth is acquired through knowledge, which in turn is acquired through the freedom of thought and originality of thought and the study of the modern versus the traditional lead the pupil to the establishment of a values system congruent with humanistic perceptions of the world. Religious belief, as a specific value, is considered by the state secular school system to be anachronistic and the spirit of free inquiry, based on Jewish sources and tradition as well as on universal culture, is that which leads to the development of values and morals.

Katz (1998) stated in the state secular school system, moral and ethical education is based on Jewish religious traditions as well as on universal humanistic values. Emphasis on Jewish and universal moral and ethical reasoning, coming to terms with moral issues, and the provision of a healthy moral and ethical atmosphere are the declared major motives of both religious and civics education in the state secular school. The presentation of real-life ethical and moral problems to pupils and their attempts to provide suitable solutions to these dilemmas based on Jewish and universal sources, are deemed to be integral features of moral and ethical education. Democracy, human rights, racial, religious and ethnic equality and harmony, and good citizenship are just some of the issues that come to the fore in this aspect of education.

Parents choose this sector mainly because they have no particular religious commitment and wish their children to experience an all round education that emphasizes achievement as well as humanistic values and citizenship without any practical steps taken to promote religious observance or lifestyle. Students are encouraged to study the different subjects taught in order to attain high levels of scholastic achievement that will enable them to obtain quality matriculation grades. Thus the religious aspects of education in this sector are perceived as part of Jewish heritage that includes Jewish history, Jewish culture and Jewish identity without being related in any way to the observance of religious precepts. In fact within religious education in this sector there is a clear distinction made between the importance of acquiring knowledge about Jewish religion and heritage and total resistance of religious education being a vehicle to increase Jewish awareness and observance.

State Arab Religious Education in Israel

Unlike the Jewish educational sector, the Arab sector is not divided into religious and secular subsectors. All Arab education is religious in its general orientation and is perceived by the Arab population as a positive universal necessity without being seen as a subject that in any way indoctrinates the need to perform religious precepts. Religious education in the state Arab sector is divided as follows:

Religious Education in the Moslem Sector in Israel

Al-Haj (1995) indicated that in the state Moslem sector students are taught the usual plethora of subjects studied in Israeli high schools in order to provide them with the necessary knowledge and standards required to sit for the matriculation examinations at the end of their school careers. Religious education in
this sector is focused on the Moslem tradition and provides students with a sound basic knowledge of Islam without making demands regarding observance of religious precepts and commandments. However, it may be noted that Moslem parents and students consider themselves to be traditionally religious in their general lifestyles and are willing to accept Moslem religious tradition as one to be valued and nurtured. Religious education as imparted to students in school is perceived by many in the Arab Moslem population as a springboard to enhance religious observance, but there is a sizeable Moslem population that sees religious education as part of the development of Arab culture and history rather than a subject that is designed to promote religious observance. In addition religious education in this sector is perceived to be related to civics education so as to promote civic and societal values characterizing traditional Moslem society.

Religious Education in the Christian Sector in Israel

Sa’ar (1998), who investigated Christian Arab education in Israel, indicated that the parents and students in this sector are, on the one hand, positive towards religion, but on the other, are in general, more secular in their life perceptions and attitudes than those in the Moslem sector. As a result of this phenomenon, parents as well as students place central emphasis and importance on the secular study of necessary school subjects that will enhance the chances of students to obtain quality matriculation certificates at the end of their school careers. Religious education is perceived by Christian parents and students to be part and parcel of the study of culture and history and, as such, is perceived to be an additional and complementary facet of the civics education curriculum. Thus religious education is thought to be part of those school activities designed to educate students towards the acceptance of democratic and humanistic values without demanding acceptance of religious belief or ideology.

In summary one may say that there is general agreement that religious education as well as civics education delivered in schools serving all national and social sectors in the Israeli school system are the relevant platform for the promotion of social cohesion and values in Israeli schools. Despite the different ideological perceptions of religious education both in the state Jewish and state Arab sectors, there is agreement that religious education is a worthy catalyst for the inculcation of consensual values in Israeli schools.

Values and Social Cohesion

Shalom Schwartz, a prominent leader in the development of values theory, defined values as desirable, trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in people's and communities' lives (Schwartz, 1992). In other words, values are perceived as motivational principles, and have less to do with how people should behave than what they need or want out of life. Among the motivational principles that form the basis for values, he indicated achievement, benevolence, conformity, hedonism, tradition, and universalism. Schwartz (1994; 1996) added that he considered values to be related to three fundamental and universal goals: biological needs, requisites of coordinated social interaction, and demands of group survival and functioning.

