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As I come to write the final editorial for this year there are signs of spring in the air and, for the first time in many years, the good rainfalls through September in parts of the State of Victoria has resulted in countryside that is bathed in a deep, intense green. The change from brown, dry and tired landscapes to ones filled with fertile green is a sight, at once, refreshing, life-giving and welcoming and one that has been missing for so many years. Amidst the usual spring activities in Melbourne, like the Spring Racing Carnival and the different arts festivals, there is an unusual happening. The Parliament of World Religions is to be held during the first two weeks in December and it is expected to bring thousands of religious people together as well as staging numerous religious meetings, presentations and performances. It is to be hoped that it will have the same effect as the rain so that it may inject new life into the field of religious education and generate new ideas and opportunities for religious educators, thereby inspiring them further in their endeavours to discover innovative and varied ways to reach out to and touch the minds, hearts and souls of their students.

It is, therefore, timely, that this issue of the journal brings together a series of articles designed to assist the classroom practitioner. The writers have drawn on their research and practice to offer a wealth of ideas and resources that can inform and enliven religious education lessons. The first three focus on philosophical and sociological aspects. Mark Craig explores the relationship between phenomenological methodologies and the potential for student meaning-making in senior secondary religion studies programs. He proposes that multiliterate approaches may be culturally more relevant to students than phenomenological approaches and should, therefore, offer more opportunity for meaning making. Richard Rymarz reports on a research study involving religious education teachers who worked in Australian Catholic schools from 1976 until 1985. He identifies a number of challenges that emerged for classroom teachers as religious education moved from a didactic toward a more experiential paradigm which impacted on both the content and the teaching activities. He argues that a new narrative of Catholic education is needed that reflects this transitional era which ‘recaptures something of the middle ground in how Catholic schools should represent where the Church sits in a historical continuum’ and reemphasizes the ‘continuity of the tradition’. Margaret Ghosn focuses on the different cultural backgrounds of students and highlights the need, in particular, for religious education programs to cater for Generation Y students who come from the different traditions, Catholic and Eastern Catholic. The next four articles discuss particular ideas and approaches for teaching. Jan Grajczonek & Maurice Ryan discuss the use of children’s picture books, Mary Boys, Stephen McKinney and Robert Hill present innovative perspectives about teaching scripture, and Maurice Ryan has written a thoughtful and informed article on teaching about the holocaust. There is a carefully researched article from Rachel Tullio and Graham Rossiter on retreats and finally, Peter Ng has discussed the relationship between religion and social cohesion in Hong Kong.

In all, there is a wealth of learning contained within the pages of this issue which do provide a step towards injecting new life into RE classes. I trust that it will provide useful reading.

Marian de Souza
Editor
STUDY OF RELIGION AND THE RELEVANCE OF PHENOMENOLOGY IN THE POST-MODERN AGE

Abstract

Post-modern shifts in educational methodology suggest that multiliterate approaches may be culturally more relevant in delivering a Study of Religion curriculum than phenomenological methodologies. This research explores the relationship between the two variables: phenomenological methodologies and the potential for student meaning-making in the post-compulsory subject, Study of Religion at a Catholic Co-educational College in Brisbane, Australia. An examination of some current teaching methodologies in Study of Religion is conducted and provides a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of these teaching methodologies in post-modern context. This paper proposes that multiliterate approaches may be culturally more relevant to students than phenomenological approaches thereby enabling greater potential for meaning-making. An empirical study, the following research has emerged out of an extensive review of current literature and was part of a Master of Education research degree awarded in 2006.

Introduction

Post-modern shifts in educational methodology suggest that multiliterate approaches may be of greater cultural relevance in delivering a Study of Religion curriculum than phenomenological methodologies (The New London Group, 2000; Jones, 2003). There has been a shift from a view of literacy as reading and writing, presupposed by some forms of phenomenology, to multi-modality. Multi-modality undergirds multiliterate approaches and offers an alternative model to that currently being used in Study of Religion (The New London Group, 2000; Barnes, 2001; Unsworth, 2002).

Approaches reflecting multiliteracy may be better positioned as a cultural resource to facilitate student meaning-making. Phenomenological approaches have a propensity to be descriptive rather than evaluative and do not clearly scaffold the development of critical thinking. Multiliteracy effectively accommodates critical thinking in post-modern contexts particularly discourse-based methodology. The empirical research presented investigates the link between phenomenological methodologies and the potential for student meaning-making in the post-compulsory subject Study of Religion. It is one of few studies known to the researcher whereby the connection between phenomenological methodologies and potential for student meaning-making has been specifically addressed.

Of note is that while this study identifies a connection between the two variables - phenomenological methodologies and student meaning-making - it does not establish with certainty that phenomenological methodologies are the direct cause of student difficulties with meaning-making. However, the results of this research do suggest, at the very least, a correlation between these two variables and this could be a factor regarding student interest. The variable of how teachers translate Study of Religion Work Programs into classroom lessons and the effect that this has on levels of student interest is not explored in depth and is a limitation of this research. However, data collected and analysed does call into question the emphasis placed on phenomenological methodologies in the Study of Religion Syllabus (2001, 2008) and associated college/school work programs. In response this paper argues that multiliterate approaches may be better positioned culturally to engage student’s potential for meaning-making.

Key terms and clarifications

Phenomenological approaches
“Phenomenological approaches” refer to a method partially developed by Smart (1968) for understanding
and analysing various world religions, later adopted and adapted for teaching religion in a secondary school context. “Phenomenological approaches” also refer to Typological methodology as developed by Moore and Habel (1982) for teaching religion in a secondary school context. This paper restricts itself to classical forms of phenomenology, which have influenced the Study of Religion Syllabus (2001, 2008) and does not factor in enriched forms of phenomenology such as the Interpretive approach of Jackson (1997) that have not had a direct impact upon the syllabi (Craig, 2008).

Study of Religion
“Study of Religion” denotes the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) Syllabus (2001) for the subject Study of Religion, formerly the Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies, and its translation into work programs. While a new Study of Religion Syllabus (2008) has been published by the QSA since the completion of this research in 2006, arguments raised by this paper are not diminished. Phenomenological methodologies are suggested by the current Syllabus as possible educational approaches, among others, for teaching Study of Religion (Queensland Studies Authority, 2008, pp.80-81).

Post-modern
“Post-modern” denotes the intellectual shift from a universal discourse of reason and of empirical certainty to diversity. Whelan (1999) argues that reality is not objective but multifaceted and no single discourse or view of reality is pre-eminent over others. Consequently, methodologies that reflect the insights of Discourse analysis, for example, multiliteracies, and of language deconstruction (constructivism) typify this period (Blake & Hamilton, 1995; Croft & Cross, 1997).

Multiliterate
“Multiliterate approaches” refer to teaching and learning that emerges out of a broader context for understanding the nature of literacy - multiliteracy. The meaning of literacy is extended beyond learning to read and write in official standard forms of the national language. It includes the context of learning (cultural and linguistic diversity, globalisation) and the multiplicity of text forms associated with information and multi-media technologies (The New London Group, 2000, pp.9-10).

Greene College
In order to ensure confidentiality, the College from where data for this project was collected is designated “Greene College. “Greene College” is a Catholic secondary co-educational college established and operated by Brisbane Catholic Education under the authority of the Archbishop of Brisbane.

Literature review
Multiliterate approaches present an alternative model to the phenomenological model for teaching a Study of Religion curriculum and could be more effective in post-modern contexts (The New London Group, 2000; Barnes, 2001; Unsworth, 2002). To contextualise this position, a brief review of phenomenology is necessary. Phenomenology, as a tool of Religious Education, reflects the influence of Hegel, Husserl and Habermas.

Hegel’s philosophical argument was that we are driven by a desire to really know the “nature” (noumena) of things, which he referred to as wesen or essence and that this knowledge is mediated through the social world - the world of appearances or manifestations [phenomena] (Boucher, 2000). Habermas (1985) posited that the critical knowing of the essence of phenomena comes through a lengthy process of observation and self-reflection. Cultural conditioning and presuppositions regarding particular phenomena can then be identified by the observer prior to final conclusions being drawn, thereby allowing objective descriptions to be constructed (Lovat, 2001). Smart (1968), assisted in developing a phenomenological approach to teaching religion within a university context by emphasising the importance of observing a religion as a concrete socio-cultural and historical phenomenon, Smart attempted to see what an adherent of a particular religion sees. This was achieved by entering the
believer’s thought world and suspending judgement in order to reduce or ideally eliminate bias or presupposition regarding the religious phenomenon under observation.

Smart’s reasoning reflects a modern rather than a post-modern discourse as it is underpinned by an assumption that diversity can be explained away via some grand universalising theory. The grand universalising theory that makes sense of religious diversity is essence [wesen] (Boucher, 2000; Jones, 2003). While there may be myriad socio-cultural and historical manifestations of religion in the world they all have at their core the same essence. The seven dimensions of religion, now synonymous with Smart, were subsequently developed as a way of describing this shared essence and comparing particular religions within secondary education contexts: the ritual, experiential, mythological, doctrinal, ethical, social and material dimensions (Smart, 1968; Lovat, 1993).

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of phenomenological methodologies at Greene College, case-study research was employed. Particular datum suggests that a multiliterate approach utilising discourse analysis may be better positioned than phenomenology to make meaning for students in post-modern contexts (Lankshear, Snyder et al., 2000; Luke, 2000; Barnes, 2001; Unsworth, 2002; Craig, 2008). Data collected from a Year 12 cohort indicates the need for more opportunity to critically evaluate religion (Craig, 2006, p.74).

Discourse-based methodologies facilitate student meaning-making by providing a framework for appropriate religious critique. Students are challenged to understand religious texts as socially constructed and selective in including certain values, attitudes and beliefs while excluding others. Phenomenological methodologies tend to be descriptive, not providing a concrete framework that acknowledges the “constructedness” of texts consistent with critical literacy (Flood, 1999; Slembrouck, 2003; Craig, 2009). While critical thinking is not precluded by phenomenological approaches it is not scaffolded either.

Discourse-based methodologies do provide a scaffold for critical literacy by utilising a metalanguage accessible to students. Multiliterate approaches operate out of a three tier structure that facilitates critical analysis – Recognition, Reproduction and Reflection Literacy (Kress, 2000; Slembrouck, 2003). While phenomenological approaches do not rule out the possibility of utilising multiliterate approaches per se the latter presupposes a constructivist model that is more consistent with discourse-based methodologies (Flood, 1999; The New London Group, 2000; Slembrouck, 2003; Pilli, 2005).

Phenomenological methodologies have shaped the Study of Religion curriculum at Greene College. A variety of methodological approaches are suggested by the Study of Religion Syllabus (2001, 2008): sociological, feminist, historical, phenomenological and typological approaches respectively. It cannot be assumed that a particular School/College has employed a Phenomenological or Typological approach given these choices. While phenomenology was predominantly used in the 1980s Study of Religion program, that is no longer the case (Craig, 2008). Therefore, it is necessary to demonstrate that Greene College has utilised phenomenological methodology in preference to other methodologies.

The Study of Religion Work Program states that in “the study of world religions, the phenomenological approach [be] used within a comparative analytical structure” (Greene College Study of Religion Work Program, 2002, p.14). Secondly, the delivery of this curriculum to students indicates the use of phenomenological methodologies, ascertained through direct observation by the researcher who is employed at the College. The researcher was familiar with a number of teaching strategies and resources utilised by Study of Religion teachers that presupposed a phenomenological paradigm. Consequently, an analysis of the Queensland Syllabus for Study of Religion (2001) and the Greene College Work Program for Study of Religion (2002) and direct observation indicates that the first of the two variables under investigation in this study, phenomenological methodologies, is present and has arguably influenced the shaping and delivery of subject matter to students.

The second key variable isolated and examined within this study, “Meaning-making”, is explored in relation to phenomenological methodologies and the degree to which one is affected by the other. Meaning-
making has a specific meaning within the context of this research and refers to students’ ability to understand a particular concept and identify its relevance within their field of experience or socio-cultural context. The contextual nature of meaning-making is salient as students spend a great deal of time interacting with different forms of media: television, music, cinema and internet. These are examples of socio-cultural “traditions” which assist adolescents to construct their personal narratives, their ways of understanding the world around them. (Pilli, 2005; Craig, 2009).

Furthermore, being equipped to negotiate religious pluralism and multi-culturalism while identifying and maintaining that which gives personal meaning within Study of Religion is essential. Pilli (2005) argues that relating learners’ experiences to wider historical-geographical narratives such as those presented via religion and culture helps them understand both the material and themselves better. Finally, a holistic approach combining different ways of learning that touch the person as a whole being can be facilitated through a cross-curricular approach to student learning (Pilli, 2005). Within the following case-study these key elements form the criteria against which the variable of meaning-making is judged to be present or not.

It investigates the connection between phenomenological methodology and student meaning-making and proposes the value of a multiliterate approach as a viable option in the post-modern context.

Method

Case-study

A case study approach was employed to interpret data and describe the experience of a Year 12 cohort in a Catholic Co-educational College. A case study approach facilitates an in-depth study of events and relationships in a particular setting where specific topics and variables can be isolated and described (Hughes & Hitchcock, 1995, p.317). The two variables that required isolation in order to complete this study were student meaning-making and phenomenological methodologies. Case-study research is an effective tool for such description and has been prominent in the social sciences assisting researchers to connect the micro-level (the actions of individuals) to the macro-level [large scale social structures and processes] (Neuman, 2003, p.33).

A case study approach did demonstrate the potential for a causal argument between methodology in Study of Religion (macro-level) and student meaning-making (micro-level). However, the premise of a causal connection between methodology in Study of Religion and student meaning-making requires further replication of the present study in other educational settings in order to strengthen this premise.

While there has been other research conducted investigating the relevance of phenomenological methodologies for teaching religion, this research has not been based upon empirical evidence but rather theoretical analysis (Barnes, 2001; Lovat, 2001). Furthermore, the two variables - student meaning-making and phenomenological methodologies – have not been discretely isolated and explored.

Research methods

Three data collecting instruments were used: a cross-sectional survey, focus group interviews and direct observation.

Cross-sectional survey
A cross-sectional survey allowed the researcher to describe the connection between student potential for meaning-making at the micro-level and phenomenological methodologies as the overarching methodology being employed in Study of Religion at the macro-level (Neuman, 2003, p.33). The survey consisted of five questions. The first two questions were designed to establish two background variables of respondents:
Gender and Subject Choices. The third question was designed to elicit data relating to student potential for meaning-making in Study of Religion.

The fourth question assisted in gathering ideas regarding changes to methodology in Study of Religion. The fifth question was open-ended and designed to obtain additional data that could be used to describe the connection between the two variables being examined. Sproull (1995) supports the inclusion of open-ended questions by stating that they can add new information when there is very little existing information about a topic. In regard to empirical data this is certainly the case. There is a lack of empirical data in relation to phenomenological methodology and student meaning-making.

Focus group discussion
Focus Group discussion/interviews, as a data collecting technique have grown in popularity over the last twenty years (Neuman, 2003, p.396). Participants were invited to listen to the opinions and understandings of others and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses given in the survey questionnaire. This instrument provided flexibility to explore possible unanticipated issues that may have surfaced during the scheduled discussion. The Focus Group consisted of three males and two females drawn from the original sample group of forty-five students who completed the survey instrument.

Direct observation
A third source of data, direct observation, enabled anecdotal evidence to be gathered - the researcher’s teaching experience in Study of Religion at Greene College (2003-2005). The use of two data collecting instruments (survey and focus group), a review of current literature and direct observation enabled triangulation of results hence increasing validity and reliability.

Research Participants

Fifty percent of the Year 12 cohort at Greene College agreed to be surveyed: twenty-one males and twenty-four females. The participants represented a range of family structures characteristic of the College’s total student population: one parent and two-parent families. Socio-economic backgrounds varied from lower to middle to upper-middle. Academic abilities of students varied from high, middle to low achievers. Participation in the Cross-sectional survey and Focus Group was voluntary and required a Parental/Guardian’s Statement of Consent.

Findings: Analysis and Discussion

Data collected enabled the researcher to describe the connection between phenomenological methodologies and student meaning-making and supported the position that a correlation exists between these two variables. This provided weight to the argument that multiliterate approaches are better placed than Phenomenological approaches to enhance student meaning-making.

Cross-sectional survey: current student perceptions of what Study of Religion is like at Greene College:
Whole sample group

The influence of phenomenology

Fifty one percent of students indicated that the value of being “non-judgemental” of other religions was encouraged (Craig, 2006). Being non-judgemental - suspending judgement - is a key value underlying phenomenological methodologies generally (Husserl, 1983; Lovat, 2001; Craig, 2008). This response supports the observation that phenomenological methodologies are informing and influencing the delivery of Study of Religion curriculum.
The benefit of multiliterate approaches

Thirty seven percent of students indicated an emphasis on the written word in classroom teaching and assessment over other types of literacies (Craig, 2006). Five examples out of a total of six assessment items in 2005 involved some form of extended writing activity. (Greene College Study of Religion Work Program, 2002). Literacy is about reading and writing at Greene College with less emphasis on multi-modality presupposed by Multiliteracy. Exploring a multiplicity of text types may better engage student interest. The internet, music, dance and drama are examples of socio-cultural “traditions” which may assist adolescents to construct meaning more effectively in the classroom (Pilli, 2005; Craig, 2009).

Current student perceptions of what Study of Religion should be like: Whole sample group

The influence of phenomenology

Sixty four percent of students experienced Study of Religion as lacking in relevance connecting only to a limited degree with their personal narratives (Craig, 2006). The curriculum is informed by phenomenological methodologies and so the link between this and a perception among students that relevance is lacking is noteworthy.

The benefit of multiliterate approaches

Discourse-based methodologies consistent with a Multiliteracy framework could increase a perception of relevance among students as it emphasises more than phenomenological approaches critical literacy in learning, particularly relevant in the post-modern context (Rorty, 1979; Grassie, 1997; Siejk, 1999; Craig, 2009). Discourse-based methodology encourages students to de\construct the larger historical-geographical narratives such as those presented via religion and culture while not losing sight of their own (Boucher, 2000; Pilli, 2005). This would help students understand both themselves and the material being studied better.