Education for Social Cohesion and Values

Values education is the field that encompasses a range of educational programs and activities and includes both theoretical and practical study of material designed to inculcate normative values accepted by society. Hogg & Vaughan (1995) defined values education as that aspect of education designed to inculcate general beliefs about desirable behavior and goals as perceived by a particular social or cultural group, community or national entity. According to Halstead (2001) values education includes fundamental concepts such as liberty, equality, rational morality, pursuit of truth, critical openness, equality of opportunity, acceptance of diversity, democratic decision-making and a free market of ideas. Katz et al (2003), after reviewing research studies on affective and values education in Europe, concluded that values education is the concretization of a system of values unique to a particular culture, tradition, background and ideological standpoint. Values education can also be perceived as an argument for social pluralism, diversity and the affirmation of differences within society (Arendt, 2000; Mouffe, 1996). Values in modern democratic society should
ensure social cohesion, equal access to participation in social and political life as well as participation in a community of shared discourse (Benhabib, 1996; Dhaliwal, 1996). According to Katz (2007b) the goal of values education is to prepare tomorrow’s citizens for life in a democratic state. This aim, includes education for a number of characteristics required of a mature citizen: this is a person who knows and understands the basic concepts of democratic values; shows an interest in what is taking place around him or her and takes a stand on issues of concern; has a sense of belonging to the state and society; is a critical thinker; is aware of his or her ability to make an impact on reality; and is familiar with the tools available for doing so. He or she is motivated and seeks to make an impact and is a critical consumer of information, capable of understanding the significance and complexity of life in a values-based cohesive democratic society.

**Education for Social Cohesion and Values in Israel**

Generally speaking, there are two main approaches toward the content of values education (Katz, 2007b): a formal approach and a substantive approach. The formal approach emphasizes teaching the structure of the values-based democratic regime and knowledge of its institutions, authorities and functions, as well as the reciprocal relations between them. The substantive approach emphasizes democratic values and deals with human rights, moral and social values, and the structure of society. In Israel the substantive approach has been adopted so as to impress upon teachers and students those values that are vital for adoption in modern democratic society and that should be integrated in normative behavior of students in Israeli society.

In addition, Katz & Yablon (2003) indicated that one of the major goals of Israeli society is to do its utmost to bridge inter-group, inter-ethnic and inter-cultural gaps between different sectors in the population, and to generate social values and cohesion in an extremely heterogeneous and sectorial society. Over the years the educational system in Israel has made gradual progress in an attempt to implement and internalize these values. The perception of values education and the promotion of social cohesion in Israel is that it is consistent with the notion that Israel is a Jewish and democratic state, and that education must contribute substantially to the closing of gaps between the different population groups in order to facilitate social cohesion and the development of democratic and humanistic values as is expected in a normative Jewish and democratic state. In their appraisal of values education in Israel, Leslau & Bar-Lev (1996) postulated that this aspect of students’ schooling includes the value concepts that a given community perceives as significant to its religious and cultural heritage and as vital to transmit to the younger generation.

Education for social cohesion and values in Israel has evolved over the years and has undergone several changes and reforms. Since the establishment of the state in 1948, values education has formed the backbone of the affective curriculum although from time to time this aspect of education has not been at the forefront of educational development. The main problem stems from the small amount of time devoted over the years to the direct teaching of values necessary for social cohesion and development. Until approximately a decade ago, the educational system suffered from an additional problem in this area: a lack of specific training for the teaching of values education (Ministry of Education, 1994; Ministry of Education, 1996). In teacher training institutions, there were no special tracks designed for values education, and most of the teachers in this field were teachers whose field of specialization was history or the social sciences. Today, as education for social cohesion and values has become a pivotal aspect of the school curriculum, there are an increasing number of universities and teacher training colleges that offer a specialization in values education, mainly in the disciplines of religious education and civics education (Katz, 2007b).

In order to ensure that education for social cohesion and values becomes a central feature of students’ education, the Israeli core curriculum, designed in 2002 and implemented in 2003, includes religious education (heritage studies) and civics education for the promotion of social cohesion between the different population sectors in the educational system (Katz, 2002; Ministry of Education, 2003). All cohorts in the elementary and junior high schools (grades 1 through 9) are now obligated to study religious education as well as civics both of which include intensive references to the promotion of social cohesion...
and well-being in the Jewish and democratic state and call for the adoption of universal humanistic values by the students (Katz, 2005). Additionally, the new core curriculum calls for the promotion of democracy, equality of opportunity in all domains, inter-sector dialogue and understanding within the school system.

The educational authorities, in the adoption of a core curriculum, mirror the wishes of Israeli society in general. The Israeli population wishes to ensure that the school curriculum sets the foundations for values education and social cohesion, issues that are considered vital for coexistence, tolerance and inter-group understanding in the sectorial and somewhat fragmented Israeli society. Thus the religious education and civics education curricula have been implemented within the core curriculum in order to consciously reflect consensus and agreement, in the hope that progress will be made in fostering peaceful coexistence between students belonging to the different sectors making up the fabric of Israeli society.

Education for social cohesion and values in Israel has made significant steps since its inception after the establishment of the state in 1948 in terms of content as well as regarding the number of classroom hours assigned to the program. The present updated program, implemented through the religious and civics education curricula, represents a significant improvement over the programs used in the past, clearly portraying Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, but also addressing the issues of social cohesion, inter-sector understanding and coexistence, as well, universally accepted humanistic values. The educational authorities in Israel are aware and sensitive to the dynamic changes that pervade social cohesion and values education programs in most developed countries, such as member countries of the OECD, and, in following these developments, modify the Israeli values education program from time to time. Both religious education (heritage studies) and civics education are now an accepted central feature of the Israeli core curriculum in the hope that, through the study of these two subjects, Israeli students will adopt the social and humanistic values precious to Israeli as well as to world society.

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*Yaakov Katz teaches in the School of Education, Bar-Ilan University, Israel*
Learn Together: Religious Education as a unifying factor in a new Ireland

Abstract

The Irish Primary education system has primarily been influenced by the efforts of the British Government to develop a system of multidenominational education in the early part of the nineteenth century. It was envisaged that Catholics and Protestants would receive a combined literary but a separate religious education. Almost two centuries later, the emergence of a more pluralist Ireland highlighted the need to develop a religious education curriculum that would support diversity and acknowledge the changing aspect of Ireland’s cultural and religious profile. This article describes the Learn Together Ethical Education programme which is an RE programme developed for one sector of Irish Primary education and raises the issue of whether some elements of this programme could be relevant to Europe and beyond. Primarily, the paper raises awareness of the need to focus on the development of research on the role of religion in education in supporting the formation of the 21st citizen.

Changing Times

In a society constantly striving to keep abreast of the fast pace of change, we can sometimes be stopped in our tracks by the discovery that what we perceive, as researchers, to be a major advance in our field of knowledge, has in fact been tried and tested under a different set of conditions and perhaps consigned to the annals of history. This article explores the contribution of education to supporting change in Irish society. It compares the efforts to bring about social and religious cohesion in an 19th Ireland dominated by religious tensions through the development of a multidenominational system of education which was both innovative and enlightened and the current efforts of one sector of Irish Education aptly titled Educate Together to support the emergence of a more pluralist Ireland by returning in part to the earlier efforts of Lord Stanley in 1831. While both approaches have met with very different levels of acceptance, the attempts to develop multidenominational schools with a common religious curriculum have marked two of the most important events in the history of Irish education. In particular this paper explores the role of religious education in supporting social cohesion with particular references to the specific challenges faced by a mainly denominational, predominantly Catholic system of schooling. If education reflects society and influences its development, then schools need to play a leading role in preparing students for citizenship of such societies.

The religious education programme “Learn Together” described in this paper was developed against the backdrop of a rapidly changing Ireland which may not have been fully prepared for the rapid onset of pluralism. The success of the programme has been recognised by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EMCU Annual Report 2005) as an example of best practice in intercultural education. It may provide a model for other societies who recognise the importance of RE in ensuring that our children can appreciate and be comfortable with those of differing faiths to themselves, while empowering them to critically interact across viewpoints within a common language of human rights and respect (Mulcahy, p. 2002).

Throughout history the Irish have undergone changes as a result of invasion, as a result of famine, as a result of emigration and, also, as a result of a movement away from our rural roots to a more urbanised way of living. The Famine of 1847 led to one of the biggest changes in Irish society and the fallout from the
Famine can still be seen in the depopulation of sections of the Irish countryside but more clearly in the Irish Diaspora, which President Mary Robinson in her address to the Joint Houses of the Oireachtas, in 1994, estimated at 70 million. This figure may be disputed (MacEnrai, 2006) but it is generally used to represent those who self identify as Irish. The figures demonstrate that a large number of people with very tenuous links to Ireland are proud to claim an Irish identity, despite generations of absence from Ireland. We are a diverse and widely flung group of people linked through a shared sense of identity, yet conversely divided by religious beliefs which demonstrate the fragile nature of such a perceived common identity. Recent changes have seen Ireland move from a country of mass emigration to one of mass immigration and while this may not appear at first glance to be as seismic a change as that which occurred in the aftermath of the Great Famine in 1847, time may prove that the changes, though more subtle, will be equally dramatic. We have been forced to look again at the concept of Irish identity and our sense of Irish nationality, perhaps concepts that we took for granted when they were not challenged. Immigration has meant that we are looking at the reality of global engagement for the first time in our history. It has also forced a review of our education system which has for centuries been almost exclusively run by the Irish Catholic Church.

The second Report of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance published in Strasbourg and adopted by the Council of Europe on 22nd June 2002 praised Ireland for taking a number of significant steps towards combating racism. However Article 46 G of the Report refers to the denominational nature of Irish Education:

Many schools in Ireland are de facto denominational (to a large extent Catholic) and ECRI noted in its first report that this situation called for a particular attention to be paid to the needs of students of minority faiths. Although such pupils are not obliged to attend religious education, ECRI is of the opinion that the issue of providing alternative religious education or a form of religious education which embraces all faiths needs to be considered.

The recently published Statement on Integration Strategy and Diversity Management : “Migration Nation” published by the office for the Minister for Integration in 2008 states that in excess of 420,000 non-Irish born people are living in Ireland and that this may be a conservative estimate. While a recent downturn in the Irish economy may have a temporary impact on the pattern of migration, it is clear that Ireland faces the major challenge of integrating people from a variety of different cultures, contrasting ethnic identities, different languages and a wide range of religious groups, while maintaining social stability and helping to foster inclusive citizenship of a new Ireland. As a society we are at odds with what Keohane and Kuhl (2004, p. 6) describe as ‘the interplay between the globalisation of the local and the re-localisation of the global.’ Zygmunt Baumann’s term ‘liquid modernity’ captures the essence of the current situation. Like any society in a time of change we take from the past and bring this into the future with us. We look at our institutions and try to discover what can be salvaged from the past and present to create something worthy and fitting for the future. In the recent past, education was responsible for one of the biggest waves of change in Irish social life and many would believe that it set in train the new economic boom that has fuelled a dramatic change in our society. Fahey, (1992, p. 386) cited in Tovey and Share (2000) points out that education was the single biggest investment of resources of the newly independent Irish state. It was a major instrument in the political consolidation and rejuvenation of independent Ireland. It paved the way for mass literacy and, according to the political scientist Tom Garvin (1998, p. 154), it accelerated the modernization of Ireland and brought about a major change in the power relationships in Irish society.