Forty eight percent of students indicated that Study of Religion needs to be more practical in its delivery and assessment of curriculum (Craig, 2006). A multiliterate approach makes available to students a wider range of semiotic systems, some that are very practical, within the classroom/school (computer technology, film, photography, art and drama). Students would grow not only in their ability to uncover meaning within religious texts through applying discourse-based methodologies, but also in their ability to use resources that are at the cutting edge of their own contextual narratives such as computer based technologies (The New London Group, 2000).

Current student perceptions of what Study of Religion is like according to gender

The influence of phenomenology

Female students (24%) identified more so than male students (4%) that Study of Religion discourages the critique of religious truths (Craig, 2006). This suggests teaching methodologies at Greene College are perceived by females in particular as reflecting the phenomenological characteristic of suspension of value judgements (Flood, 1999).

Current student perceptions of what Study of Religion should be like according to gender

The benefit of multiliterate approaches

Forty one percent of males in contrast to 27% of females identified that Study of Religion needed to be multi-modal in the delivery of curriculum (Craig, 2006). As a result males would particularly benefit from a multiliterate approach to learning as a host of mediums including print, electronic and audio-visual resources are becoming dominant over the written word (Kress, 2000, p.182).
Current student perceptions of what Study of Religion is like according to subject choice

The influence of phenomenology

Humanities students more so than Maths/Science students experience Study of Religion as encouraging one to be non-judgemental of other religions – a value distinctive of phenomenology (Craig, 2006) [Table 1].

The benefit of multiliterate approaches

Humanities students experience Study of Religion as more theoretical than practical (Craig, 2006) [Table 1]. A Multiliteracies approach to student learning would arguably benefit Humanities students more than Maths/Science students. The inclusion of other semiotic systems (Computer technology, film and photography) in addition to the grammar of languages in student learning experiences could assist Humanities’ students particularly to more effectively make meaning (New London Group, 2000).

Table 1: Student perceptions five and nine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBJECT AREAS</th>
<th>Student Perception 5: Non-judgemental of other religion’s beliefs</th>
<th>Student Perception 9: Theoretical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths/Science</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Current student perceptions of what Study of Religion should be like according to subject choice

The benefit of multiliterate approaches

Maths/Science students more so than Humanities students wanted Study of Religion to draw on other subject areas in the delivery of curriculum (Craig, 2006). Responses to Student Perception Seven, which support a cross-curricular approach to Study of Religion, indicate this (Table 2). For these students inclusion of content matter particular to other subject areas would enhance student-meaning making. A multiliterate approach to student learning is more holistic combining different ways of learning via multi-modality that potentially can touch the person as a whole being – mind, body, spirit (Kress, 2000, Pilli, 2005). This is further supported by humanities students who favoured the inclusion of more “creative” learning experiences (Table 2).

Table 2: Student perceptions 7 and 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBJECT AREAS</th>
<th>Student Perception 7: Draws on other subject areas eg. Science</th>
<th>Student Perception 10: Topics allow students to be creative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths/Science</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Students</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusions that emerged out of the literature review were consistent with student responses to Question Five on the survey instrument (Table 3).

### Table 3. Comparing student responses with the literature review

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION 5: Student Suggestions</th>
<th>Discussion</th>
<th>Comparison with Literature review</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thirty three percent of students suggested that topics be chosen that bear more relevance to the narratives of secondary students enrolled in Study of Religion at Greene College</td>
<td>Topics chosen for Study of Religion, which are strongly informed by phenomenological methodologies, are arguably struggling to find a place of relevance and meaning within the lives of students</td>
<td>A cross-curricular approach could generate a wider selection of topics and help students more effectively de\construct meaning in Study of Religion (Flood, 1999; Kay, 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thirty three percent of students suggested that learning experiences in Study of Religion be more practical with excursions to religious places of worship and involvement in social outreach programs</td>
<td>Study of Religion may be too theoretical, not always incorporating opportunities for practical experiences that could render the subject more meaningful</td>
<td>A multiliterate approach to learning could encourage the accessing of other semiotic systems including more practical learning experiences (Kress, 2000; Luke, 2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twenty two percent of students suggested that Study of Religion curriculum incorporate more effectively student views and opinions on religious topics discussed in the classroom. Furthermore, the suggestion was made that there be more scope for critiquing other religious views and for student-student/teacher dialogue.</td>
<td>Study of Religion at Greene College does not encourage enough, student views on Religion and opportunities for them to critique Religion in an informed and balanced manner.</td>
<td>Discourse-based methodologies may be better positioned to facilitate a critical approach to understanding religion. Reflection Literacy (multiliterate model) could further assist in this (Kress, 2000; Slembrouck, 2003).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Focus group**

- **Cross-sectional Survey**
  - More freedom to critique Religion
- **Focus Group Discussion**
  - More opportunity to critique values, beliefs and attitudes of various religions
- **Literature Review**
  - Adopting Discourse based Methodologies may provide better opportunities for critique of various religions

**Figure 1. Validating data.**
Data from the focus group was triangulated with data from the literature review and survey questionnaire. There was agreement across all three instruments thus increasing the reliability and validity of this study. The diagram below presents a brief summary of results based upon a triangulation of this data (Figure.1.).

**Meaning-making and Study of Religion**

Data collected at Greene College suggests that a multiliterate model would assist students to make meaning more effectively than a phenomenological model in post-modern context. Analysis of student perceptions as a whole cohort, according to Gender and Subject Choices indicate the following:

- relevance is lacking in Study of Religion curriculum;
- multiliterate approaches may connect better with the contextual narrative of students via multi-modality, which is the contextual reality of students.

Computer-based technologies in their myriad textual forms constitute a key “tradition” that makes meaning for adolescents. Secondly multi-modality renders Study of Religion more holistic enabling increased cross-curricular learning experiences to emerge.

Particular subject areas present a perspective on the world that together constitute a more complete or holistic understanding of the human narrative. Mathematics and the Sciences construct a narrative of the physical/material world that is complex yet profoundly cohesive and harmonious. Social Science constructs a world view incorporating historical and geographical narratives that tell part of the human story and that impact upon the personal narratives of students. Religion subscribes to a world view identifying the invisible dimension of human life underlying material existence as significant and personally meaningful. Each subject engages a variety of text types to impart information and together empower students to construct a comprehensive world view. Relating learners’ experiences to the wider physical, historical-geographical and spiritual narratives inherent within religious pluralism and multi-culturalism through application of discourse-based methodologies renders Study of Religion of greater relevance to the personal narratives of students.

**Conclusion**

Research presented reveals a connection between the two variables: phenomenological methodologies and the potential for student meaning-making. The nature of this connection is that phenomenological methodologies are struggling to facilitate meaning-making in Study of Religion and that multiliterate approaches could be more effective and of greater cultural relevance to students. It is important to note that while phenomenological methodologies, which have their origin within modernism, may be struggling to assist students to make meaning that this is not tantamount to saying that post-modern methodologies are superior to modern methodologies.

Suggesting a change in methodology is to acknowledge that the construction of meaning is now occurring within a different socio-cultural context and that other methodological frameworks for meaning-making could be more effective. This is not dismissing the possible value of enriching current phenomenological approaches in order to render them more meaningful tools for learning and teaching Study of Religion in a post-modern context. Examples of this enrichment are evident in the approaches of Grimmit (1987), Wright (1993), Jackson (1997) and Erricker (2000).

The results of this research question the emphasis placed on phenomenological methodologies in the Study of Religion Syllabus (2001, 2008). Furthermore, it questions the preference given to it over other methodologies such as discourse-based methodologies. In Study of Religion the task of the teacher is to facilitate meaning de\construction and to render concepts that may be foreign to a student’s contextual

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narrative accessible by re-presenting these concepts in a language that is intelligible to them. On the altered educational landscape of post-modernism multiliterate approaches encompassing Discourse-based methodologies may provide better opportunities than phenomenological methodologies for achieving this objective.

References

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1 The term ‘Study of Religion’ is used throughout this article to refer to the specific religious education program based on the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) Syllabus 2001.
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN TIMES OF CHANGE: RECOLLECTIONS OF RE TEACHERS WORKING IN CATHOLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS 1976-1985

Abstract

Religious education and Catholic schooling, in general, experienced a period of profound change in the time after the Second Vatican Council. This paper seeks to gain a sense of this transition by examining the experiences of RE teachers who worked in Australian Catholic schools from 1976 until 1985. The narratives that emerge from this study suggest a number of challenges for classroom teachers as religious education moved toward a more experiential paradigm. This brought with it changes in the way RE was taught and also what content it covered. These changes were reflective of wider theological debates within Catholicism. The paper argues that a new narrative of Catholic education is needed that is reflective of this transitional era.

Introduction

Ours is a time that criticizes and debunks the past, that teaches a ideology, that looks forward to a utopia. (Lonergan, 1974, p. 93).

A common, and enduring, public perception of Catholic schools is imbedded in narratives that are now well over fifty years old. Stories of going to Catholic schools that were overcrowded, staffed by religious, where discipline was strict, and at times uncompromising, and where religious education was based on rote learning of the catechism still feature in the public perception of what it was like to grow up Catholic (Turner, 1992; Dwyer and English, 1990; Campion 1983). These descriptors have great resonance for those who were born in the immediate post war the so-called Baby Boom (Lipsky and Abrams, 1994). This generation was educated before the seismic shifts in Catholics self-understanding brought about by the Second Vatican Council, (1962-1965) (Stacpoole, 1986).

A number of approaches can be taken to understand the impact of the Council. One way, which may become more prevalent in the future, is the discussion over how the Council sits within the Tradition (O'Malley, 1971; Jedin, 1981; Schloesser, 2007). Pope Benedict XVI (2005) framed the debate in terms adopting a hermeneutic of discontinuity, a radical departure from what preceded it, as opposed to a hermeneutic of reform or continuity which stresses an obvious connection with other Councils and not marking a clear break with the past. Another perspective is to look at the personal impact the Council had. For a generation of Catholics it proved to be a seminal experience, marking a sudden transition from one way of being a Catholic to a new understanding. For many the abruptness of the change was disconcerting (Forsyth, 2001). Appleby (1989), for example, records the reaction of many priests who, after the Council, felt inadequate when parishioners asked them for explanations of significant changes such as why the basic Catholic ecclesiological metaphor went from the Church militant to the People of God. Campion (1982) has likened the impact of the Council to the walls of a ghetto coming down. As well as the personal impact there was also an institutional dimension to these changes as Catholic agencies tried to deal on an organizational level with conceptual and practical upheaval (Dryden, 2003). As this was largely unanticipated it could not be adequately prepared for. Unlike the personal stories of adaptation to change these institutional narratives to the new post conciliar zeitgeist are relatively rare as they are often the consequence of the more personal narrative which preceded it. A key Catholic institutional agency is the school which Kelly (1990, p. 46) quite rightly describes as, “the flagship of Catholic commitment to Australian culture”. In order, however, for a fuller appreciation of the recent history of Catholic schools to

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emerge the post conciliar period needs to be further investigated and documented. By the 1960’s Catholic schools were changing and over the next twenty years the experience of students attending Catholic schools was substantially different from those of previous generations. Rymarz (2001) has noted that recollections of Catholics who attended Catholic schools after the immediate post conciliar period were largely positive but, at the same time, weak. This may explain why these narratives have never gained the prominence of those from earlier times which left much more of a legacy – both good and bad - and as such became the focus of public discourse. Students’ experience of religious education in particular in more recent times is very different from the pre conciliar era. Flynn in his extensive longitudinal studies, beginning in the mid 1970’s, has noted that religious education is a discipline which, amongst other things, struggles to have much of an impact on students (Flynn, 1992; Flynn and Mok, 2001).

If students’ expectations and experiences of Catholic schools had changed, the same could be said of teachers. By the 1970’s the teaching profile of staff in Catholic schools had radically altered (Martin, 1983). By far the most significant change was the inexorable rise in the number of lay teachers. The Council encouraged the laity to see themselves as an irreplaceable part of the missionary nature of the Church. This understanding emerged out of a key Pauline image used in Lumen Gentium (1964, # 31) of the Church as the Body of Christ, which brought with it changes in the perception of teaching as both a career in the conventional sense and a living out of a vocation.

Many schools were undergoing profound structural changes and this had an impact on teaching staff. One example of this was the amalgamation of schools often as a consequence of the virtual disappearance of teaching religious. In many instances single sex schools merged into one co-educational facility and control of the school shifted from a religious congregation to a central agency such as the Catholic Education Office. Class sizes which were enormous in the 1950’s, by present standards, reduced significantly in the 1970’s and 1980s. Amongst other things this altered the student-teacher relationship and allowed for a more personal relationship that would become an important factor in the way religious education was taught.

In classroom religious education in the 1970s, there was a pronounced shift toward more experiential pedagogical models (Rossiter, 1997; Buchanan, 2005). In many ways the experiential approach to religious education was anticipated by the short-lived kerygmatic paradigm (Ryan, 2001). Crawford and Rossiter (2006, p. 424) have typified this era as a movement toward religious socialization and away from religious education, making classroom RE “less school like” and more personal. These changes placed great emphasis on the learner and their experience of the world. This can be contrasted with the traditional style which relied more on didactic instruction and authoritative texts (Rymarz, 2003). The change in religious education affected not just process but also content, that is, the material that went into the curriculum and classroom teaching. The idea that key concepts and formula needed to be at the core of the curriculum was replaced by a more dynamic understanding of revelation that was again rooted in the learners existential sense of how God acted in his or her life (McDermott, 2007). These changes produced a deal of confusion that was addressed by the development of Guidelines for Religious Education first in the Archdiocese of Melbourne and then elsewhere. These Guidelines sort to apply some rigour and system but at the same time remaining faithful to an experiential approach to religious education (Ryan, 1997).

This paper seeks to gain a better understanding of Catholics schools in the 1970s and 1980s by utilizing the perspective of RE teachers who worked in the schools in that period. This period was decided upon as it was sufficiently removed from the pre and immediate post conciliar period so that new narratives about Catholic schools could be heard.

RE teachers were chosen to give this study some focus by concentrating on one group of teachers and not the whole faculty and because religious education is both germane to the identity of the Catholic school and a discipline that was greatly affected by the tumult following the Council. One of the goals here is to provide some background for a new narrative of Catholic life that recognizes the personal and institutional changes which have reshaped Catholicism in recent decades (Rymarz, 2008).
Methodology

An in-depth interviewing technique was adopted as this was seen as the best way to allow participants to share their recollections of events that were now many decades in the past. As the name implies an in-depth interview seeks “deep” information and understanding (Atkinson, 1998). The in-depth interview allows participants to proceed at their own pace and also encourages a dialogue to develop between the researcher and the participant. This is a fruitful means of allowing for prolonged and reflective engagement with the research theme (Minichiello et al, 1995). Implicit in this methodology is that deep understanding is held by those who agree to participate in the study and one of the tasks of the researcher is to achieve the same level of knowledge (Johnson, 2001, p.106). The methodology used here does not claim to give a comprehensive sample. Rather it arises out of the school of qualitative enquiry which privileges depth of response on a theme which is complex and nuanced. A number of funnel questions were prepared and these were designed to move the interview toward certain topics. The funnel questions invited the participants to share their experience of teaching religious education in the period under review; to discuss their recollections of classroom practice in religious education; to comment on how they were supported by the school in their role as RE teachers; to compare religious education in the period under review with their more recent experience and a more general focus on how they saw the general goals of religious education in the earlier period.

Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals who taught religious education in Catholics secondary schools in the period 1976-1984. All of the participants in the study, with one exception, reported on their experience of working as RE teachers in Catholic high schools in Victoria, Australia (one participant worked in the period under review in a Catholic high school in Sydney, New South Wales). Schools were contacted and the Religious Education Coordinator in the school was asked to pass on details of the study to any teacher who may be interested in being interviewed and who had taught RE in Catholic secondary schools between 1976 and 1984. Interviews were conducted at the schools where the teachers currently worked and ranged in duration from 1 to 1.5 hours. All interviews were audiotaped. Using the tapes as well as notes the interviews were analysed and a number of dominant response categories were established (Miles and Huberman, 1995). On the basis of this analysis, four participants were contacted again and asked further questions about their experience of teaching RE. The goal here was to gain further insights and to clarify issues that remained ambiguous after their first interview.

Results and Discussion

The interviews revealed a number of strong response categories, which will be discussed here in turn.

A Time of Change

Many of the participants saw, quite accurately, this time as one of profound transition, in both a personal and professional sense. On a personal level some of the older participants remarked on how the changes in schools mirrored changes in the wider Church and this brought with it some uncertainty and challenge:

I felt, all of a sudden, lots of things disappeared. It was as if, all of a sudden, what you had been taught to believe in and taught very firmly was kind of wiped out in a way and this really challenged me as a person. HD 2

The old model of RE that many had remembered from their school days was now well and truly abandoned. A new approach, however, had not yet established itself but there was an acute awareness that a clear break had been made. This was manifested in many ways across the whole school but certainly in RE change was dramatic. To illustrate one of the participants referred to a series of college magazines from the period. One edition from the early seventies clearly differentiated itself from what had preceded it. In place of the usual, somewhat sombre, reflection on the place of RE in the school written by the principal was a new version which featured a series of comments by students with no obvious connection or theme and which seemed somewhat frivolous.
A number of participants noted a lack of support in these transitional times. This was often expressed as a feeling of being on one’s own. Essential tasks of daily teaching such as lesson planning and developing teaching and learning activities were often done in loose collaboration with other teachers but without strong leadership and in contrast to other subject disciplines. What was very evident was a lack of coordination and systematic implementation of the curriculum, the term “ad hoc” was used by a number of participants as a descriptive adjective.

Other subjects had structured texts and they have structured courses. RE was more a case of finding your way around, talking to people for support, talking to people about what resources they’d been using. GS 1

This informal support was most evident in the way teachers helped each other in the absence of structured and coordinated assistance:

I can’t even remember if we had RE coordinators in those days. We certainly didn’t have the sort of meetings we have today…everybody was in the same boat and you would say hey I just did this really great thing with my class and you would share things, word sheets etc but there wasn’t a great deal of support. PG 2

Many of the teachers referred to being aware that the Melbourne Guidelines had been introduced and these helped establish a “base” for classroom practice.