Today, Irish society is faced with a new set of challenges presented by immigration and by a more global society. The challenge for our education system is to navigate the many issues that are raised when we try to develop inclusive citizens who respect and understand difference while maintaining their own identity and perspective. Educate Together is a system of schooling that was developed in 1978 by a pioneering group of parents. The system is underpinned by 4 key principles. The schools are:

- **Multi-denominational**, that is, all children having equal rights of access to the school, and children of all social, cultural and religious backgrounds being equally respected,
• Co-educational and committed to encouraging all children to explore their full range of abilities and opportunities,
• Child centred in their approach to education,
• Democratically run with active participation by parents in the daily life of the school, with due regard however for the professional role of the teachers.

In keeping with the principles, Religious Instruction is not offered during the school day, nor are there any religious icons displayed on the school premises. The ethos states that ‘No Child is an Outsider’ and children of all religions and none are educated together. There is a statutory obligation on all Irish Primary schools to provide the equivalent of 30 minutes per day to RE. Unlike other curricula which are developed by the National Council for Curriculum Awards, the RE curriculum is locally devised by school Patrons. An Ethical Curriculum entitled ‘Learn Together’ has been developed by Educate Together to underpin the core principles and is delivered in place of the traditional Religious Education Programme delivered in denominational schools. School premises in many instances are used for Religious Instruction but this takes place outside of school hours and is organised by the parent group.

Education as an agent of change

In Ireland, while it is impossible to predict with any certainty that immigration figures will continue to grow there is some evidence from the Central Statistics Office that net immigration trends will not be reversed to any considerable extent in the next two decades. Regardless of the nature of growth into the future, Irish education still has a responsibility to engage with the concept of inclusive citizenship as defined in the declaration of the European Ministers for Education on intercultural education in the new European context. The Council of Europe states that the development of the ability to interact productively in a multicultural context is not intuitive but must be acquired and learned. Interestingly, they urge governments that it is imperative to include the management of religious diversity within the larger context of intercultural education. This unity of the intercultural and multidenominational elements of inclusive, democratic citizenship, will, they believe, serve to foster dialogue around issues of identity, co-operation and peaceful conflict resolution. (Athens: November 2003) This is again emphasised in the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: “Living Together as Equals in Dignity. (2008: p29) This is an interesting challenge from an Irish perspective given the predominantly denominational nature of our education system and in particular the denominational ethos that prevails in the majority of Irish Primary schools.

Religious Education and the Irish National School System

The current figures available for membership of different religious groupings in Ireland relate to the 2002 census.(CSO:2004) The indications are that these numbers have increased significantly, based on the immigration patterns and the numbers of churches belonging to different faith groups opening up throughout Ireland. The census figures revealed that:

The number of Muslim and Orthodox adherents increased significantly between the censuses of 1991 and 2002- the former more than quadrupling to 19,000 and the latter increasing from less than 400 adherents in 1991 to over 10,000 in 2002. Non Irish Nationals made up 70% of the Muslims and over 85% of the Orthodox faith who were usually resident and present in the State on Census night. (Press Statement: Central Statistics Office: April 8th 2004).

The headings ‘No Religion’ and ‘Not Stated’ were added to the Census in 1961 for the first time. The respective figures for that year were 1,107 and 5,625. By 2002 these figures had increased to 138,264 and 79,094. This marked a dramatic increase from 1961 and also from the 1991 figures, where the percentage increase in those who stated they had no religion was a sizeable 72%. There was a slight drop in the percentage of those in the category ‘Not Stated’ of –4.3%. Kieran, (2005) believes that this may in part be due to the influence of postmodernism and the rejection of absolute, universally valid, truth. This
may indeed be part of the reason but the dramatic nature of the figures indicate that the second largest grouping after Catholicism fall into the category of having no religion. The stated percentage of Catholics in Ireland is 87%. This does not take into account the number of espoused Catholics who may not practice and who may favour a different type of education for their children. This presents a major challenge for the predominantly Catholic Primary schools in Ireland. The genesis of the Irish National School System has its roots in the early 19th century, at a time when Ireland was under British rule. This paper does not allow for a detailed discussion on the history of Irish Education, however it is important to set the context for what was to follow, a system of Primary education which is predominantly denominational and under the patronage of the Catholic Church.

The involvement of the state in Irish education was an unusual move on the part of the British government and has been open to different interpretations. While countries such as Prussia, Holland, France, Spain, the Nordic Counties and Greece all underwent a greater state involvement in education at the beginning of the 19th Century, England moved at a much slower pace. It could be argued that the involvement of the state in the Irish system was a type of social experiment in advance of making any changes on the mainland (O’Buachalla, p. 19; Coolahan, p. 3). However, there were many other reasons why Ireland got a state supported primary system in 1831. Among these were: the interest in education, which was evident through the voluntary agencies and the hedge school system, the possibility of using schools as a means of cultural assimilation and the pressure put on the British government by Irish members of parliament. Whatever the reasons, the result was a system of national education, which would lead to a unique relationship between Church and State, which still exists in the provision of Primary education up to the present.

A commission into Irish education established in 1824 ruled in favour of a government board to oversee a state-supported school system and it rejected the previous model of channelling of public funds through voluntary bodies. It also favoured a system of combined literary instruction for children of different denominations and the provision of separate religious instruction (Hyland & Milne, p. 98). Much of the impetus for reform came from Thomas Wyse, one of the leaders of the Catholic Emancipation Movement (Wyse, 1901). Wyse had been instrumental in setting up “The Friends of Civil and Religious Liberty”, a joint group of Catholics and Protestants who proposed among other things:

- That the State should have no established religion
- That an attempt to seize on public education, with a view to converting it into a monopoly for any particular class or sect, is to disturb in a direct manner the order of society  (Johnston Auchmuty: 1937: pp 74-75)

When Wyse joined Parliament in 1830, he submitted a detailed plan for National Education in December of that year. Among the points he made in this plan were:

Let Catholics and Protestants be educated, wherever possible, in the same school. Each in their quality of citizen (should) contribute to it. Its object is to prepare future citizens for a common country.

Due to a series of legal mishaps, Wyse did not get to present his Education Bill to Commons, and on 9th September the announcement was made in The House of Commons by Lord Stanley, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, of the setting up of a Board to oversee education in Ireland. The proposals were tentatively made in a letter to the Duke of Leinster, inviting him to become Chairman of the new Board of Commissioners for National Education. (Hansard Parliamentary Debates, 1831, Hyland and Milne, p 99; Coolahan, p12) The letter was never underpinned by a legal statute, due in part to the political climate of the day. However a more probable explanation might be that, if this were seen as some form of social experiment, it would be much easier to change and amend if it fell outside the remit of legal conventions.

The letter referred to the 1812 decision to appoint a Board to superintend a system of national education in Ireland. This system should: ‘admit children of all religious persuasions and should not interfere with the
particular tenets of any.” It is clear from this that, as far back as 1812, there was a concerted effort to ensure that the system of national education would not be hindered by disputes over religion, though some would argue that this was more politically than religiously motivated.

By 1828, a Committee of the House of Commons, recommended the adoption of a system ‘which should afford, if possible, a combined literary and a separate religious education, and should be capable of being so far adapted to the views of the religious persuasions which prevail in Ireland, as so to render it, in truth, a system of national education for the poorer classes of the community.’ It was the stated intention of the government that the Board would have complete control of the schools either erected under its auspices or those already in existence who would place themselves under its management. Thus was born a system of patronage, which to a great extent determined the current system in Irish primary schools. Schools would be kept open for an agreed number of hours on either four or five days a week for moral and literary education only. The remaining one or two days would be ‘set apart for giving, separately, such religious education to the children as may be approved of by the clergy of their respective persuasions’. The Board would also permit and encourage clergy to give religious instruction to the children of their respective persuasions, before or after school on the remaining days. This indicated a real support for the division of literary, moral education and religious instruction. Sacred Scripture would not be excluded from the combined literary and moral instruction and a written General Lesson displayed in all classrooms referred to St. Paul’s Gospel and the command that “all men should live peaceably together”, even those of different religious persuasion.

The Stanley Letter, while laying down the principal tenets for a countrywide system of national schools, did not have, nor did it seek, legal status. However, the implications did have far reaching consequences for Irish education. In essence, it put in place a system, where the locus of control lay with a centrally devised system, under the financial control of parliament but with the power to invest the running of schools in local authorities or groups, in this case specific Christian denominations. This cumbersome system, set in train by the Stanley Letter, has left us with a national system of education, which is unique in Europe. Most of our schools are in effect privately owned while our system of national education is predominantly public. The combined forces of the Church and the new and emerging Irish State in the 1920’s gradually eroded the multidenominational concept of Irish Primary schools.

By 1954, the distinction between secular and religious subjects was blurred. The religious spirit of the school began to inform the way secular subjects were taught and this was further strengthened through a succession of changes culminating in the Education Act of 1998 which required each Patron to articulate their particular ethos. This ethos should permeate the whole school and underpin all aspects of the school. Stanley had espoused the concept of education as a force in developing social cohesion in Ireland. The focus was specifically on bringing together children of different religions, in this instance Catholic and Protestant. While his vision may have been too radical for a country full of political insecurity and sectarianism, his concept may have relevance to the current challenges of integration facing Irish education.

**Religious Education Curricula**

Today up to 97% of Irish primary schools are denominational, with predominance (93%) of Catholic schools, a small number of Protestant schools, two Muslim schools and 56 Educate Together schools. In 2008 two new Community National schools were set up under the Patronage of Co. Dublin Vocational Education Committee, a sector which traditionally deals with second level schools. This marks a new departure in Irish Education and is a response to the increase number of immigrants in parts of Co. Dublin. An advisory group, made up of the representatives of the main churches, the Humanist Association and Educate Together has been set up to develop a Religious Education Curriculum for these schools. It is too early to comment on how this curriculum may evolve but there is a commitment to separate Religious Education from Religious Instruction. However it is planned to offer Religious Instruction during the school day to the main religious faiths represented in the school. This is a problematic area as it brings into question the
issue of training the providers of these classes, the content of the material delivered and the possible exclusion of children who do not belong to one of the main belief systems.