Once the Guidelines came out then there was at least that direction, even if you didn’t have the networking available or the time to work with teachers outside RE meetings. At least you had that stated direction and you could accumulate resources and ideas for where you wanted to go and still base it on that. GS 2

RE: Content and Process

Classroom RE in the period under investigation was in the recollections of the participants in this study different in both content and process to what is done today. In terms of process the strongest influence on how RE was taught in the classroom was trying to refer as often as possible to the experiential world of the student. As one participant put it, “we were doing a lot more stuff with kids about what they thought of things and what they felt, trying to relate it to their own experience” NG 2.

This emphasis on experiential learning lead to a bias toward a particular type of content, namely those topics which best lent themselves to discussion and which students had an obvious entrée point. Two examples are given below:

The units of RE we focussed on human relationships, human development, and a lot of things that were essential. It became central of all the things we worked. PV 3

There were always girls with moral dilemmas. We did a lot of that. They could come to class and talk about pros and cons. We did a lot of talking. MN 1

These content changes were not as explicit as the new processes as they were of a more conceptual nature. Whereas, teachers needs to confront changes in pedagogy directly as these impacted on their daily work, the new conceptual base reflected the larger movements in theology at the time. These changes were not often well understood or articulated by the participants in this study who were seeing these developments one or two times removed from the source. Often those in leadership positions, who had some type of preparation, were the ones who initiated change in the way RE was regarded and what topics were covered.
The principal went off to do a course at the CEO and when he got back he told us that the way we did things in RE had to be completely redone. It was a big shock because none of us shared his experience of the seminar... I remember one thing that he [the principal] (was) a big one was a new way of understanding Jesus, we needed to make him much more human and relevant to the lives of teenagers. PK 4

A number of participants recalled how the principals of the schools they worked in, at the time, took a strong interest in RE and tried to implement change but this was done informally. As one participant noted she would “often find a lesson outline popped in your pigeon hole”.

What emerged from the interviews was a sense that while changes in both the content and process of RE were taking place, there was little in the way of structured practical support or focussed explanation for new concepts that were filtering through to schools. The post conciliar era was undoubtedly a time of change but it would seem that this change was not well supported in schools. This is not to say that teachers did not enjoy the experience of teaching RE in the period under examination. Some of the participants saw this era as differing from the present in that RE then allowed for a type of interaction between teacher and student that was more informal and personal, as one participant put it, “I had a ball because the kids did, I think the staff did. It was all junior staff at the time and we loved the freedom”. MJ 6

When participants were asked about the content of RE many drew a contrast between that period and what is typical in contemporary classrooms. This contrast was often put in terms of a far greater academic focus today.

No RE wasn’t academic then, not like now. I would say it had a wishy-washy focus. There was very little kind of academic stuff at all. It was very much experiential. There’s nothing wrong with that. It was very much sort of outreach and that was fine too. But it didn’t have the foundation there. JC 2

In order to better understand the changes in content, participants were asked directly how they approached a number of central topics in religious education. One of these was teaching about Jesus. When asked about this many of the participants sought above all to present Jesus as a human figure, who dealt with the issues that all people face. One participant recalled being told by a coordinator that the old Jesus was the Jesus of the Sacred Heart, ethereal and other worldly, “a Jesus for a different time”. Other participants did not recall how they taught about Jesus except to note that it was not a big part of the curriculum as the chosen topics reflected those which teenagers would, at least on the surface, find interesting and had some practical application. As one participant noted “we focused on Gospel values and tried to incorporate these into what stage of their life and their development” BU 4.

A number of other key themes were investigated and a general trend emerged that saw the content of religious education take a naturalistic turn and move away from topics and themes that had a metaphysical dimension. As one participant commented “At the time we couldn’t figure out if [RE] trying to be religious, or humanistic” RC 2

This was reflective of contemporary theological discussions that had ramifications for how Catholic schools approached content material in religious education. Most teachers could not contextualize these tensions well, but their practice, nonetheless, were influenced by these debates even if the school did not communicate the underlying conceptual issues well. To take as an illustrative example of the wider theological discussion taking place at the time consider differing Christologies that were emerging from Europe.

The emphasis on the human Jesus was reflective of a wider theological discussion on how to present Jesus in the contemporary cultural milieu. Contrasting views in this discussion can be found in the work of such extremely influential theologians as Hans Kung and Walter Kaspar. Kung argued against a “dogmatic” representation and in favour of an understanding of Christ that emerged from engagement with his human actions. The general orientation here is sometimes described as a movement toward a “Christology from
“below” and Kung argued that such a shift was appropriate for the times, “a historical Christology from below, in the light of the concrete Jesus [is] more suited to modern man”, (Kung, 1977, 133). This approach to Christology was hotly contested. Many saw this as a profound mistake because it placed enormous strain on how the Church had traditionally understood and taught who Jesus is. In this view what needed always to be stressed was the continuity in the Church’s understanding of Christ and an indispensable part of this was seeing Christ as the Divine Logos, the God from God of the Nicean formula. This is well put by Kaspar (1996, p. 315) when he writes:

A Christology purely “from below” is therefore condemned to failure. Jesus understands himself “from above” in his whole human existence. The transition from anthropological to theological viewpoint cannot be carried out without a break. A decisive change of standpoint is required.

From the interviews conducted here it seems that the Jesus from below hypotheses was well supported in Catholic schools in the period under review. Not that the teachers involved realized the theological underpinnings that supported these ideas. None of the participants could recall being given any instruction of these contrasting Christologies or how to integrate them but this is another instance of how change at this time was not supported by, in this case, in-service training.

How the students would have reacted to this emphasis on the human Jesus can only be speculated on. What appears to be clear is that the pantocrator Christ, passing judgement, which was such a strong feature of earlier Catholic narratives was not a part of the school experiences of Catholics in the period under investigation. The human Jesus was not a judgemental one, but at the same time he was a somewhat nondescript figure, hovering somewhere between heaven and earth. Rather the Christ that many would have heard about in religious education class was a diffuse one, who at most times was allied to their own experiences as heavy emphasis was placed on his human qualities, or as one participant put it “we always stressed in our teaching to students that Jesus was their friend”.

The experience of teachers in this study is suggestive of an emphasis on a hermeneutic of discontinuity. The changes in Catholic schools signified most strongly, perhaps, by the change in personnel had ramifications for how the tradition was seen in situ. Although many of the old positions were severely challenged the more difficult task of what was to replace them was not fully addressed. As one participant perceptively commented “it was like our road map had need taken from us and we had to make our own way” PH 2. This type of change has immediate and practical consequences in the daily operations of the school. One a deeper level, however, it brings into question the way in which the tradition is understood and how the school and the individual teacher is connected to it.

What implications, then, did the changes to RE in schools have for the shape of many Catholic narratives and can we learn something from this experience for how RE is approached today? In the first instance, it made many of the narratives of post concilar Catholic less powerful than those that had preceded them. Powerful here is not a synonym for positive. Rather the changes going on in Catholic schools, as typified by the RE program, left a more ambiguous legacy. Gone were the strong and almost iconic images of a Church that was sure of its message and especially of its continuity. As often happens in times of rapid change what replaced this surety was not yet fully formed. It is likely that for many post conciliar Catholics their narratives of what it was like to grow up Catholic will reflect some of the dislocation evident in schools at the time.

In terms of how RE is taught today, there are lessons to be learned when traditions move too quickly to disavow their past, even if this is done in an unconscious way. As Wuthnow (1993, p. 48) puts it “the church must... be backward looking; it has a special mission to preserve the past, to carry on a tradition”. If change is to be successfully implemented then it must be well managed and planned for. This is especially so for agencies which bear the substantial burden of representing the tradition to the public. Any religious group and certainly one with the ancient roots of Catholicism needs to make its history a strong aspect of its claims for plausibility (Berger and Luckman, 1967).
Plausibility structures must be able to provide a clear and cogent explanation of the faith to those within the community, especially at times when individuals are challenged. One factor which assists in building up cognitive plausibility is a sense that the tradition not only has plausible reasons for existence but also that these reasons have some historical gravitas (Donovan, 1997). This is one of the advantages of seeing, as Benedict XVI does, Catholic teaching in the post conciliar era in terms of a hermeneutic of continuity. If beliefs change precipitously it always leaves the question, especially to the uninitiated, of whether what they are being told now is it fact reliable and durable. MacIntyre (1984, 221) points out how the history of individuals is inextricably linked with the “larger and longer histories of a number of traditions”. The more credible these larger histories are the more embedded the individuals becomes. Smith (2003, p.103-106) speaks of religion as a super-empirical moral order but one that must be secure and not in a state of flux, much less reversal or dramatic lineal change.

Often emphasis on discontinuity is done to stress a new, superior approach as if some fresh, novel insight has been discovered. There was a clear sense in this study that many key topics in RE such as Christology were presented in a way that juxtaposed what had been done in the past. Kolvenbach (2007), however, points out the problem with this view, from a Catholic perspective, when he comments, “The newness of the Lord is not found in the hermeneutics of discontinuity, a breaking with the past, but, as Pope Benedict XVI pointed out, in the hermeneutic of continuity”. The “new” Jesus is the one who is inextricably linked to the Jesus of Christian heritage, who is encountered in the historic community of faith which must do all it can to proclaim his abiding presence. Jesus then is not constructed but discovered.

**Conclusion**

It may be that what is needed today is to recapture something of the middle ground in how Catholic schools should represent where the Church sits in a historical continuum. The post conciliar era stressed the newness of many situations and the continuity of the tradition before and after the Council may have been neglected. In the current historical circumstance it may be appropriate to reemphasis the continuity of the tradition. To return to the example of Christology Dulles (1994) commented that after the Council that a significant struggle developed between those who wished to develop a more personalist Christology and those who saw no change as necessary. This struggle was largely resolved in favour of those who advocated change. A new challenge has emerged, however, which needs to be addressed, namely, where the connection of Christ to the distinctive memory of the faith tradition is called into question. Dulles (1995, p.27) notes:

> Since about 1975 an equal and opposite problem has arisen. Under pressure of the historical and cultural relativism that dominates the secular culture of our day, some Christians and Catholics have lost confidence in the permanent and universal value of revealed truth. It has become necessary to insist against this trend that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION WITH GENERATION Y CHILDREN OF EASTERN CATHOLIC MIGRANTS

Abstract

Given that religion and spirituality influence identity and behaviour, it becomes apparent that Religious Education has the task to foster those aspects that are most associated with positive identity and behavioural outcomes in students. Furthermore, with evidence of significant variations in the way Generation Y children of Eastern Catholic migrants express and understand their religion and spirituality in contrast to Generation Y Anglo Australians, this study highlights the multidimensionality of Religious Education in Catholic schools. Religious Education of tomorrow must be open to different avenues for Generation Y students both Catholic and Eastern Catholic to be engaged in. This includes particular focus on spirituality, cultural identity, belonging, community building and faith convictions. Recommendations are offered to cater for these students.

An Opening Reflection

As a religious educator one becomes familiar with coursework and can map out exciting lessons to engage students, including the challenges of faith, religious truths emerging from Scripture, time to meditate, the hope of ecumenical movements, social justice works, and the wisdom distilled from the writings of scholars. And as religious educators over the years, scores of students are guided, taught, nurtured, prayed for and listened to. One comes to name God to their students but yet do we allow students to name God in newer or different terms?

To name God is to name from the very experience of our lives, from our history, culture and needs. The call of Religious Education is for teachers and students, to value experience, to forge relationships, to speak the stories and then and only then, to name God together.

Eastern Rites in the Religious Education Syllabus

One recent example of the call to name God in wider terms was voiced by the Eastern Rite Catholic Bishops in Australia (Maronite, Melkite, Ukraine and Chaldean). The Bishops endorsed a paper they had commissioned (2009) where they voiced a strong complaint to the Latin Church Australian Bishops, the National Catholic Education Commission, the Catholic Education Offices and Catholic Teachers of Australia, concerning Religious Education and treatment of Eastern Rite Catholic children in Australian Catholic schools. A major concern was that children of Eastern Catholic descent in Roman Catholic schools, were educated in a Latin Catholic spirituality to the extent that they abandoned their Eastern Church of origin. Ignorance among Catholic school teachers was demonstrated by the regular religious practices offered, which was a one size fits all approach. Recommendations put forward by the Bishops included inviting Eastern Catholic priests to celebrate the Divine Liturgy, as well as extending pastoral hospitality to Eastern Catholic clergy in those cases where large numbers of Eastern Catholics are enrolled. It was also recommended that in-services be offered in regards to the needs of Eastern Catholics in schools.

In response Rymarz (2009) wrote, ‘In terms of the formal religious education curriculum there is a case for including more material on Eastern Catholic Churches in existing units as well as developing the new ones that have a distinctive Eastern theological focus.’ The concerns by the Eastern Bishops are a timely
reminder that when we do theology in the classroom, there are numerous contexts that need to be considered from religious beliefs, to nationalities, to a variety of cultural practices of students. So how do we allow God to be named in the classroom?

Enculturation

The Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite in the Second Vatican Council documents commences with, ‘The Catholic Church holds in high esteem the institutions, liturgical rites, ecclesiastical traditions and the established standards of the Christian life of the Eastern Churches.’ As the Eastern Catholic Churches are called to be in communion with the universal Church and wider community, the Australian Church also has the responsibility to work towards new ways of being Church, to avoid the possibility of forcing these believers to retreat into a cultural ghetto, holding to old styles of being and identity, so as to maintain a sense of belonging. This call flows into Catholic classrooms.

Religion never exists in a vacuum, but always in a matrix of culture from which it cannot readily be separated. As Pope John Paul II (1982:7) stated, ‘The synthesis between culture and faith is not just a demand of culture, but also of faith. A faith that does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not fully lived out.’ This implies that symbols, devotions, customs and traditions, adopted by ethnic Catholics are acknowledged by the Church.

The call for enculturation as encouraged in Gaudium et Spes requires solutions to the challenges that come with being a Church in a foreign country, including nationalistic ties to faith, the challenge of religious diversity and how to sustain an environment where plurality of viewpoints can flourish without giving rise to division. This is the point where Catholic schools currently are and where Religious Education in the classroom requires what Evangelii Nuntiandi states as ‘Legitimate attention... to the very deep aspirations of peoples and human communities to find their own identity even more clearly.’

Identity and spirituality are dynamic, continually being rediscovered by generations in different places and times. In an era of openness to all, different cultures and mentalities offer new challenges and expressions of identity, faith and spirituality. So what is the world view of children of Eastern Catholic migrants who have settled in Australia? What role does family, culture and religious values play, while experiencing a Western, secular lifestyle? Such questions in regards to religious identity and spiritual needs of these young people will be worked through in this paper, which is a coming together of experiences of children of Eastern Catholic migrants, of Australian research into religious identity of young people, of theological reflection, and of Religious Education in schools today.

Australians and religious affiliation

Today’s secondary Catholic schools have engaged learners of the Generation Y cohort born between 1980 and 2000, who have experienced a society characterized by the cultural plurality of post modernity, consumerism, dislocated families, and a shift towards gender equality.

The Spirit of Generation Y (2003-2006), a three-year study of youth spirituality in Australia by Mason, Singleton, and Weber (2007), found three types of spirituality that emerged among this cohort including Traditional (46%), New Age (17%) and Secular (28%). These young people relied on family and friends as the source of their beliefs, values and social support. The attendance at religious services was low, even among those who were adherents of a religion. Reasons given included the irrelevance of Church to life today, being out of touch, and unable to connect with people, and it was a significant minority of young people who found the communal life and activities attractive.
In other data, the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 Census for 2006 indicated that, in terms of religious affiliation, the number of Catholics had slightly increased, though in the overall percentage of the national population, the percentage had fallen. Furthermore, the Catholic Church had one of the highest proportions of people born in non-English speaking countries. People born overseas in non-English speaking countries were more likely to be church goers (31%) than those born in Australia (19%). This is a result of the understanding that for some ethnic groups, Church involvement forms part of their identity and sense of community. If we account for these data on religious affiliation, there are implications for schools and the Religious Education program?

If Church is no longer the place where contemporary life dialogues with religion, many Generation Y people will only find this opportunity in schools and Religious Education classes. Furthermore, though the Church is considered irrelevant, some young people still seek communal life and activities offered by the parish. Is this an invitation for schools to become the first place of welcome and belonging, engaging young people in community building activities, while incorporating religious insights into everyday issues? With the absence of Church life, and a Western society characterised by multiculturalism, pluralism of faiths and a tendency towards secularism, individualism and racism, young peoples’ faith and spirituality become essential components in their formation and identity. As students are a product of contemporary society, by doing contextual theology in classrooms, ministry becomes faithful and effective.

Influence of family and ethnic heritage

Crawford and Rossiter (2006) proposed that people develop a sense of personal identity through a complex interplay between five centres of influence. These include the popular culture; a distinctive ethnic and/or religious heritage; national identification; personal need, interests and ambitions; and family or friendship groups. For the purpose of this study, attention will be paid to the ethnic and/or religious heritage.

In the study of Generation Y by Mason et al (2007) factors which influenced young people to remain active Christians included the denomination to which the respondent belonged, parent’s commitment, attendance of friends, family intactness, and the type of school attended. More importantly, ethnic parents held on more closely to religious faith and passed this on to their children, particularly fathers born in non-English speaking countries.

The study by de Souza & Rymarz (2003) of young Australian Copts, revealed that most tried to base their life on their religious teachings and that attendance at worship helped to develop their spirituality, suggesting there were no discernible differences between their cultural, religious and spiritual identity. Factors that may have led to the close bonding between family and religious community, included motivation for members of small communities to gather together, and to offer support and strength amidst the wide diversity of Australian society. Such interaction may promote the cultural identity of individuals, and their emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Another factor was that a majority of their parents were born in Egypt. Thus, their identity may have been strongly linked to the cultural and religious identity of their homeland, a place where many have suffered persecution for their religious beliefs. This situation may strengthen the resolve to maintain their religious heritage in Australia’s secular and pluralistic society.