Padraig Hogan (2003, pp. 65-74) highlights the changing balance of responsibility in denominational schools in relation to religious education and religious formation. Teachers are taking more responsibility for religious formation at a time when they may be undergoing changes in their own religious attitudes and beliefs. This fact has been recognised by the Catholic Church and it set up a consultative process, supported by the Irish Catholic Bishops Conference to guide how religion is taught in Ireland. (May 2005) In its paper entitled Catholic Primary Schools: A Policy for Provision into the Future published in 2007, the Commission refers to its dual role as a civic institution and a Christian community where diversity is welcomed, beliefs are respected but where the Catholic School cannot relinquish its freedom to proclaim the Gospel and to offer a formation based on the values to be found in a Christian education.

Learn Together

When the first Educate Together was established in Dalkey in South Dublin in 1978, one of the first tasks of the group was to develop a Religious Education Curriculum. This is a pre-requisite for all patrons who seek to open a new school. Until 1999 each new multidenominational school was required to seek individual patronage. Later a National Patron entitled Educate Together became patron for all new schools. Some of the original schools still maintain individual patronage. The teaching of religion in schools is covered under Rules 68 and 69 of the Rules for National Schools. Rule 68 emphasises that ‘of all parts of the school curriculum religious instruction is by far the most important’. Rule 69 outlines procedures for the provision of formal religious instruction and for facilitating the withdrawal of pupils if necessary ‘where such religious instruction as their parents or guardians approve is not provided in the school for any section of the pupils.’ Research conducted in 1998 (Mulcahy) had identified the importance of the Core Curriculum in the transmission of values and also as the key curricular approach to the fostering of pluralist attitudes in children. The Core Curriculum was the commonly used term in Educate Together schools to describe the equivalent of the Patron’s Religious Education programme. The programme, at that point, in most schools was based on the first Dalkey Religious Education Policy This policy had been developed into a more complete programme at a Summer In-service programme in 1989.

My own research highlighted the role of the Core Curriculum in helping children to look at the beliefs of others, to study world religions and allow them to discuss their beliefs and talk about them in class. The children learned that ‘there is a place for everybody in the world’ (Mulcahy, 1998, p. 62). The curriculum affirmed similarities and differences, encouraged children to be sensitive to the rights and beliefs of others, allowed human rights education and peace education to be included in the programme and encouraged an understanding of all belief systems. However, concerns were expressed about the range of different curricula, the lack of support for new schools in developing curricula and the complete lack of training for teachers in the design, development, delivery, assessment and evaluation of such an important part of the school programme. Some teachers also indicated that while schools were obliged to provide discrete time for the delivery of the Core Curriculum, in reality this did not always happen in the schools. Finally, the research indicated that some of the topics that formed the basis of the Core Curriculum had not been subsumed into a range of programmes such as Relationship and Sexuality Education, (RSE) and Social, Personal and Health Education. (SPHE) This had impacted on the Core Curriculum in terms of a single identifiable program within some of the schools surveyed.
Fig. 1: Thematic Analysis of Key Curricular Aims

| Personal Growth Aims       | To support Personal Development  |
|                            | To foster the art of self-knowledge and self belief |
| Spirituality               | To encourage a sense of spirituality in the child |
|                            | To help children to learn to cope with grief and loss |
| Justice and Rights Aims    | To foster equality, social justice and human rights |
|                            | To respect difference |
|                            | To foster good citizenship |
| The Environment            | To foster a compassionate relationship with the natural world |
| Belief Systems             | To foster an understanding of different Belief and Value Systems |
| Ethos                      | To represent the ethos of the school at curricular level |

The task of developing a program for the entire sector accelerated when overall patronage reverted to Educate Together. Through a series of interviews with individual schools, a large scale questionnaire distributed to all Principals in the sector and a focus group of parents and teachers, the issues around the existing curriculum were identified and the groundwork begun on developing Learn Together: An ethical education curriculum for Educate Together schools (2005).

The relevance of the curriculum in relation to articulating the ethos of the school was clearly identified in the research. Many of the principals returned to the 4 principles of Educate Together, in order to locate the relevance of the Core Curriculum in relation to the ethos and culture. Words such as ‘critical, imperative,’ central,’ ‘fundamental’ and ‘essential’, capture the feelings of the principals on this issue. The two quotes that I have selected highlight the passion with which principals wrote on this subject.

1. **It is critical.** It is through the Ethical Core Curriculum that the ethos is explored, mediated and delivered to the children. The ultimate aim is that the Ethical Core Curriculum informs the daily, lived ethos of the school at both informal and formal levels. (Principal Teacher for 10 years)

2. **The Core Curriculum is to a great extent the practical, pedagogical embodiment of the school’s ethos.** It is what makes the school different and unique. (New Principal, Year in the sector)

An identification of the values that underpinned the sector was conducted in order to inform the development of the new curriculum.

Fig. 2: Values Grid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal</th>
<th>Moral</th>
<th>Political</th>
<th>Educational</th>
<th>Environmental</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance Acceptance Openness Self-Respect Self-worth The ability to communicate</td>
<td>Honesty Integrity Respect for others Respect for Diversity Sense of responsibility</td>
<td>Equality Justice Diversity Commitment to Pluralism Democracy Inclusion Sense of Community</td>
<td>Cherishing each child Ensuring each child reaches potential</td>
<td>Respect for the Environment Respect for our World</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The key values identified as underpinning the school communities in the Educate Together sector in the areas of Personal and Moral Values are founded on respect: respect for the self and respect for others. These values are transmitted in a multidenominational climate that is committed to equality, justice and pluralism. The danger of relativism in such a setting is often highlighted by critics of a liberal approach to education. There is a danger that if schools argue that diversity is the highest value of all, then from a relative perspective, human rights and dignity of the individual can be challenged by conflicting values such as racism and lack of freedom. The answer lies in the acknowledgement of difference as a key feature of modern pluralism. A discourse model such as that presented by the Core Curriculum supports the concept of consensus pluralism through communication and heightened understanding of core values. This approach underpinned the development of the Learn Together Curriculum and is located in the recognition of common values and the habituation of students into these values through critical reflection.

Based on the initial findings from the research the work commenced on developing Learn Together. This was done in consultation with teachers, children and parents and the views of the Head of the Irish National Teachers Organization were also sought through an in-depth interview. The authors included two Principals, a member of the National Association and me in my role as an educationalist, a Director of Educate Together and the chief researcher.

Through interviewing 200 children in the sector and consulting with all the schools, 4 key strands began to emerge which would form the new curriculum.

- Moral and Spiritual
- Justice and Human Rights
- Belief Systems
- The Environment

The programme is laid out in the same manner as the other curricular subjects. It has clearly identified aims and objectives and adopts a spiral approach that is age and stage related. Thus, a topic that is introduced at Junior Infants level is developed right through to Sixth Class (Final Year). An example from the objectives for cultivating spiritual growth at Junior Infants states that the child shall be enabled to ‘develop his/her meditative spirit through the provision of opportunities for silence and reflection.’ By Sixth Class this has evolved to ‘understand the tradition of meditation as a key aspect of spiritual development and grow in self knowledge through the provision of opportunities for meditation and reflection’. As the programme progresses there is an emphasis on activating the knowledge and awareness that has been fostered through the programme. Teachers are given a range of options for delivery of the programme and there is a strong emphasis on group work, debate, assemblies, role play, art instillations and classroom visitors.

The key aims for the programme were agreed as follows:

- Foster in each child a knowledge and understanding of different value and belief systems in an atmosphere of inquiry and mutual respect
- Prepare our children to become caring members of a multicultural society with the necessary intercultural skills to enrich such a society
- Address issues of spirituality and morality in a reasoned and informed manner
- Facilitate in our children the ability to make reasoned and informed moral judgements
- Allow the opportunity to cultivate spirituality in a safe environment
- Raise awareness in our children of issues of equality and inequality in society
To achieve these aims requires commitment from teachers, parents and guardians. The teachers and parents are reminded that the programme encapsulates the motto of the sector: Learn Together to Live Together. Under the heading of School Atmosphere and Climate we are reminded that the values that underpin Learn Together should be lived out through providing a safe space for the children where they can articulate feelings and emotions and where the physical environment explicitly reflects the intercultural, inclusive nature of the school. At all times the multidenominational nature of Educate Together is acknowledged through appreciating the individual and shared beliefs of the children.

Exploration of the issues raised must be facilitated through the provision of spaces where children can reflect and experience a sense of awe and wonder, express their opinions in a safe environment, search for meaning and purpose through a study of issues that emerge in their lives such as grief and loss, debate, investigate, imagine, predict, record and critically analyse issues and grow in self knowledge through opportunities for reflection and quiet time.

Conclusion

The bringing together of children from different ethnic and religious backgrounds cannot of itself ensure harmony in the world. However it does offer us an opportunity to foster an appreciation of difference, to gain knowledge of different aspects of society, to give a voice to challenge racism and ignorance and a chance to strengthen that sense of awe and wonder of the world that we all once possessed. Learn Together attempts to do just that.

Learn Together demonstrates that spiritual and ethical education does not have to involve separate education. It identifies the common values that we share in our humanity and offers a pathway for educating our children to live in a pluralist Ireland.

Professor Kathleen Lynch (2004)

Children who are educated about spiritual values or ethical principles across a range of belief systems learn to understand difference and speak about it with a language of respect. Preliminary results from the REDCo-Project, an EU research project aimed at comparing the limitations and potential of religion in education, indicate that religious pluralism is not only accepted but welcomed by pupils and that the realisation of the vision of peaceful co-existence in a pluralist society is contingent on people learning about each other’s beliefs, listening and getting to know a variety of views (Bertram-Troost et al, 2008). The vision of Lord Stanley in 1831 and that of Educate Together in 2009 echo the sentiments of this research. From an international perspective further exploration of programmes such as Learn Together and the relevance of religion in education has the potential for world wide research.

As educators and policy makers we can bring to this process the value of respect, both for the differences that distinguish us and the similarities that unite us.