Similarly, a recent study of young Maronite Catholics in Western Sydney (Ghosn, 2008) revealed that participants highly valued their religious tradition and attendance at Church services was essential to their life pattern. Their religious faith was tightly interwoven with their identity. The spirituality of the young Maronite adults revealed influential factors of Lebanese culture, and parish events including Faith and Bible discussions, praying the rosary and weekend retreats. The Maronite Eastern Catholic Church, was crucial for the second-generation members, as one of the few institutions in Australian society that effectively provided a sense of belonging and group identity.
Immigrants can use different aspects of their religion to develop patterns of group identity, such as ethnic or national identity. This not only clearly shows how religious identity can be subordinate to other forms of group identity, but how it can also be used to support the creation or maintenance of other types of group identities. As ethnic Eastern Catholic youth find themselves in a western worldview characterized by individualism and secularism, then, according to Dumont (2003:370):

Religion can also provide an effective compensatory status to (im)migrants, minority groups, and individuals by offering support, protection, a moral code, self-esteem, and a positive self-image in alien surroundings. Religion can help (im)migrants to find an identity and something to hold on to in an overwhelming flow of changing processes in a world characterised by homogenisation, fragmentation, and migration.

Maintaining ethnic identity involves the preservation of history, language, customs, social networks and religion. In schools, students of the same ethnic backgrounds group together while maintaining boundaries with others who differ in faith, values or nationality. Noble, Poynting and Tabar (1999) studied a group of Christian and Muslim boys who described themselves as Lebanese-Australian. Their friendship groups at school were based either on ethnicity or religion, ‘If it was just Lebanese society, then it would come under religion... like, because there are other cultures, it would come under Lebanese.’ Their Lebanese identity was based on shared symbols of language, family, values, customs, tradition and religion. Yet Powers (1996) emphasized that hospitality be the norm:

To receive the other as other and to let others see us as other. The diversity manifests both the richness beyond imagining of the forms of humanity and of God’s being in the world. It also manifests the other hidden in the self and not yet imagined or named.

In contrast to studies on Eastern Catholic migrant youth, Engebretson’s (1999) research among boys in Victorian Catholic secondary schools, suggested that experiences of Church were irrelevant to the lives of Australian teenagers who were mostly of Anglo Saxon background. Yet there was a general belief in God and willingness to think about the ‘more to life’ questions.

In the findings from Australian Youth Spirituality Research, Hughes (2007) noted that the ways most young Australians thought about religion was quite different from the way many young immigrants spoke of it. All migrants were positive about the Christian faith, attending church frequently with their families. Several commented that the Christian faith taught them to be good people and offered rules and duties for life. There was an assumption that they were judged by religion rather than that they could judge or evaluate religious faith. Children of recently arrived immigrants viewed religion as the ground of their cultural heritage. It was part of the world in which they operated, the foundation of the ethnic community of which they were a part. In contrast, the majority of Anglo-Celtic young people said that it was a good thing to question their faith, displayed less encouraging attitudes towards Christian religion and lower attendance. So how does Religious Education in the classroom respond to needs of Catholics and Eastern Catholic, whose needs and assumptions differ?

Young people learn attitudes and behaviour from what significant others such as parents, teachers and peers, reinforce for them. As Pope Paul VI stated in Evangelii Nuntiandi, ‘the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life.’ Religious educators in multicultural classrooms are then, firstly called to witness to Christ, listening and engaging in the many cultural perspectives of their students.

The School Setting

The central task of Religious Education in Catholic schools has always been to foster faith, spirituality and missionary growth in students. As Religious educators, teachers are mentors who carry responsibility and
opportunity to spend time with young people in the classroom setting to discuss issues in life, just as Jesus spent extended time with his disciples.

Religious Education is an academic endeavour but also incorporates a pastoral role, cultural engagement, dialogue, spirituality, social action, and theological insights. It is life giving to the audience it engages with, in this case young students from a wealth of nationalities, faiths and cultures. Creating a sense of community and offering the challenge to search and name God in the different ways that young people tell their stories becomes the goal of Religious Education in schools.

For many young people spirituality is found within the active style of their religious practices, but most importantly, in retreats or reflection days. In a study by Hughes (2007), a group of Australian youth in a Catholic school, were asked what was the most fun they ever had. They unanimously responded it was a retreat in which they had glimpsed something of the sacredness of the other and the spirituality of close friendships. Retreats allow students to get away from the noise and pressure and allow teachers to get below the surface and to build up trust. Aside from this, liturgical experience, the sacramental life, rituals and prayer, need to find a place in the Religious Education syllabus, for these are the ways that many young people connect or experience the transcendent. Inviting priests of the Eastern Rites to celebrate their Divine Liturgy, as endorsed by the Bishops, demands worthy attention. Other activities could include prayers written and prayed by Eastern Rite children that refer to their family struggles back in their homeland, or perhaps discussion around the life of one of their Eastern Catholic saints (e.g.: Saint Charbel). Such possibilities are easy to implement and allow these young children to feel that their religious beliefs and values are honoured and respected by other Catholics.

A relevant Religious Education programme will pass the Good News on in language, symbols and rituals, that Generation Y are familiar with. From that frame work, teachers can then take students into a deeper understanding of their faith that finds expression in universal symbols, in efforts to unite multicultural students under shared values and religious teaching. As research reveals, many young Eastern Catholics highly value their religion, and it follows since young people listen and are influenced by other young people, the classroom is the perfect setting to invite those of Eastern Catholic background to express the Good News through their stories and experiences, which encourages leadership and transformation.

In regards to Pastoral care in the Religious Education syllabus, students’ stories include contexts of time and place, witnessing, the experience of other faiths and multiculturalism, tradition, family disintegration and ethnic hostilities. Teachers who value the story of students and accept their different cultural backgrounds, offer students purpose to their lives. Teachers in other words, are theologians who will seek to engage in conversation with their students, as they journey together in search for truth. For young children of migrants, expressing the power of the gospel in their own particular cultural practice at school provides distinctive expressions to their hopes and possibilities as Australians.

Spirituality is not limited to a personal relationship with God, but also in connection with the self and with others, that is, it is communal. It is experienced through others, social action, in quiet time but also in engagement with family and friends, through traditions and culture, performance of rituals, and named through saints, stories and symbols. The school community is called to reflect the collective cultural system of migrant parents, and Religious Education that encourages love, support and appreciation for the diversity of life, enables community and relationships among multicultural students.

Religious Education classes are called to encourage openness to differences, and affirmation of the other, their life principles, religious beliefs and identity. Through their capacity to confer positive value on group identity, schools enable students to challenge the negative group-image and stereotypes imposed by the larger Australian society. Religious Education also strengthens hyphenated identity by supporting general aspects of culture and traditions, and by reinforcing religious value orientations. Religious Education is called to add weight to a social consciousness. Furthermore entering into the social concerns of Eastern
Catholics, many of whom have experienced oppression back in their homeland, offers the possibility of peace.

The appeal of the classroom for many second-generation members will lie in its capacity to provide a positive social identity, group empowerment, social networks with other young people, while also maintaining their own traditions. Religious Education programmes focusing on spiritual growth and leadership, affirmation and empowerment, would enable young people of different migrant and religious backgrounds to connect with one another, an opportunity little afforded elsewhere.

Finally teachers need to educate themselves on the different Rites that are used. Some resources that teachers can refer to in regards to Eastern Rites include the Journal of the Melkite Catholic Eparchy of Australia and New Zealand or Marounia. Magazine of the Maronite Eparchy of Australia or the Eastern Catholics in Australia issued by the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference. Teachers of Religious Education have the task of being creative, culturally relevant, community focused, spiritually engaging and open to dialogue.

Conclusion

Catholic schools are a viable institution for children of Eastern Catholic migrants seeking certainties of identity, faith conviction and a sense of belonging in the midst of a multicultural Australian society. Generation Y students, both children of migrants and those born here, both Catholics and Eastern Rite Catholics, seek affirmation of their faith and cultural values, empowering relationships and spiritual awareness. With the questions of identity, faith and belonging, holding importance for Generation Y, Religious Education in Australia, in the twenty first century is called to be spiritually enriching and socially engaging for these young people.

Religious Education teaches a theology of tomorrow that expands understanding to incorporate more rather than less, difference rather than conformity, and acceptance rather than division. Then as a school community of young Anglo people seeking spirituality, of first and second generation children of Eastern Catholic migrants embracing religion as a source of identity, and of teachers of Religious Education who are theologians and mentors, together they can share their stories, cultures, values, religious practices and experiences, and so come to truly know and name God.

References


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INTEGRATING CHILDREN’S LITERATURE INTO THE CLASSROOM RELIGION PROGRAM

Abstract

With its capacity to captivate and ignite the imagination, story is often central to the classroom religion program offering students opportunities to engage with and develop spiritual, moral and religious concepts and the language to express such concepts. Children’s literature may provide doorways into the life-worlds of others. It offers glimpses of how others interact with life and all life has to offer. Children both relate to and identify with characters, events and issues and in the process can learn a little more about themselves and their own life-worlds. This article explores a number of children’s literature titles and specifically outlines how each can introduce religious concepts and language to students. Introducing students to such language and concepts using contemporary picture books immediately captures their imaginations, as they are able to relate to the characters, events and ideas conveyed in the books. It also affords students opportunities to explore sensitive and personal issues from a safe distance, as they do not have to declare their own involvement.

Introduction

Children’s literature offers classroom religion teachers creative and concrete ways of introducing, supporting and extending the classroom religion program. Saxby (1997) maintains that worthwhile books that endure do so, “not only because they challenge the reader but because they illuminate the human spirit. They reach down to the core of what it is to be human” (p. 12). The value of children’s literature in nurturing children’s spiritual and religious development has been extensively documented (Pike, 2004; Trousdale, 2007; Witte-Townsend & DiGiulio, 2004). Among other things, children’s literature affords teachers opportunities to facilitate children’s “access and entry” into religious language, symbols, images, and rituals, all of which have to be “translated into personally meaningful categories” (Tacey, 2000, p. 205). As teachers, if we facilitate students’ entering these doorways, they are able to engage deeply with the stories, developing their skills to analyse and critique such stories, to gain deeper understandings and meanings into what it is to be fully human.

This article explores a number of children’s literature titles and specifically outlines how each can introduce religious concepts and language to students. Introducing students to such language and concepts using contemporary picture books immediately captures their imaginations, as they are able to relate to the characters, events and ideas conveyed in the books. It also affords students opportunities to explore sensitive and personal issues from a safe distance, as they do not have to declare their own involvement. Luke (as cited in Anstey & Bull, 2000) suggests “that children will construct their characters and future in relation to the cultural texts they encounter”, and believes “the characters and contexts found in books provide templates that children use to interpret and explain their identities and the world around them” (p. 190).

Before we explore how specific picture books can be used in the religion classroom, it is first important that we consider a number of issues surrounding students’ abilities to learn and understand in the religion classroom. Although the theory of developmental psychology as proposed by Piaget has limitations, it is, nonetheless, a theory that has lasted and continues to inform us about children’s cognitive development.
Children are not able to think abstractly until the formal operational stage at the ages of between 12 and 15 years and it is during the preoperational stage, when children are between the ages of 2 and 7 years that their development of language and other symbolic systems take place. Many religious concepts and symbols are complex and abstract, beyond the thinking abilities of early childhood and primary aged students. The links between their own concrete experiences and environment to the more abstract ideas of religion need to be scaffolded. It is at this point that we can turn to, and call upon, Vygotsky’s (1978) theories of development which take on a sociocultural view arguing that children’s social and cultural environments shape their development. Vygotsky argues that higher mental functions are developed through social interactions between adults and children, in which children’s language and cognitive development is scaffolded within the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

Influenced by Piaget and Kohlberg, Fowler’s (1981) theories about the stages of faith development provide religious educators with many insights regarding children’s cognitive development specifically within the religion classroom. He emphasised the role of trusted adults in the first stage, which he initially described as a pre-stage and named it as Undifferentiated Faith. In the next stage of Intuitive-Projective Faith when children are between the ages of two and six years, powerful images presented in stories give form to the child’s understanding and feelings towards the ultimate environment. During the Mythic-Literal Faith stage which includes children between the ages of six and eleven years, “story becomes the major way of giving unity and value to experience” (p. 149). As the child develops in this stage, awareness of the clash or contradiction between stories compels greater reflection on meanings. The reliance on literalism begins to break down. The developing child begins to take the perspective of others in confronting the contradictions they encounter.

It becomes apparent that these theories of cognitive and faith development provide us as teachers with key insights into how to best scaffold students in their development of religious concepts and language. Story provides us with an effective starting point. Our teaching roles are therefore pivotal in opening and developing such templates for students. These roles involve making the phenomena, experiences and feelings known, deeply known, as well as constructing the language to express such knowing. It is through these encounters that young students can begin to understand and articulate their own identities, their relationships with each other and their environments, all of which contribute to the religion program’s capacity to be more relevant and transformative. This article will discuss the following strategies for integrating children’s literature into the classroom religion program:

- Sacramental themes
- Themes of liturgical seasons
- Religious themes such social justice

Sacramental Themes

DiGidio (1991) argues that sacraments are lived long before they are celebrated and they are lived in community. Children come to understand sacraments through living in relationship in families. Part of sacramental education should include an exploration of sacramental themes and such themes are embedded in relationships. The overriding conceptual understanding embedded in all sacraments is that of relationship. Each sacrament plays its own unique role in developing and strengthening relationships: Sacraments of Initiation in welcoming, identifying, nurturing, building, affirming, nourishing, and celebrating relationships; Sacraments of Healing in renewing, repairing, reconciling, healing, empathising with and supporting relationships; and Sacraments of Commitment in deepening, strengthening, committing to, and sharing relationships.

When students are introduced to the sacraments, it is essential that they are able to understand how the Church emphasises sacramentality with its members. What do these sacraments mean in the life of a believer? How does what happens to them in and during a sacramental rite translate to their own lives?
Before students can begin to comprehend what it means for believers to live sacramentally, they must first know what aspects of the sacraments translate to life. Initially then, before complex theological concepts are explored, sacramental themes and concepts need to be introduced so that students can see the ‘lived’ elements of the sacraments. A concrete way for introducing such a seemingly abstract concept is to highlight sacramental themes in children’s literature.

The sacrament of Eucharist celebrates community, nourishing, sharing, memory and sacrifice. All of these themes are evident in the book, *Let’s Eat* by Ana Zamorano and illustrated by Julie Vivas (1996), which is suitable for students in the early years. *Let’s Eat* is a story of a family who gathers everyday to share lunch. This meal is filled with much talking, laughing, and sharing of great food. During one week, these gatherings were not the usual joyous and boisterous times, as a different family member for one reason or another was missing each day. Each day Mamá would sigh, “Ay qué pena! What a pity.” Even Mamá herself is missing on Saturday, as she has gone into hospital to have baby Rosa. “Ay qué pena!” sighs Antonio. However, the following Sunday much excitement and merriment abounds, as everyone is together at last, including baby Rosa! “Qué maravilla!” sighs Mamá. “How wonderful that everyone is eating together!”

Initial discussions could focus on community and the importance of having everyone present to share the lunchtime meal. Teachers could emphasise the concept of community by comparing the feelings and atmosphere at the family meals on those days when someone was missing for the two meals where, usually, everyone was gathered. Draw out from students why on those days when everyone was present, was so much more celebration and joy obvious? Draw a picture of a big table and surround it with students’ descriptions of all the feelings and happenings of those times when everyone gathered. Make comparisons to students’ own family celebrations when many of their relatives and/or friends are present and how they differ from other times. Discuss table fellowship and link to the concept of the Mass as a form of table fellowship around which the family of the Church gathers to celebrate.

Discuss with students those times when the extended family comes together to share not only good food, but also wonderful stories, which are memories of times gone by. Relate this to believers’ experiences in coming together at the Eucharist to remember Jesus at his last supper. To make the term, sacrifice, more concrete, discuss it in terms of the sacrifices Mama and Papa in the story may have made to provide these wonderful meals for their family. What sacrifices do students’ parents and caregivers make? What sacrifices can students themselves make, not only in helping prepare meals, but also in sharing their own food or possessions during times of collecting for the missions and so on? All of these actions are living the sacraments. Introducing them through literature affords students opportunities to see how such themes can be lived.

A book that develops Eucharistic themes suitable for upper primary is *The Keeping Quilt* (Polacco, 2001). This is a story of a quilt and its significance for Patricia’s family who migrated from Russia to New York. It spans six generations. Not long after they arrived, Anna (Patricia’s great-grandma) grew out of her dress and babushka. While her mother sewed a new dress from other family members’ discarded clothes, she decided to make a quilt, which would remind everyone of their homeland. Family and friends cut out animals and flowers from the scraps of clothing and sewed an intricate quilt bordered with Anna’s old red babushka. The quilt was used during the family’s most memorable and significant events. Teachers could draw two big “Symbol Wheels” (Hill & McLoughlin, 1995). Place the word “quilt” in the middle of the first circle and ask students to add the things for which the quilt was used:

- As a tablecloth used every Friday evening at Sabbath;
- As a picnic rug on the day that Patricia’s Great-Grandpa asked Anna to marry him;
- As the huppa under which they were married;
- As a shawl to be wrapped around their first daughter to welcome her into the world;
- As the huppa at Patricia’s own wedding; and
- As the shawl to be wrapped around her own baby daughter.
Emphasise with students that the quilt became a symbol of precious memories for the family. It represented their struggling times as a family (making clothes from other members’ clothes rather than being able to buy new ones) and happy times.

Write the word, Eucharist, in the middle of the second symbol wheel. Ask students to state what believers remember and celebrate in the Eucharist. Students will be able to realise the significance of both symbol and Eucharist for Christians, as they explore the quilt’s place in the lives of this family.