References


*Dr. Carmel Mulcahy* is the Head, School of Education Studies Dublin City University, Ireland

Based on McDougall’s 1991 PhD dissertation, this book reminds us initially of two issues. The first is just how recent and how hard won is academic education for females, something that makes us appreciate the inspiration and vision of educational leaders like Cornelia Connelly. The second issue is the importance of political, cultural and religious context in understanding the achievements of such educational visionaries. Founder in 1846 of the religious order of women, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, which is a non-cloistered active order of women educators, Cornelia Connelly was a wife and mother of five as well as, with her husband, an adult convert to Catholicism. When her husband sought and received a papal deed of separation for the dissolution of their marriage so that he could join the priesthood, Cornelia turned to religious life. She became convinced that she must found a religious order of women in England for the education of girls, poor girls in particular but also girls of the middle classes whose education was considered unimportant. This she did in 1846, taking up the vocation that would be her platform for innovation in girls’ education in England. At a time when it was assumed that girls needed only education in the domestic and cultural arts, Cornelia’s conviction was that girls needed and deserved “solid education” in the moral, spiritual, physical and intellectual aspects of life. Thus she carved out her philosophy still known today as “Holy Child education”, a philosophy which was influenced by the Sacred Heart Sisters with whom she had stayed and worked prior to her founding of the order, and the Jesuits. From 1856 to 1863 Cornelia ran a Catholic Teacher Training College at St. Leonard’s on Sea where she trained hundreds of young women in her educational philosophy and methods.

A particularly helpful feature of the book and of the research from which it grew, is the explication of the historical context, which helps the reader to know much more than simply about Cornelia Connelly and her impressive achievements. At the time that she founded the order and in the twenty or so years that followed, there were increasing numbers of Catholics in England, most of them Irish and poor, and subjected to anti-Catholic discrimination. In addition this time coincided with changes to public education in England, the Oxford movement, and the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in England which occurred in 1850. The book places the extraordinary work and achievements of Cornelia Connelly in this complex historical context. It shows how Cornelia arrived at her most significant contribution, the *Order of Studies of the Schools of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus*, a compendium of her educational philosophy and methodology, and which she produced in the final year of the Training College. The Order of Studies “spells out a methodology whereby intellectual, religious, artistic, and practical skills were integrated and implemented in such a manner as to be educationally formative for girls” (p. 190)

The book is meticulously researched, and of itself is a fine historical account of a particular period in the history of education. More than this however, it documents a time, and within it the achievements of an educational visionary, Cornelia Connelly, in which education for girls took great steps forward. The book
Paperback. 194 pages.

Gabriel Moran’s 1966 book, *Theology of revelation* also published as *God still speaks* (together with *Catechesis of revelation*), had a notable impact on Catholic religious education in North America and in Australia. The idea that revelation was continuing — that God was also revealed in ongoing human experience — was seminal to the Second Vatican Council. Moran revisited this theme in 1997 in *Both sides: The story of revelation*. This new book is the culmination of his ideas on this theme. He proposes that the relationship between faith and revelation constitutes the basis of Christian life.

For many, the notion of faith has become an increasingly privatised, individual activity of making personal meaning; for others, faith is like giving a somewhat unreflective affirmation of a set of religious truths proposed by church authorities. At the same time, Christian revelation is often regarded as the concrete object of religious faith; in other words, revelation was given by God through Jesus, the Church and the Bible. In earlier times, it was thought that unchanging revelation ended when the last Apostle died, leaving behind what was called the ‘deposit of faith’ which would be safeguarded by the Church. Moran’s book explains persuasively why these ideas of faith and revelation are problematic, and not faithful to the original Christian gospel. His response emphasises that both faith and revelation are better thought of as active, present tense, relational verbs.

From this basis Moran extrapolates to show how the Church and individuals can address the particular needs and problems in the contemporary world in a way that offers hope. It is consistent with the dream of Vatican II to find language and ideas that will promote human dialogue and engagement with contemporary issues, while exploring what it means to fully human in a world where the search for meaning and values has become more complicated, problematic and puzzling.

Moran examines central problems in church authority and in Christian morality. He gives attention to the important need for dialogue both within the faith community and between religions. He adds a valuable new perspective to the notion of inter-religious dialogue. Finally he adds an educational perspective showing how the Christian life can be understood as “a lifelong journey of response to a divine teacher”. This is a particularly valuable book in challenging contemporary thinking about faith and revelation and then following this through to implications for Christian spiritual life — “the Christian ideas of faith and revelation will either be the chief obstacle to dialogue with the contemporary world or else the main foundation of the Christian spiritual life that can give substance and direction to religious searching.”

Professor Graham Rossiter
Australian Catholic University
Journal of Religious Education is an academic refereed journal subject to peer review. It is published by the School of Religious Education, Faculty of Education of Australian Catholic University four times each year.

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- various models of faith communities in which evangelisation and catechesis may take place besides the Catholic school;
- religious education of children and adolescents;
- continuing religious education for adults;
- family ministry and youth ministry.

All articles submitted should be between 3500-5000 words in length and prefaced, on a separate page by an abstract of no more than 150 words. Please submit your article electronically as a Word attachment to EditorJRE@aquinas.acu.edu.au. A COVER sheet should contain the title of the paper, author’s name, brief biographical details, institutional affiliation, postal address, phone, fax, email address, where available. Authors will receive a copy of the issue of the journal in which their contribution appears.

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