**Themes of Liturgical Seasons**

Children’s literature also offers opportunities to explore themes related to the Church’s liturgical seasons. The Christian year passes through five main liturgical seasons, which revolve around the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: Advent, Christmas, Ordinary Time, Lent, and Easter. The liturgical years follow a three year cycle: Year A which focuses on the Gospel of Mark, Year B whose focus is the Gospel of Matthew and Year C which focuses on the Gospel of Luke. The seasons follow the same rhythm and pattern but focus on each of the different gospels according to the designated year. It is important that students understand the nature of the liturgical seasons and their significance to the Church’s liturgy. Each liturgical season emphasises particular themes:

- **Advent** in preparation for the birth of Jesus emphasises themes of expectancy, anticipation, awakening, journey and so on. It focuses on the Annunciation, Mary’s role as the mother of Christ, John the Baptist as the herald of Jesus’ ministry and so on.
- **Christmas** celebrates the birth of Jesus.
- **Lent** is a time of repentance, conversion and a change of heart.
- **Easter** celebrates the death and resurrection of Jesus and its key themes are hope, new life, salvation and so on.
- **Ordinary Time** focuses on all other aspects of the life of Jesus. During these times, we hear about Jesus’ relationships with those around him, the role of discipleship and what that means in the life of believers.

In making students more aware of such themes in everyday contemporary life, they are able to relate more realistically to liturgical themes. Such themes are the central focus of many children’s literature titles. The following sections outline specific books, which can be used for the liturgical seasons of Advent, Lent and Easter.

*Children’s Literature and Advent Themes*

*The Arrival* by Shaun Tan (2006) - a picture book with no text - depends on its images to tell the many stories of people who have left their home countries to come to live in new lands. Through these sepia images we meet the new arrivals and empathise with their joys and frustrations, as they encounter new and confronting experiences. Each image captures people in different moments: being processed on arrival in officious and bureaucratic ways; trying to communicate their needs in a foreign language; experiencing sights, sounds and tastes that are unfamiliar; and unexpectedly finding a welcoming stranger and a place to stay. This book evokes many themes centred on journey including: expectancy, anticipation, belonging, acceptance, tolerance, generosity, hospitality, and so on. Such themes are central to the season of Advent and thus *The Arrival* provides an effective entry into these themes of Advent.

One way of bringing such themes to students’ awareness is to focus on various characters’ senses, feelings and emotions during their experiences. An effective activity for engaging students in such ways is the completion of a sense story. Place students into groups and assign each group a different series of images from the book, which tell the story of one of the characters. As they view these images, ask them to brainstorm and list what this character sees, hears, smells, tastes, and feels, as he/she is involved in the
various activities shown in the images. When they have completed this task, ask them to then discuss what would some of these characters’ emotions be as they went through such experiences.

*Children’s Literature and Lenten Themes*

Lenten themes of repentance, conversion and change of heart are evident in the book, *The Red Tree* also by Shaun Tan (2001), which is more suitable for upper primary or lower secondary students. *The Red Tree* focuses on themes of a desolate journey encompassing loneliness, isolation and depression. It eventually leads the main character to a conversion, a change of heart and renewal. A young girl wakes one morning surrounded by floating dark leaves, “sometimes the day begins with nothing to look forward to.” As the story continues, her day becomes increasingly darker, as she is consumed by her own troubles, loneliness, fears and a growing sense of confusion and concern. The strong, stark illustrations echo the thoughts on each page, but on each page a solitary red leaf is somewhere to be found. Finally, upon entering her room at the end of the day the young girl finds that it is amassed with the colour of a dazzling, red tree:

> ... but suddenly there it is  
> right in front of you  
> bright and vivid  
> quietly waiting  
> just as you imagined it would be.

This book is ideal for the season of Lent and it correlates well with Jesus’ forty days in the desert where many real parallels can be made. Just as the many images of darkness and monsters are metaphors for this young girl’s despair, so too the image of the devil for Jesus. In the end, the full blossoming of the red tree is a powerful symbol of the hope, new life, and renewal of resurrection.

*Children’s Literature and Easter Themes*

Death, despair, then hope and new life are the central themes of Easter. These themes can be challenging ones to introduce to students but there are a number of books, which link to them effectively and poignantly. *Rain Dance* by Cathy Applegate and Dee Huxley (2000) set in central Australia is a young girl’s experience of drought and its effects on her family whose farm has had to be put up for sale. The smell of rain is in the air, clouds are gathering and soon thunder resounds: “Pit...pat...pit...pat...Pitter, pitter, pat... The first drops beat out a hesitant rhythm on the corrugated-iron roof.” As the rain falls everyone breaks into laughter. Their joy and excitement are expressed through this young girl’s wild dancing until she falls soaked and exhausted onto the veranda into her mum’s arms. The final page radiates hope as the paint on the new “FARM FOR SALE” sign is shown to be washed away and the family waits moreoptimistically for their father’s return from the bank. The promise of a new beginning follows seeming despair and hopelessness.

Following the reading of this story some discussion questions to put to students include:

- How did the main character feel at the beginning of the story? At the end of the story?
- Why did the main character dance when the rain fell?
- Which is the best page of the story? Why?
- What is the message of the story?

After this exploration, students could compare and contrast the girl’s experiences and feelings with those of Jesus, before he was crucified and in one of the gospels’ accounts of when he met some of his disciples after his resurrection, such as in Luke 24:13-53, when he met two of the disciples on their way to Emmaus.

*Circles of Hope* by Karen Williams and illustrated by Linda Saport (2005) is a book of hope, faith and perseverance and is also ideal to share with students during the Easter season. It is young Facile’s story of
his gift to his newly born baby sister. As his father did for him when he was born, young Facile plants a tree for his sister. The tree his father planted for him is Facile’s and is the only tree in Haiti. Facile gets great joy from climbing his tree from which he can see everything near and far. However, the first seed he plants is eaten, the second is washed away and the third is burnt. These setbacks are not enough to daunt Facile who then builds a circle of small rocks around the seed to protect it from all kinds of harm. Finally, one of his seeds survives and grows into a tall tree for Lucia to climb. The tree planting did not stop there, and both Facile and Lucia continued to plant more mango seeds and eventually the mountainsides of Haiti became covered with trees, surrounded by circles of rocks.

Students could be encouraged to name each of the steps Facile takes to ensure his gift for his sister actually happened. It would also be useful to be explicit about the title and its many levels of meaning:

- The circle of rocks became the circle of hope for the tree;
- As the tree grew it became a symbol of Facile’s hope for his gift to his sister;
- The successful planting of the many trees also gave hope to the island ensuring that it could indeed experience regrowth.

Teachers could explore the Easter story for these same themes and the central Easter message of hope becomes more tangible for students.

Social Justice

Other key elements in the religion classroom are Catholic social justice and social teaching. Catholic teaching on justice has its foundations in Scripture, namely the teachings of the prophets and in the Gospels as both taught and lived by Jesus, and in the teachings of Thomas Aquinas (McBrien, 1995). Since the nineteenth century Catholic social teaching has been articulated in conciliar, papal and other official documents (Office for Social Justice). Some key principles of Catholic social teaching include:

- **The sacredness or dignity of the human person:** The social ministry of the Church places particular emphasis on the protection and promotion of the dignity of each person as the image of God.
- **Rights and responsibilities:** Each person has basic rights which include the right to life, food, clothing, shelter, protection, freedom (including religious freedom) and autonomy. It is also acknowledged that each person has basic responsibilities to each other, his/her family and communities.
- **Community and common good:** The social nature of the person is recognised and relationships are essential. Each person is obligated to work for the good of society, for the common good.
- **Option for the poor:** John Paul II spoke of “a preferential but not exclusive option for the poor.” Special attention to the needs of the poor is a moral obligation for all. We are all to be concerned for the common good but we are asked to weight more concern toward those without a voice and those in need.

Two worthwhile books that can be used together with upper primary students to explore themes of social justice and the above principles are *Dancing the Boom Cha Cha Boogie* by Narelle Oliver (2005) and *The Rabbits* by John Marsden and Shaun Tan (1998). *Dancing the Boom Cha Cha Boogie* deals with the theme of refugees and takes the perspective of the landowners who immediately suspect that the new arrivals have come to take their valuable food source, sea slugs. These peaceful and playful arrivals have been washed ashore after their own island was washed away in a devastating storm. The Boss Snig locks them up and demands that they leave the island as soon as their own boat is repaired. The fun-loving Murmels, who only want to dance the Boom-cha-cha Boogie, are harmless and pose no threat to the island’s inhabitants; in fact, they have much to offer this community. However, they are perceived as dangerous and threatening, and are treated accordingly.

Many relevant themes, which are now part of our everyday world in which fear is promoted, emerge from this colourful encounter between innocent arrivals, the Murmels and suspicious landowners, the Snigs. An effective strategy with this story is to have students explore the feelings, characteristics and attributes of
both the landowners and the refugees as both are explicitly described and inferred in the story. Photocopy or scan an image of both the Snigs and the Murmels and ask students to list characteristics as described or implied in the book. Direct students’ attention to the illustrations, which also provide insights into the implied attributes and characteristics.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Animals</th>
<th>Explicit descriptions or quotes suggesting characteristics &amp; attributes</th>
<th>Inferred attributes &amp; characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landowners: The Snigs</td>
<td>“No doubt you have your shifty eyes on our precious sea slugs.” “Silence!” snapped the Boss Snig.</td>
<td>Judgmental and suspicious. Powerful and bossy. Not willing to listen to arrivals’ explanations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refugees: The Murmels</td>
<td>Murmels did not have a worry in the world... The murmels awoke with a jolt. They were trapped!</td>
<td>Carefree and fun-loving. Are prisoners and judged as criminals.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Once the circumstances of this story have been explored, John Marsden and Shaun Tan’s (1998) book, *The Rabbits* can then be read. This darker book focuses on the arrival of Europeans to Australia. Its perspective is from the arrivals who are not refugees as were the Murmels in the previous story. Rather, they are invaders. The images of this book depict the indigenous landowners hiding behind trees and bushes, as they observe the arrival of strange white coloured humans with their menacing machines. These landowners are unable to prevent the eventual destruction of their land and the abduction of their children by these new arrivals. In contrast to *Dancing the Boom-Cha-Cha Boogie*, the landowners in this story are the victims and the new arrivals are far from refugees. Students can complete the same task as for the previous story: noting the feelings, characteristics and attributes of both the arrivals and the inhabitants.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>People</th>
<th>Explicit descriptions or quotes suggesting characteristics &amp; attributes</th>
<th>Inferred attributes &amp; characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Invaders: The Rabbits (Europeans)</td>
<td>They won’t understand the right ways. They only know their country. They chopped down our trees and scared away our friends...and stole our children.</td>
<td>These people do not know anything of how to live here. These people destroyed our landscape and pushed away the animals that lived there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landowners: The Aborigines</td>
<td>But some of the food made us sick, and some of the animals scared us. Rabbits spread across the country. No mountain could stop them or desert or river.</td>
<td>New foods and species were introduced to the environment and caused problems. These people were strong and could not be controlled.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When students have completed the retrieval chart discussion can follow. Scaffold the discussion with such questions or prompts as:

- In what ways were the stories similar?
- How were they different?
- Who had agency in the first story? In the second?
- Why do you think, the landowners have such agency in the first story and not in the second? What gives some people agency and how do other people come to feel submissive?
- What moral issues are expressed in these stories? How do you respond? Can you say who is moral? Who exhibits social justice?
- On what grounds or foundations can you argue the morality of these stories?

It is essential that students are made aware of the moral foundations and Church teaching that underpins an appropriate response to the issues in these stories. Students should not respond to such questions in uninformed ways, such as, “It is just not right. You do not treat people that way.” Alternatively, “Christians do not support such actions.” This latter statement is a concern, as students should not think that only Christians are concerned with social justice. What they should know is why Christians abhor such actions. They should know the Church teachings that underpin social justice and morality.

At this point teachers may refer to gospel values and how they inform and underpin Church teachings. Jesus proclaimed in the synagogue in Nazareth:

   The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
   because he has anointed me
   to bring good news to the poor.
   He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
   and recovery of sight to the blind,
   to let the oppressed go free,
   to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour. (Luke 4:18-19.)

Ask students to argue the moral issues in the stories using the above passage as a basis of their arguments. Completing such tasks and discussions with students affords their engagement with critical moral issues that do not impose on their own personal decisions. At times when teachers focus on morality and social justice, they can almost place their students on trial. Using children’s literature not only facilitates constructive and informed discussion and debate, but it also facilitates reference to scripture in engaging ways. Students are reading and interpreting scripture with purpose.

Conclusion

Many quality children’s literature titles are published each year that can effectively be integrated into the classroom religion program. Many rich and deep meanings contained in stories are not always immediately recognised by students. When teachers utilise appropriate and creative teaching and learning strategies they open a story’s possibilities. Well-crafted stories are doorways for students; teachers can facilitate their entry and access into such stories. Lessons learned will endure for a lifetime.

References


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EZEKIEL, BIZARRE PROPHET TO THE EXILES: A CASE STUDY IN INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

Abstract

Our Sacred Scriptures—both Old and New Testaments—contain some difficult texts that can be used (and have been) to sanction violence and to condone immoral actions (e.g., slavery). It is vital that those for whom the Scriptures are sacred interpret them judiciously. The book of the prophet Ezekiel provides an excellent case in point; it has become a key text for those championing the Rapture, and thus a dangerous text in our world. This article explores other interpretations of Ezekiel and concludes with some general principles for interpreting Scripture.

Introduction

Even as we regard the Bible as sacred, as the “word of God,” we must take note of problematic passages that appear to sanction violence, demean women, condone slavery, and discriminate against particular groups. Frederick Buechner, well-known writer and Presbyterian minister, playfully describes the Bible as a … disorderly collection of books which are often tedious, barbaric, obscure and teem with contradictions and inconsistencies. It is a swarming compost of a book, an Irish stew of poetry and propaganda, law and legalism, myth and murk, history and hysteria . . . hopelessly associated with tub-thumping evangelism and dreary piety, superannuated superstition and blue-nosed moralizing; with ecclesiastical authoritarianism and crippling literalism (Buechner, 1973, pp. 8-9).

Buechner’s description is, of course, not the last word. Certainly, much more might be said about the nature of our Bible. But he does entice us into peering more closely into the ambiguities of our biblical texts. We find soaring visions, profound poetry, and passionate devotion to a just and merciful God alongside texts in which God rages, orders the wholesale destruction of peoples, and seemingly approves of “smiting” one’s enemies (who are thus God’s enemies).

As Christians who hold this “swarming compost of a book” as Word of God, how do we personally do justice to it—and face the violence it has sanctioned over the generations? As religious and theological educators, what do we do with the fact that our sacred literature encompasses powerful passages and strange, if not disedifying, stories. Moreover, if we grant that the Bible is itself a sort of “big tent,” then will we not face resistance from those in our churches who both regard it as the source of divine answers and wield it as a cudgel against those they deem immoral?

These are vital questions in our day, and certainly more challenging than a single article can address. We might, however, profit from a brief exploration into the book of the prophet Ezekiel, examining various modes of interpretation and then stepping back to list some principles by which we might interpret Scripture.

Ezekiel

If there were a contest for the weirdest book of the Bible, Ezekiel would have few competitors; he also makes the most frequent usage of our images of wind/spirit, fire and water. Four times the Spirit of the Lord lifts him to various places where our priestly prophet has exotic visions (3:14; 8:3; 11:1; 40:1). Consider:

In the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I sat in my house, with the elders of Judah sitting before me, the hand of the Lord GOD fell upon me there. I looked, and there
was a figure that looked like a human being; below what appeared to be its loins it was fire, and above the loins it was like the appearance of brightness, like gleaming amber. It stretched out the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my head; and the spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north, to the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy. And the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the vision that I had seen in the valley (8:1-4).

His ruthless judgments on the people of Judah and Israel, condemnation of Jerusalem as a “brazen whore” and “adulterous wife” (e.g., 16: 30-32) in tandem with his relentless portrayal of an angry God are disconcerting, to say the least. Ezekiel, in short, is a tough read.

Before we excise Ezekiel from the canon for his over-the-top visions and offensive allegories, we might listen to this counsel from the late American writer Flannery O’Connor:

The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make them appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock — to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the blind you draw large and startling figures. (Fitzgerald, 1969, pp. 33-34).

““To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the blind you draw large and startling figures.” No better insight into Ezekiel might be given to us. We might take a few minutes to name some of the “distortions” in our world and churches we find repugnant—perhaps then we will be more able to listen to our raging prophet Ezekiel. In particular, we might read Ezekiel mindful of our ecological crisis. It is not that he is prophesying about it but rather that the surplus of meaning in texts allows us to hear him questioning what our generation has done to the land. See, for example, “Thus says the Lord GOD to the mountains and the hills, the watercourses and the valleys, the desolate wastes and the deserted towns, which have become a source of plunder and an object of derision to the rest of the nations all around” (36:4).

Chapters 36—39 encompass oracles of divine restoration that draw abundantly on the powerful images of wind, fire and water. These chapters also include the distasteful analogy of unfaithful Israel as “like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual period” (36:17) and the repulsive divine promise to take the sword against Gog of the land of Magog. Ezekiel characterizes Gog as an apocalyptic figure who marches from the north, intent on ravaging Israel but who is ultimately destroyed by God:

With pestilence and bloodshed I will enter into judgment with him; and I will pour down torrential rains and hailstones, fire and sulfur, upon him and his troops and the many peoples that are with him. So I will display my greatness and my holiness and make myself known in the eyes of many nations. Then they shall know that I am the LORD (38:21-23).

Gog appears again in the Book of Revelation, now teamed with Magog in a sort of cosmic clash: When the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, in order to gather them for battle; they are as numerous as the sands of the sea. They marched up over the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from heaven and consumed them. And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (20:7-10).
Fundamentalist Readings of Ezekiel

Gog—and often his Revelation companion Magog, play leading roles among those preoccupied with the Rapture—“Google” them and follow some of the commentaries (and don’t miss some of the YouTube entries!) Because Ezekiel 38 speaks of various nations invading Israel before God exercises his judgment on Gog, many among the more literalist interpreters believe that chapters 38-39 prophesy an outbreak of war in the Middle East in our time. This war, according to Jennifer Rast of Contender Ministries, “will usher in the tribulation and the rise of the Antichrist; a war that will end with the destruction of Israel’s enemies by God Himself, and lead to the signing of a peace treaty with the Antichrist” (http://www.rockofoffence.com/ezek38.html). Consider the political and religious ramifications of Rast’s interpretation, which is based on the theory that Ezekiel is prophesying about Islamic nations:

The good news is that God wins. God will come against the invaders Himself and destroy them. Verses 19-20 say that there will be an earthquake so great that people all over the world will tremble. In the ensuing chaos, nations will begin to turn on each other. The confusion will lead to the largest case of death by friendly fire ever seen. Verse 22 of Ezekiel tells us that there will be plagues, torrents of rain, hailstones, and burning sulfur. Just as God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, he will destroy these invading forces. Once again, God will make it known to all the nations that He is the Lord. He will give the nations proof that He is the Holy One in Israel.

This war against Israel will pave the way for the Antichrist’s military rule over the world and his demand that the world worship him as God. With Islam defeated and the Christian Church raptured, opposition to worshipping a man as God will be greatly reduced. Those who are left would have no army with which to mount much of a protest (http://www.rockofoffence.com/ezek38.html)

In the hands of such interpreters, Ezekiel becomes extremely dangerous—a text that assumes that God is on our side, rationalizes demonization of entire peoples, provides no urgency for peace-making, and depicts the Holy One as smiting the enemies of Christianity.

Other Readings of Ezekiel

The prophets are much more complicated than the literalist interpreters read them, and God’s involvement in history not so simple to discern. What if, instead of assuming God is on “our side,” we instead imagined that God sees all of humankind, weeping at each death caused by someone claiming to act in the name of God? What if, with Martin Buber, we refused to believe that God desires violent action against others, and when presented with such a biblical text as Ezekiel 38-39 chose God over the Bible? Commenting on 1 Samuel 15:3 (Samuel’s demand, in God’s name, that Saul kill all the Amalekites, Buber wrote: “As an observant Jew of this nature when he has to choose between God and the Bible, chooses God. ... Nothing can make me believe in a God who punishes Saul because he has not murdered his enemy” (cited in Lefebure, 2000, 61).

We must explore more profoundly Ezekiel’s depiction of a wrathful God, which occurs throughout the book and not simply in chapters 38-39. It seems likely that Ezekiel’s own trauma as an exile has left him disconsolate, feeling abandoned by God. We might turn to Lamentations to get a feel for what the exiles experienced: “My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out on the ground because of the destruction of my people, because infants and babes faint in the streets of the city” (Lamentations 2:11).

Is Ezekiel angry about his fate as an exile? Angry at those who seem to have forgotten the covenant? Angry at God? Has he projected his anger onto God in hopes of finding some explanation for their miserable exilic experience? In searching for meaning, did he become acutely conscious of Israel’s sinfulness, thereby regarding it as justly deserving of punishment?

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We must not turn aside from biblical descriptions of a wrathful God, since the prophets in particular provide so many passages in which God rages at injustice. Yet we must interpret them sensitively, mindful that too many persons bear tender scars from authoritarian homes in which divine anger mirrors capricious and destructive parental anger. How many people today reject belief in God because they rightly reject an angry potentate, ruling from afar? And yet, do we believe that God merely looks on, smiling benignly and approvingly at our world—at our inhumanity to one another, at the chasm between rich and poor, at the indifference to the fate of the planet? Three sentences from Abraham Joshua Heschel’s classic book The Prophets offer a profound interpretation: “God is not indifferent to evil. He is always concerned, He is personally affected by what man does to man. He is a God of pathos. This is one of the meanings of the anger of God: the end of indifference!” (Heschel, 1971, 64).

Complementing troubling texts in Ezekiel are beautiful oracles of restoration that make abundant use of wind/spirit, fire and water.

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances (36:25-27).

Then follows beautiful poetry about God’s promise that the “land that was desolate [will] become like the garden of Eden.” God will rebuild the ruined places and replant the desolate ones (36:35-36).

Wind/spirit dominates Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones being brought back to life. Once again taken up by the spirit of the LORD (37:1), he is transported to a valley clogged with bones:

Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.” So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone (37: 5-7)

This text, less well known than Second Isaiah’s magnificent poetry of consolation in chapters 40-55, similarly speaks words of solace. Exile has been the experience of deadness and desiccation; dwelling in a foreign land, Israel’s hopes had evaporated. Now, however, Ezekiel prophesies revivification:

Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live…I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you back to the land of Israel... I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord” (37: 9, 12, 14).

Typically, Christians interpret this text as a type of the resurrection of Jesus, and its liturgical use reflects this when paired with the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-45), as it is on the fifth Sunday of Lent in many traditions. Typology has its place, but moving too quickly in this direction misses the important communal character of Ezekiel’s vision. This is the restoration of a people—a sinful people. Note that God has taken the initiative, purifying them, giving them a new heart and a new spirit, reviving their deadness. It is grounded in this earth—a restoration of a devastated land. Ezekiel’s vision is incarnate.

In Jewish tradition this vision is read during the Shabbat of the Passover season. One commentator, Rabbi Amy Eilberg, writes:

The rabbis said that on some ultimate day of Rebirth, all of the dead would be resurrected, and that day would be Pesach. On some mythic future Pesach, the world will be so utterly transformed that

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death will be vanquished. The bones will knit together and rise and breathe, and come to life again. Passover is the time we recall the greatest known day of God’s redemptive activity in the world. We are once more in the midst of celebrating the transformation of slavery, suffering and constriction, into freedom, expansiveness and hope. In that annual celebration, looking back at a time of great liberation, we dare to hope -- as surely as we open the door for Elijah -- that liberation will come again, that hope will triumph in unimaginable ways. (http://www.jewishsf.com/content/2-0-/module/displaystory/story_id/3318/edition_id/59/format/html/displaystory.html)

Ezekiel 37 has also been a text of hope in the Black Church. Well known is the familiar African-American spiritual (lyrics by J. Rosamund Johnson, and music by James Weldon Johnson):

Ezekiel connected dem dry bones
Ezekiel connected dem dry bones
Ezekiel connected dem dry bones
I hear the word of the Lord.
Your toe bone connected to your foot bone,
Your foot bone connected to your ankle bone,
Your ankle bone connected to your leg bone,
Your leg bone connected to your knee bone,
Your knee bone connected to your thigh bone,
Your thigh bone connected to your hip bone,
Your hip bone connected to your back bone,
Your back bone connected to your shoulder bone,
Your shoulder bone connected to your neck bone,
Your neck bone connected to your head bone,
I hear the word of the Lord!

Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk aroun'
Dem bones, dem bones, gonna walk aroun'
Dem bones, dem bones, gonna walk aroun'
I hear the word of the Lord!

The humor in this spiritual may not do justice to the profundity with which many slaves, exiled from their homelands and shackled by white masters, drew upon this revivification of the dry bones. As Allen Dwight Callahan writes,

Ezekiel’s message of life after exile is nothing less than the declaration of life after death, the pronouncement of a collective resurrection. In the biblical imagination of the slaves and their progeny, the text of the prophet’s vision of dry bones in Ezekiel is emblematic of African-American hope all the souls lost in the catastrophic exile of slavery might be restored and revived, that their bones might yet live again (Callahan, 2006, p. 61).

This was a vision to dance to, an image that nurtured hope, a text to carry in their bodies and spirits. Ezekiel’s vision in the valley of dry bones is also a word of promise for us in our own troubling times. He evokes the revivifying power of the Spirit of God, for which we have such need—and reminds us of the dry bones of literalist interpretation.

Thus, some principles for reading Ezekiel and the rest of Scripture:

1. Approach texts with reverence for their complex interconnections. Imagine them as an intricately connected web (Green, 2006, p. 75). Think of them as classic texts that have a “surplus of meaning” (Ricoeur, 1976).
2. Take note of problems in texts. Do not shy away from admitting that Scripture bristles with “challenging” texts. Let them cause us to think, engage in conversation, and search for meaning(s) within and across our traditions of faith.
3. Be attentive to the ways in which texts have functioned (and may still function) for communities, particularly texts used that can be used to legitimize vilification of and/or violence against the other. Be especially mindful of ways Christians have abused texts or texts that offer opportunities for misinterpretation.

4. Draw upon a theology of revelation in which the Bible’s authority is disclosive and dialogical rather than unilateral and absolute. Show how the Bible mediates God’s self-revelation, and is normative for the church as an orienting vision of God’s reign, not as a blueprint for our lives. The Bible “constitutes a privileged possibility of revelation in the present,” and is a “medium of the divine self-gift for all who approach it in faith” (Schneiders, 1999, pp. 45-46).

5. Question the canonical status of expressions of hostility (Is there not a “normative understanding of the gospel . . . that requires us to criticize and reject its more superficial and accidental locutions?”(Williamson, 1993, p. 140).

6. Honor the continuing revelatory power of the Old/First Testament by drawing upon its texts in teaching and preaching. Imagine the two testaments as a conversational circle rather than as ordered in linear succession. Find a more complex alternative to the simplified patterns by which we have related “Old” to “New” Testament in a simplistic promise-fulfillment schema.

7. Situate the Christian story within the larger context of God’s blessing of all creation, and of God’s gracious promises of which the Jews continue to be recipients. Do not presume God is in our corner—or that we have a corner on God! Speak of Jews in the present as well as in the past. Seek Jewish interpretations of texts (e.g., http://www.batkol.org)

8. “Choose God over the Bible.” At their best, our traditions have resisted readings of Scripture that reduce God to human stature. (Buber, in Lefebure, 2000, p. 61).

References


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This essay is an edited version of one of three keynote addresses to the 23rd Biennial National Conference of the Australian Association for Religious Education on September 30, 2008. The conference theme was “Wind, Fire and Water: Finding God in the 21st Century” and it was directed to an audience which was largely made up of Christian religious educators.
Stephen J McKinney and Robert J Hill*

A REFLECTION FOR THE CATHOLIC SECONDARY SCHOOL ON THE PARABLE OF THE FATHER AND HIS TWO SONS

Introduction

Catholic education and Catholic schools articulate a mission that is based on explicit gospel values (Christian Education, 1965, # 8, The Catholic School, 1977, # 9, The Religious Dimension of the Catholic School, 1988, # 25). This can be readily discerned in the mission statements of Catholic schools. These statements provide a useful Christian rationale for the Catholic school – public statements for internal and external purposes. Typically, the statement is displayed on school walls, websites and in school handbooks. These statements usually claim that the Catholic school is a Christian community, or aims to be a Christian community (Lay Catholics in schools, 1982, # 41). Mission statements, however, in practice, can be so general that they often fail to capture the diverse nature and challenges of the daily operation of this aspiring Christian community. It can be difficult for a mission statement to articulate the complexity of the population of the Catholic school. First, there is often a wide range of faith commitment demonstrated by those staff and pupils who are Catholic or nominally Catholic (The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, 1998, # 6, McKinney, 2008). Second, there is a serious challenge for many contemporary Catholic schools to include children of other Christian denominations, other faiths and children of no faith, in an effective way (The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, 1998, # 11, Ryan, 2008). This raises the issue of the ways in which the Catholic Christian school community, in all its complexity, can practically and inclusively engage with the gospel values on a daily basis.

The Church documentation recommends a number of ways in which the Catholic school is called or expected to engage with gospel values. Liturgical and sacramental life, for example, are highlighted as being crucial in sustaining the Christian school community (The Catholic School, 1977 # 54). These, however, can be problematic at times within the complexity of the contemporary Catholic school. One of the other recommended ways is to devote more attention not only to the Gospel values and the Christian community, but also to the original context of these gospel values. As the Religious Dimension of the Catholic school (1988, # 26) states:

The religious dimension of the school climate is expressed through the celebration of Christian values in Word and Sacrament...

The Catholic school (1977, # 55) makes a more robust claim that a Catholic school that does not constantly refer to the Gospel and does not enjoy ‘frequent encounters with Christ’ can lose its purpose. It is not just the ‘gospel values’, then, that should be at the heart of the Catholic school, but the Gospel itself. The Gospel values are, after all, derived from the four gospels which contain the life and words of Jesus in the accounts of his salvific ministry. In many respects this theme has been revisited by the Synod of Bishops which met in Rome in October 2008 to discuss the theme of the Word of God in the Church. Its concluding act was to offer 55 propositions to Pope Benedict XVI for his consideration. Reiterating the Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation of the Second Vatican Council, # 25 the Synod urged that all people and the young in particular, be exhorted to approach the scriptures so that the dialogue with God becomes a daily reality (Synod, # 22). It also hoped that the Word of God, being the soul of theology and the soul of pastoral care, the Christian community should receive, hear and support the young generations so that they are initiated in the knowledge of the Scriptures, and that they in turn will then be able to communicate the Gospel to their contemporaries (Synod, # 34).
One of the challenges for Catholic schools, as aspiring Christian communities, appears to be the creation of opportunities for engagement and reflection on the gospel; that is, if they are to engage with this repeated call to live according to gospel values. If the Catholic school is to engage with the gospel in the long term it may open up the possibility of allowing the gospel to challenge perceptions and attitudes, and even actions, of the community. A starting point, we would suggest, could entail engagement with a series of specific scriptural texts and could entail reflecting on the gospels as members of the school community.

This article offers a possible approach to, and interpretation of, a scriptural text for Catholic schools to help facilitate this process. This approach entails close reading of specific texts in an attempt to open up our understanding of the relevance of a text for the contemporary Catholic school. This is not conceived as a systematic method such as contextual bible study or even Lectio Divina, but provides a preliminary context and explanation to aid reflection on the passage within the context of the Catholic school (Dysinger, 2009, The Scottish Bible Society and the Contextual Bible Study Group, 2006). In that sense, this is probably more a resource than a method. The article has chosen to focus on one of the parables because they were exemplary teaching tools used by Jesus: designed to engage the listener but also challenge the preconceived positions and attitudes prevalent at the time. In Jesus’ hands these parables were often based on recognisable human characters who were used to highlight the contradictions that the hearers had not yet recognised in their lives. This article will focus on the parable of the prodigal (or lost) son, but for the purposes of this reflection, will be re-titled the parable of the father and his two sons – which is more coherent with the close reading of the text that seeks to incorporate a deeper understanding of the implications of the attitudes and actions of all three of the characters. It is also hoped that the use of this parable story within a Catholic school can operate at a number of levels for different hearers on different stages of the journey of faith (and even for those who espouse no faith).

Luke 15:11-32. The parable of the father and his two sons

Even the best known parables, or perhaps especially the best known parables, are capable of a fresh and innovative reading. This particular parable, like the parable of the Good Samaritan, is a classic example. In most readings, the two sons are somehow contrasted with each other; one contrite, the other unforgiving. Between the two is the indulgent father who is prodigal with his forgiveness – even though the parable is usually called the Prodigal Son. Our reading considers the two sons as having more in common than is usually supposed. Both sons exhibit a type of poverty, because both are estranged from their father and both are terminally focussed on self. A comparison of the two can be instructive, with common features placed together, rather than separated into two narratives, as they appear in the parable. Since the tale begins with the younger son, we shall begin with him, and then compare him to his elder sibling.

A Father already as good as dead

The younger son begins with a horrible, cynical request. He wants his share of the inheritance that would come to him, that is, normally after his father’s death. He can’t wait, so, in effect, he treats his father as being already as good as dead (v. 12). However, the elder son also seems to consider that his father is as good as dead to him, since he displays no desire to take part in anything that involves his father or his brother (v. 28).

An inability to form relationships

The younger son, having abandoned his father as already dead, is motivated only by self-interest. Having squandered the money he could not wait for, he would further abandon his religious principles (presuming that he is Jewish), not only by being willing to work among pigs, but to eat the very food of these unclean animals (Marshall, 1978, pp.608-609). His sense of self-preservation is demonstrated further when he
decides to go home. He hopes to get a job as a paid servant to his father. This is interesting: if he were a slave, he would have a permanent connection with his owner, but he understandably does not want to be a slave; neither does he want the relationship involved in being a son. But as a paid servant, he is employed casually, paid, and free to leave (or be dismissed). Even in starvation, he wants to be paid! (v. 19). His elder brother also seems unwilling or unable to form relationships. He too seems motivated only by self-interest, suggested by his apparently sole ambition being to celebrate with his friends, and not his family (v. 29).

Neither son appears to give any thought to the father’s feelings. Even when he is faced with near starvation, the younger son’s thoughts apparently go to the servants who work for his father, and who want for nothing, rather than to the father himself (v. 17). Likewise, the elder brother has no thoughts for how he might hurt his father’s feelings by his refusal to join the celebration. When the elder son refers to his brother with a contemptuous ‘this son of yours’, and even adds details of his own to the original sparse narrative of the young man’s behaviour, suggesting that ‘...he and his women...’ were responsible for swallowing up the father’s property (v. 30) the father gently reproves him with the correction, ‘your brother’ (vv. 27, 32) (Johnson, 1991, p.239). Notice that in his confession, designed to lead to his employment as a servant, the younger son does not confess to the sin that his brother invents for him (p. 237). The elder son, who shares everything that his father possesses, and who clearly wants for nothing, is however, the one who feels trapped, feels that he is a slave (v. 29) (p. 238).

Of course, although there are similarities between the two brothers in the attitudes identified here, there is a perception that the offences of the younger son are considerably greater than those of the elder. Perhaps we need to reflect on whether that is really the case, or is this conclusion itself an example of doing what the elder son does, and adding our own details to ‘flag up’ the severity of the crime. In other words, is the parable itself often read with the same prejudice we find displayed by the elder brother? It is in order to overcome such partiality in engaging with this parable that the present reading is offered. Having considered the similarities between the two brothers, as a final step, a consideration of their differences might be instructive.

Open and closed

The most fundamental difference appears to be in the way the two sons respond to the father’s overtures to them. In both cases, the father physically goes out to his sons. With the younger son, an acceptance of the father’s outreach is not actually spelled out, but is very clearly suggested in the party that is going to follow. But in the elder son’s case, there is intransigence. When the father goes out to him and reaches out to him, the elder son remains immobile. His lack of movement prevents the father’s desire for reconciliation being fulfilled. There is something typically biblical in this. The very first Psalm outlines the conditions of blessedness for humanity: “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers” (Psalm 1:1, RSV translation). There are three attitudes here: walking with the wicked (that is, those who do not keep the law), standing around with sinners (i.e. those permanently excluded from the temple and synagogues, most probably because they are rendered ritually unclean by the work they do, e.g. shepherds, sailors, merchants, even physicians etc), but the final category are those who not only do not move themselves, but prevent anyone else from moving (Mullins, 2005, p.100, Viviano, 1997, p.649). These are the scoffers, the cynics, who remain seated, stopping any movement. These might be found in Mark’s account of the paralysed man cured after his friends lower him down through the roof of the house where Jesus is. Crowds are jostling to get a better look at what Jesus is doing, and to hear better what he is saying. But the scribes are seated, saying to themselves, “‘How can this man talk like that? He is blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God?’” (Mark 2:7). Contrast this intransigence with disciples, who obey Jesus’ call to follow (behind) him while he always travels, always continues in motion (Mark 1:17. 20; 2:14) (Moloney, 1980, p.135). So, the elder son is the motionless one, preventing all motion, refusing his father’s overtures and outstretched hand.

It is also noticeable that the father is utterly impartial towards his two sons – a challenge faced by all educators and educated alike. In fact, he is reckless in the chances he takes with them: he gives half his
property to a younger son he may never see again; and he also takes the chance of leaving the elder son in his self-imposed alienation in the fields (Johnson, 1991, p.240). But, for the father, the risk is worth taking with both sons. The signs may be that he has lost both, but the hope is that they will return. The father sums up his hope, fulfilled, in the words that must express exactly what his dreams were about, because he uses the phrase twice, that the younger son ‘was lost and is found, was dead and has come back to life’ (vv. 24, 32) (Johnson, 1991, p. 238, Marshall, 1978, p.611).

There are three ‘movements’ in this parable: the selfish son, focused on personal gain, who brings about this own downfall, but who is able to accept the outreach of a father that he never dreamt he would be treated to. The literal movement of the father who moves impartially to each estranged son, and who extends the hand of acceptance to both. And there is the static, almost monolithic pose of the elder son, every bit as alienated as his brother, but unable or unwilling (or both) to accept his brother’s return and his father’s outstretched hand to himself.

**Turning good theory into practice: a preferential option for diversity**

The concept of acceptance appears to be crucial to the understanding of forgiveness in the parable. On a superficial level, it might seem artificial, or even meaningless, to the reader or listener to draw a distinction between forgiveness and acceptance but, arguably, what is called forgiveness of a person can lack any real acceptance of the person. When this is the case, whatever forgiveness is offered is immediately qualified. The key to the father’s level of acceptance of his two sons in the parable lies in his readiness to recognise and accept their diversity. Acceptance is prepared to take the risk of reaching out to the other without qualification or condition, because the one reaching out is not afraid of losing anything in the process of accepting the diversity of the other. This is the love that underpins the unity of the Body of Christ, because it is the love that accepts that each member of the body is differently gifted by the Holy Spirit, and that it is precisely in the diversity of giftedness that the body is at its strongest: all members, acting differently, but all to the service of the One Lord who is the head of the Body.

**Discussion**

What are the implications of our reading of this parable for the community of the Catholic school? A common interpretation of this parable is to consider the practical implications of the Gospel values of repentance, forgiveness and compassion. These are, of course, highly important for the Christian community of the Catholic school. The opportunity exists for people to repent of their behaviour, no matter how extreme or how repugnant. The father’s love for the two sons is grounded in a deep compassion and the forgiveness offered by the father is unconditional and complete. The concept of Christian forgiveness between members of the Catholic school community is crucial for the quality of relationships which are necessary for both the orderly manner of school life and work and the creation and maintenance of Christian community. Further, these relationships not only continue within school but can continue beyond school, and the Catholic school has the potential to be a site that prepares some of the pupils for an adult Christian life. This is a laudable interpretation and extension of the message of this parable.

The parable, however, highlights dual concepts of Christian *forgiveness* and *acceptance*. The father does not just forgive both his sons; he accepts them both and values them both. It would appear that Christian forgiveness and acceptance are necessarily and inextricably bound together as part of the same process. This is observed in the conduct of the elder son in the parable. The parable, in fact, is left somewhat open-ended as the failure of the elder son to accept the younger son suggests a lack of forgiveness and a resentment of not just the generosity of the father’s *forgiveness*, but the father’s *acceptance*. The lack of expression (or sentiments) of acceptance by the elder son suggests a lack of forgiveness. The gospel calls for loving acceptance of the other, with all their failings, and forgiveness; forgiveness, then, is rooted in an acceptance of the other. Expressions of Christian forgiveness that do not include acceptance would appear
to be inadequate, incomplete or inauthentic as expressions of Christian forgiveness. This may be an important point for the Catholic school in its continuing endeavour to form a contemporary identity and community that is recognisably Catholic yet inclusive.

The community of the Catholic school, as a community that is called to reflect on gospel values, may wish, then, to identify this dual concept of forgiveness and acceptance as one of the aims of daily life in the aspiring Christian community and reflect on the underlying nature of the expressions of forgiveness that currently exist between members of the school community. The challenge of this parable may clarify the nature of Christian forgiveness and also the limitedness of inauthentic expressions of forgiveness. Further, it must be recognised that the challenges of accepting the other and valuing the gifts of all members of the school community are not, of course, limited to any particular section of the school: it is a challenge which is extended to every pupil, every member of senior management, every parent, every teacher, every member of staff working in the school in any capacity – in short, anyone who can claim to be a part of the school community.

Concluding remarks

All of the above is premised on the understanding that there is an intentionality (and scope) to reflect on scripture. If the Catholic school espouses a disinterest in scripture, or a diminution of the importance of scripture, there are, according to some of the Church documentation on Catholic education, implications for the creation and growth of Christian life, but there can be a variety of reasons for this disinterest or diminution. Where such intentionality does not appear to exist within a Catholic school, it may indicate a genuine anxiety in the role of scripture in the diversity of the contemporary Catholic school. There may be anxieties about the ability of the readers to read scripture ‘properly’. It may indicate the related problem of a lack of understanding and belief in the importance of scripture. It may paradoxically indicate an arid weariness in reading scripture as a result of a cycle of over-familiar passages that are not repeatedly re-interpreted. It may even indicate an unhelpful retention of the now outdated and dreary legacy of the ill-informed disinterest in scripture that caricatured much of 20th century Catholic life. If there is anxiety, or lack of understanding, we have provided a possible starting point with an introduction to the familiar tale of the father and the two lost sons, which also offers some new insights to aid the understanding and interpretation of the complexity of this parable. This possible starting point could help members of a Catholic school community reflect on scripture and the importance of scripture for daily life.

In terms of scope for this engagement it would be disappointing if this were solely the preserve of the religious education classroom. This would be an impoverishment of the concept of the Catholic school and the Christian school community and a reductionist / minimalist attitude. The Christian school community as a whole should seek a variety of opportunities to engage in serious reflection on scripture. These could be cross-curricular, weekly opportunities or special events. A more focussed engagement with scripture would help create or enhance a more flexible Christian community, and this would enable the Catholic school to assist some adults and children on their journeys of faith and prepare some children to assume their rightful position within the wider Catholic community. It would also introduce other adults and children to the depth of gospel values and a more profound understanding of Christian life.

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1 The Catholic school must also be constantly attentive to the possibility that these gospel values and this aspiring Christian community can become reduced to mission statement cliché and sound bite. (McLaughlin, 1996).

2 All biblical references and quotes are from the *Jerusalem Bible* unless noted as RSV translation (*Revised Standard Version*).

3 The Syrian Neo-Platonist Iamblichus, in the late 3rd or early 4th century AD, maintained that people limit themselves in the good they do to others because they are afraid of losing something of themselves in the process. This has been called the theory of limited good. (c.f. Esler, 1998, p. 48). It sounds remarkably like forgiveness which lacks acceptance. The question for Catholic schools and any Christian community is: How do we avoid the pitfall of settling for little more than ‘limited good’?
HOLOCAUST EDUCATION AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Abstract

The Nazi Holocaust is the back-drop to every conversation between Christians and Jews. Religious educators working in Christian contexts must be aware of this reality. This article examines educational responses for educating Christian students about the Nazi Holocaust. The Catholic Church has made a number of faltering steps towards responding to the holocaust. A brief overview of these attempts provides a context for this discussion.

Introduction

Pope Benedict XVI visited Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Museum in Jerusalem on 11 May 2009. On that occasion he gave a moving speech in the Hall of Remembrance. He told those present and the world’s media: “I have come to stand in silence before this monument, erected to honour the memory of the millions of Jews killed in the horrific tragedy of the Shoah.” He said that:

The Catholic Church, committed to the teachings of Jesus and intent on imitating his love for all people, feels deep compassion for the victims remembered here. Similarly, she draws close to all those who today are subjected to persecution on account of race, color, condition of life or religion - their sufferings are hers, and hers is their hope for justice. As Bishop of Rome and Successor of the Apostle Peter, I reaffirm - like my predecessors - that the Church is committed to praying and working tirelessly to ensure that hatred will never reign in the hearts of men again. (Benedict XVI, 2009)

Despite its heartfelt statements of regret and sorrow, Pope Benedict’s speech was heavily criticised by sections of the Israeli media and some Jewish organisations. Officials at Yad Vashem expressed “disappointment” at the pope’s speech. Among other things, the pope was criticised for his unwillingness to declare any direct responsibility on the part of Catholic Church officials for the conduct of the Holocaust. One Israeli journalist was blunt in assessing why this might have been the case:

In last night's speech, he inexplicably said Jews "were killed," as if it had been an unfortunate accident. On the surface, this may seem unimportant....But the word the pope used is significant because someone in the Holy See decided to write "were killed" instead of "murdered" or "destroyed." The impression is that the cardinals argued among themselves over whether Israelis "deserve" for the pope to say "were murdered" and decided they only deserve "were killed." It sounded petty. Even the recurring use of the term "tragedy" seemed like an attempt to avoid saying the real thing. (Segev, 2009)

Experienced Vatican journalist and author John Allen was more kind in his assessment of the speech, giving the pope “an A for effort, and a B for execution” (Allen, 2009). Whatever the assessment, the speech revealed the ongoing concern among many Jewish groups and individuals that Catholic Church officials had not yet delivered a consistent, comprehensive and transparent statement on Christian complicity in the Nazi Holocaust.
After Pope Benedict’s speech, some commentators in the Jewish media reflected with greater acceptance on the visit by the previous Pope John Paul II on 23 March 2000. During his visit, Pope John Paul II recalled his Polish upbringing and his witness of Jewish friends murdered by the Nazis:

My own personal memories are of all that happened when the Nazis occupied Poland during the war. I remember my Jewish friends and neighbors, some of whom perished while others survived. I have come to Yad Vashem to pay homage to the millions of Jewish people who, stripped of everything, especially of their human dignity, were murdered in the Holocaust. More than half a century has passed, but the memories remain. (John Paul II, 2000)

The horrors of the Holocaust are a stain on the story of European Christianity. And, it is intriguing to reflect on the accidents of history that offers up a Polish pope and a German pope to represent the Catholic Church’s views on it in the new century. These papal statements of memory and sorrow and their reception by Jewish communities reveal something of the present state of Catholic responses to the Nazi Holocaust. They also contain lessons for Australian Catholic religious educators. Attempts to teach the Holocaust in Australian Catholic schools risk receiving an A for laudable efforts but a B, or worse, for inadequate execution. Words, and how they are used, are important. The area of Holocaust memory and education is hotly contested. Efforts of Catholic Church officials to respond to the Holocaust have been closely scrutinised and challenged. Gaps appear still to exist in the Church’s response. And these gaps present challenges for Australian Catholic religious educators.

This article will survey the Catholic Church’s official documentary record on the Holocaust and Holocaust education. The discussion will then move to consider the principles and practices that might underpin a positive educational implementation of these official Church pronouncements. One note on language is necessary before beginning this exploration. In many contemporary discussions, the word *holocaust* is often substituted with the Hebrew words *shoah*, or *churban*. *Shoah* is the word that describes a destructive whirlwind. *Churban* is a word that means destruction. *Holocaust* is a word that also describes the legitimate functions of sacrifice in the Second Temple period of the religion of Israel. So as to avoid any ambiguity or confusion, many now choose to use the word *shoah* to describe Nazi atrocities.

**Official Catholic Documents on Shoah Memorial and Education**

The pivotal official Catholic Church document on relations between Catholics and Jews was *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council’s 1965 declaration on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions. This document - or more precisely # 4 - was a radical revision of the Catholic Church’s attitude towards Jews and Judaism. It laid a foundation for subsequent official documents from Vatican and local Church sources. While it did not mention the shoah directly, it made a general statement deploring “all hatreds, persecutions, displays of antisemitism directed against the Jews at any time and from any source” (paragraph 4). It did not admit any Christian complicity in promoting any of these things. It did not make a specific reference to shoah education or memorial, but it did “beg the Christian faithful...to be at peace with all people” (# 5). It provided a platform upon which Vatican and local Church communities could reflect. It enabled the subsequent publication of more extensive accounts of the past and future of relations between Catholics and Jews.

In 1974, the Vatican established the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. In that year, this new body published a document called *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate, No. 4*. It proposed to offer practical advice on the ways various Church members and agencies might fulfill the intentions of # four of *Nostra Aetate*. It acknowledged the Vatican II document was written “in circumstances deeply affected by the persecution and massacre of Jews which took place in Europe just before and during the Second World War” (Preamble). Despite this admission, it mostly glossed over any specific consideration of shoah education or memorial. It asked for special attention to the publication of text books, history books and the formation of all religious educators who would be well versed in the new understandings of the relationship between Jews and Catholics.
Specific instruction on shoah education came a decade later from the same Vatican organisation in their 1985 statement: *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*. The authors claimed that “catechesis should help in understanding the meaning for the Jews of the extermination during the years 1939-1945, and its consequences.” In general, this document showed the fruits of twenty years of dialogue between Catholics and Jews in the wake of Vatican II. It was more specific in its recommendations and responded directly to issues on the mind of many Jews that had formed the basis of criticisms of earlier Vatican publications. But its recommendations on shoah education, while direct and significant, were meagre: no plan or curriculum content or preferred approach was mentioned.

In 1997, the Congregation for the Clergy published a major statement on catechesis in which the authors directed catechists to acknowledge and attend to the relationship between Christians and Jews.

> Special attention needs to be given to catechesis in relation to the Jewish religion. Indeed when she delves into her own mystery, the Church, the People of God in the New Covenant, discovers her links with the Jewish People, the first to hear the word of God. Religious instruction, catechesis, and preaching should not form only towards objectivity, justice and tolerance but also in understanding and dialogue. Both of our traditions are too closely related to be able to ignore each other. It is necessary to encourage a reciprocal consciousness at all levels. In particular, an objective of catechesis should be to overcome every form of antisemitism. (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, #199)

This passage hints at the need for education on the shoah but stops short of actually naming it. The authors show an awareness of the maturing relationship between Catholics and Jews since Vatican II and encourage a form of dialogue that goes beyond mere instruction in the major symbols and beliefs of Jewish religion. While it could be admitted that such dialogue would inevitably include reflection on the shoah, the authors neglect to specifically reference this aspect.

In 1998, the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews published a separate and lengthy document titled, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*. The document claimed that Christians had a “duty of remembrance” in relation to the shoah and that “there is no future without memory” (#1). It called for a “moral and religious memory” among Christians (#2). The document ended with a call to “all men and women of good will to reflect deeply on the significance of the shoah” (#5). Despite its extensive treatment of the subject, the document was heavily criticised in Jewish and some Christian circles for its selective remembering of history and its inability to fully express Christians’ complicity in the shoah. For example, the Vatican document recalled how Cardinal Bertram of Breslau in February 1931 published a pastoral letter condemning National Socialism - the Nazi ideology. Jewish critics pointed to the selective way that Cardinal Bertram was represented in the document. While it was acknowledged that he had condemned National Socialism in 1931, they pointed out that he opposed all public protest against the deportations and massacres of the Jews. After Hitler’s suicide in 1945, Cardinal Bertram “addressed a circular letter to the priests of his diocese inviting them to celebrate a solemn requiem service in memory of the Fuehrer” (International Jewish Committee, 1998). These critics contend that examples such as this demonstrate a response that is “slurred over” in the Vatican’s *We Remember* document.

The official Catholic documentary tradition on shoah education is scant and sketchy: the efforts are commendable but the execution of positive strategies is somewhat lacking. Certainly, clear guidance has been provided to catechists and religious educators to engage in shoah education and memorial. But the official endorsement to do so is hardly compelling and the scope and content of that education is fraught with ambivalence about the level of acceptance of Christian complicity in the shoah. This lack of official support and guidance on shoah education means large gaps exist in the conduct of shoah education in Australian Catholic schools. The discussion in this paper will now turn to the nature of these gaps and what educational responses might be appropriate.
What Challenges Confront Australian Religious Educators who Teach the Shoah?

Shoah education in contemporary Australian Catholic schools can pursue a number of directions - many of them inadequate or dangerous in their own way. Teaching can be moralistic, shocking, sentimental, uninformed, artificially freed from the ghosts of the past, simplistic, missionary, unhistorical, inadequate, unsophisticated, poorly conceived, and/or de-humanised. The antidote to these potential pit-falls in presenting material on the shoah to Australian students in Catholic schools is similar to the way other curricular hurdles are cleared: sound text books and materials, well prepared teachers, a close attention to language, avoidance of cliché, and the presentation of material with which students can engage in a critical and evaluative manner and not the proffering of glib or simplistic responses. The shoah poses questions for Christians and for all people, the depths of which can never be adequately plumbed. Any teaching that glibly communicates an easy resolution to these complex questions requires pedagogical revision.

For Catholic schools, a particular responsibility is apparent. Programs in Australian Catholic schools must confront the regrettable history of encounters between Christians and Jews. Mary Boys has said that in our history of interactions with Jews, there is much “that is a source of deep shame for all of us who are Christians” (Boys, 2002, p. 12). She argues that contemporary Christians need to confront the shameful aspects of their history, not to tax people with more guilt - which would be ultimately paralysing - but because it has an astringent effect, “awakening us to the dangers of shallow religiosity and ignorance masquerading as zeal” (Boys, 2002, p. 12). Teaching the shoah in Australian Catholic schools necessitates some exploration of the Christian teaching of contempt for the Jews. As one United States Jewish educator put it, omitting the history of antisemitism in teaching about the shoah “allows teachers to avoid unpleasant encounters with their religion’s history… the omission also avoids possibly unpleasant encounters with Christian parents” (Schweber, 2006, p. 52). Avoidance of this aspect leaves students groping for answers to the reasons why the Jews were persecuted. It ignores any considerations of the processes of victimisation and resistance.

For religious education programs in Catholic schools, this attentiveness to the past requires some consideration of the deicide charge – the accusation that the all Jews everywhere and at all times were responsible for the killing of God in the person of Jesus. The charge of God-killing is founded in an interpretation of the gospel text in Matthew 27:25 [Then the people as a whole answered, “His blood be upon us and on our children.”] This passage - the so-called blood curse - has resounded through Christian history in passion plays, sermons and vitriolic denunciations of Jewish responsibility for Jesus’ crucifixion. While the deicide charge was never official Church teaching, the effects of it have penetrated deeply into the consciousness of Christians. These effects will need some accounting for. Religious educators will need to provide at least a brief historical survey of the consequences of the deicide charge for Jews and Judaism.

The shoah is becoming, in this generation, a symbol with universal application. Historian Yehuda Bauer contends that, while the shoah is unprecedented in human history, “it has become a symbol of evil in what is inaccurately known as Western civilization, and the awareness of the symbol seems to be spreading all over the world” (Bauer, 2001, p. x). In contemporary culture, books, artworks, movies and documentaries on the shoah are commonly released to popular audiences. These creative artists seem to be mining the meaning of the shoah for clues with which to understand our a common humanity. This contemporary trend also encourages religious educators to consider that shoah education may best be principally located in the humanities and creative arts, rather than among the social sciences. An exploration of the shoah might make profitable use of the methods and subject matter drawn from the disciplines where the human person is the centre of academic inquiry.

What Should Catholic Religious Educators Teach their Students about Christian Complicity in the Shoah?

A shift in writing and teaching about the shoah has occurred in the past fifteen years or so. Up until the 1990s, most programs focused on the suffering of the victims of Nazi persecutions. These studies
considered the shoah as an outgrowth of traditional antisemitism, albeit the most destructive and horrific in a long history of pogroms and persecutions against Jews. This simplified picture has been compounded by an increased focus on the perpetrators and bystanders of the Holocaust, the “near ubiquitous complicity” as Hannah Arendt expressed it, of the civilian populations. In short, scholarly attention has been given, not just to the Jew-hating Nazi thugs, but to railroad bureaucrats, doctors, lawyers, industrialists, bankers, police officers, accountants, and it needs to be said, Church officials (Browning, 1992; Goldhagen, 1996; Friedlander, 1997; Cornwell, 1999; Ericksen & Heschel, 1999; Rittner, Smith & Steinfeldt, 2000; Krieg, 2004).

Another strand in writing and research about the shoah focuses on the resistors and rescuers. Some of these rescuers have entered the popular imagination and their efforts at resistance to the Nazis and care for Jews are relatively well known: Oscar Schindler has been featured in Steven Spielberg’s movie, Schindler’s List; Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg rescued Jews in Budapest; Father Max Kolbe took the place of a condemned compatriot in Auschwitz. The Yad Vashem museum in Jerusalem pays homage to over 16,000 “righteous gentiles”; no one can be sure of the precise number of people who rendered courageous service in the cause of rescuing Jewish people during the Nazi terrors.

A context for understanding the role and significance of the rescuers and resistors would include attention to the fact that their numbers were relatively few in the vast populations who either turned their backs or cravenly collaborated with Nazi plans. So, balance and perspective are required. For example, consideration of the heroic actions of those such as Father Max Kolbe will need to be balanced with studies of those who watched on and chose to do nothing. The story of Max Kolbe is well enough known and recited in Catholic circles. In 1941 while interred at the Auschwitz extermination camp, Max Kolbe volunteered to take the place of a condemned fellow Polish inmate. He was starved to death by his captors. He was canonised as a Catholic saint by Pope John Paul II in 1982. The efforts of a Kolbe, Schindler, or Wallenberg are exceptional; they are not indications of normal responses from those confronted by the Final Solution. A further corrective is also possible with a simple confrontation with the question: “Would we have done any better if we had been in their place?”

**What Should Australian Catholic Schools Do in Relation to Shoah Education?**

The question of an appropriate approach to teaching and learning the shoah in an Australian Catholic school is complex and requires an extensive treatment. The following ten principles provide a discussion point for the creation of an adequate teaching and learning approach in Australian Catholic schools.

1. Teach the shoah with the same academic principles used in teaching other topics – rigorous investigation, inquiry, questioning, challenge... An overly reverential atmosphere in the study of the shoah is an enemy of understanding. Begin the inquiry with an understanding that many questions will not be able to be assigned clear and unambiguous answers. While greater clarity is achievable in a well designed study, some questions will live with students for a life-time.

2. Catholic religious educators have a share in the responsibility to explain to and explore with their students Christian complicity in the shoah. This exploration will seek to describe Christian complicity in the shoah – including the history of the teaching of contempt for the Jews - and not limit an understanding of the causes of the shoah to the actions of Adolf Hitler and his henchmen.

3. Sensitivity is required when selecting material to be presented, especially those materials placed before children and younger adolescents. Many of the pictorial and documentary evidence is shocking and not suitable for review by children. Fortunately, a helpful range of children’s literature is being published that provides age appropriate stories about the shoah for children.
4. Conduct a Yom HaShoah ritual with a class or school assembly. A Yom HaShoah ritual typically includes the lighting of six candles to commemorate those murdered at the hands of the Nazis, the recitation of prayers - especially a reading from the scroll of destruction - and the reading of testimonies, prayers and survivor memoirs. The Yom HaShoah could be included in the prayer rituals of Catholic schools in April when it typically features in Jewish communities, or at another selected time suitable to the school’s program.

5. Currently, many feature narrative films are being released for general public viewing that focus on themes related to the shoah. Teachers should resist the urge to show any of these films in their entirety. Each movie is the unique perspective of a director or production company who have a particular agenda to prosecute. No one movie could hope to encapsulate the complexity of the shoah; students will not understand the shoah by viewing movies alone. Instead, use the analytical tools of the media studies discipline to discern what meanings are embedded in each selected cinematic representation. Movies are one helpful adjunct to the study of the shoah, not a substitute for other necessary forms of inquiry.

6. Include stories of Jewish life in Europe before the Nazi Holocaust. This will provide students with a context to understand Jews as persons, European citizens, holders of a range of religious responses to life, and members of various cultural, social, political and economic groups. This will assist students to see European Jews as more than merely victims of Nazi atrocities. It will also help to break down stereotypes about “the Jews” and foster understandings of a people characterised by, among other things, diversity, complexity and difference.

7. Include stories of the “righteous among the nations” – those non-Jews who assisted in the survival of Jews at great personal risk. But, do not confine the study of the shoah to these people only or allow the understanding to develop that their actions and responses were normal or widespread. A consideration of the so-called righteous among the nations helps students to explore issues of courage, responsibility and care.

8. Avoid giving the perception that Jews exist only or principally as the victims of Christian persecution. The shoah does not define Jews or Judaism, even though it assumes a destructive presence in their history. Another way of stating this is: resist the simplistic equation that “a study of Jews and Judaism = a study of the shoah.”

9. Avoid cliché and oversimplification in the quest for answers. Simplistic slogans such as “Never again” or “Remember” tend to simplify and domesticate the shoah and its meanings. A study of the shoah should not hang upon the expression of such slogans which can become glib attempts to deal with complex and ambivalent material. Similarly, the use of simulations and role plays about the shoah in classroom programs is potentially problematic in that these activities distort the actual experience of victims of the shoah. For example, eating a reduced diet for consecutive school lunch times does not replicate the experience of people starving in the camps or ghettos under Nazi occupation.

10. Avoid a mere social science approach to teaching the shoah. Avoid an over-concentration on study of “the numbers” killed or interned. A focus on numbers risks affirming Stalin’s obscene dictum that “a single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a mere statistic”. Instead, use art, poetry, autobiography, music, narrative and other disciplines of the humanities and creative arts in studying the shoah. Survivor testimonies and memoirs are a valuable source of materials for student examination. These classroom resources, drawn from the humanities, provide opportunities to explore the question of how the shoah was humanly possible, help to avoid stereotypical images (“the Jews”, “the Germans”), and discourage premature judgments about the motivations, actions and responses of victims, perpetrators, bystanders and rescuers.
Conclusion

Gabriel Moran has pointed to the centrality of the Nazi Holocaust for Jewish and Christian dialogue: “I cannot postpone the immediacy and urgency of the Holocaust. On the Jewish side, it is the reality that hovers over every Christian-Jewish conversation, whatever may be the topic under discussion” (Moran, 1991, p. 25). Any attempts to assist Christian students to understand Jews and Judaism will need to include some specific exploration of the shoah and Christian complicity in it. This notion was given specific form in the observation of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations when commenting on the Vatican’s, We Remember document in 1998. They pointed out that “as Catholic belief as expressed in recent documents clearly links the salvation of Christians with God’s redemption of the Jewish people whose covenant with him is irrevocable, Christians cannot view the Shoah as they do other genocides” (1998). This perspective places before Catholic religious educators the challenge of presenting the shoah to their students as an unprecedented event in the history of the world in which Christians were fundamentally complicit.

References


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CRITICAL ISSUES FOR THE FUTURE OF SENIOR CLASS RETREATS IN AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: PART 1 - MAJOR THEORETICAL AND EDUCATIONAL ISSUES

Abstract

This first of two articles reviews some of critical issues for the future of retreats in Catholic secondary schools that emerged from a doctoral research study of teachers’ understandings of the nature, purposes and conduct of live-in retreats. It follows up an earlier publication that reported some of the research findings (Tullio, 2006). The scope of the research project is outlined briefly in endnote 1. The article draws on the conclusions reached in the final chapter of the research thesis (Tullio, 2009). It tries to develop a ‘big picture’ interpretation of the significance of the live-in retreat as one of the most important ‘grass roots’ innovations in Australian Catholic religious education. The follow up article will discuss some of the key issues for the theory and practice of retreats.

For a number of reasons, the place of retreats in Catholic secondary schools is not as secure as perhaps it was formerly. Hence there is a need for Catholic education authorities to review the conduct of retreats so that their valuable contribution to religious education can be confirmed, while at the same time addressing the problems that could impede their future development. This article seeks to further this agenda by reporting research based insights that can promote reflection and discussion.

Introduction

In 1964, Bernie Neville, a De La Salle brother working at St Michael’s College in Adelaide, organised an experimental live-in weekend retreat for senior class volunteers from some local Catholic boys and girls schools. It was called a Christian Living Camp and it was conducted at Victor Harbor. As far as we can determine, this was the first live-in communitarian retreat for Catholic schools in Australia. It proved to be both a remarkable and significant turning point in the conduct of school retreats. What began as an innovation by a small group of practitioners eventually became the norm for retreats for Catholic secondary schools across the country. While for centuries Catholic retreats were modelled on the silent retreat for religious communities and clergy, the new style communitarian retreat was rarely silent; it was centred on community building, communication, conversation, fun, friendship, and celebration – a substrate within which religious activities like prayer, reflection, Reconciliation and Eucharist were embedded.

This represented something of a revolution or quantum change as far as the conduct of Catholic school retreats were concerned. Yet it is possible to show that this new style of retreats retained key elements in the traditional Catholic notion of a retreat dating back into early Christian spirituality.

The discussion in this article concentrates on major theoretical and educational issues associated with the communitarian retreat as a significant innovation – in the areas of Catholic spirituality, psychology, education, school based curriculum development, and especially in Catholic school religious education. The second article in the series will address psychological and spiritual issues related to the conduct of retreats, together with contextual factors that have a bearing on the implementation of retreats, and the resourcing of retreats and the professional development of retreat leaders.
Major theoretical and educational issues

1. The ‘new style’ communitarian live-in school retreat: Evidence of both continuity and change in Catholic spirituality

The idea of going away on a retreat had its origins in early Christian spirituality, particularly in what has become known as ‘desert spirituality’ (Swan, 2001; Ward, 2003). Desert spirituality presumed that one could get closer to God by retiring, even temporarily, from the concerns of everyday life to commune with God in silence and solitude (Mundy, 2000; Pearce, 1989). While silence is rarely if ever a prominent feature of contemporary school retreats (or in Catholic retreats generally), there are a number of aspects of early retreat spirituality that are still evident in the purposes and activities of live-in school retreats today.

The life of monks in the monastic orders was like a continuous retreat (Belisle, 2003; Brooke, 2003; King, 1999; Knowles, 1969); but the ‘active’ religious orders (such as the Jesuits, and the teaching orders founded since the 17th century) developed the structurally lasting characteristic of the retreat as a time out for physical and spiritual rejuvenation (Caraman, 1990; Goussin, 2003; Ivens, 2004). This more ‘portable’ retreat came to have a significant influence in Catholic Christianity. The Catholic retreat movement has endured for centuries by adapting successfully to different circumstances (Lunn, 1913; Hood, 1958; Lovell, 1994).

The introduction of Christian Living Camps in Adelaide in 1964 represented a dramatic transformation in the purposes and mode of conduct of school retreats. For the first time in the history of Catholic spirituality (at least in Australia), the notion of retreat became associated with much talk and fun. In this more personal/communitarian context, the idea of taking time out and going away to reflect on one’s relationship with God was being presented in a different light. The spiritual dimension of retreats was usually always a positive experience in the Catholic spiritual tradition. The communitarian retreat would add the elements of enjoyment, fun and exhilaration.

While to some extent, this new form of school retreat was influenced by the experience that some of the original retreat leaders had in the adult Catholic Cursillo movement (Neville, 2007), in the main, it represented an innovation in Catholic spiritual practice that had its origins in Australian Catholic schools. From there, the acceptability and the desirability of communitarian retreats spread to religious orders and the wider Catholic community in Australia. This is an interesting incidence of the Catholic school system coming to have a nation wide spiritual influence on the Catholic Church in this country (as explained further below).

While there are many aspects of the communitarian retreat that were new and innovative in the 1960s, there is still evidence of a continuity with the spiritual principles associated with the historical development of the retreat within the Catholic spiritual tradition since the times of the early Church fathers and desert spirituality. This is illustrated in Table 1 (p. 59).

2 The new communitarian retreat: An innovation in Catholic spirituality from the time of the Second Vatican Council

The new communitarian retreat was to become a key signpost in the development of Catholic spirituality after the Second Vatican Council. It represented the quest for a ‘personally relevant’ spirituality in modern times. The transition from traditional, silent, religious order modelled school retreats to the new, celebratory, community-modelled, discussion-oriented retreats was iconic of the transition from a traditional 1950s Catholic spirituality to what could be termed a Vatican II spirituality. During and just after the Second Vatican Council, Catholics in Australia were making significant adjustments to their practice of spirituality – changes which were more extensive than had occurred for centuries since the Reformation (Cashen, 2005; Greeley, 2004; Groome, 1998; Schillebeeckx, 1985; Tacey, 2003).
Table 1: A summary of retreat practices and emphases in spirituality from the early Christian communities through to contemporary live-in school retreats. It shows areas of continuity and change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retreat practices and emphases in spirituality</th>
<th>Early Christian monastic communities</th>
<th>Religious orders, especially the teaching orders (following the innovation introduced by the Jesuits)</th>
<th>Catholic secondary school retreats in the 1950s</th>
<th>Contemporary communitarian Catholic secondary school retreats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawal from society</td>
<td>X life was like a continuous retreat</td>
<td>X limited withdrawal when conducted on school premises</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X special attempt to highlight the community experience of Eucharist as a keynote of the whole retreat community experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going away to live at a relatively isolated place</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Usually stayed at school</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual practices/prayer</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liturgy and sacrament of reconciliation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X special attempt to highlight the community experience of Eucharist as a keynote of the whole retreat community experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal reflection</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being in a community</td>
<td>X the taken for granted living structure of the group</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X special emphasis on community building as a principal retreat dynamic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun activities and recreation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The joy of going away with friends</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The joy of meeting new people and making new friendships; enhancing existing friendships.</td>
<td>X this applied to the early ‘inter-school’ and ‘stranger’ camps and retreats and not to retreats for one school’s pupils only.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extensive discussion in groups</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A special emphasis on ‘personal development’ alongside the ‘spiritual’ dimension.</td>
<td>In these times it was presumed that the spiritual dimension to retreats would be important for overall personal development – but this link was not stressed</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The adults who conducted the first new style communitarian school retreats in the 1960s (all of whom were members of religious orders) were concerned with trying to enhance the lives of young people in Catholic schools with a ‘relevant’ spirituality (Firman, 1968; Rossiter, 1975, 1978); this was an additional stimulus for them to work out what was a ‘relevant Catholic spirituality’ for adults. They acknowledged that working together, and with young people on these retreats provided an influential forum that affected their own personal spirituality, as well as their approach to resourcing the spirituality of youth.

In a sense, for a number of these retreat leaders, the conduct of retreats served to ‘fast track’ both their personal and spiritual development. A key factor in this movement was their growing belief that relationships (friendship and being ‘close’ to people) were central to personal development and spirituality (Kennedy, 1967). Being in a responsible position to model spirituality on retreats put them in the role of ‘bridge building’ from the traditional to a new style of Catholic spirituality.

Another factor was their flexibility in trying out new and innovative community building activities that related to youth spirituality. However, there were some concerns, even in the early stages of development of these retreats, about the important explicit, spiritual dimension of retreats. This still remains an issue today.

A key to understanding both the changing spirituality background to the emergence of the communitarian retreat and its psychological dynamics lay in the new Vatican II spirituality. Crawford and Rossiter (2006, pp. 173-177) provided a succinct account of the development of what they called a Vatican II “psychological Christian spirituality” in the 1960s and 1970s. They claimed that this represented a quantum transformation in Catholic spirituality, and that it set lasting precedents such that it eventually became the ‘mainline’ spirituality in Australian Catholicism since that time. However, there remains considerable diversity in Australian Catholic spirituality and a number of Catholics would not identify with this so-called mainline spirituality whose authenticity they would question.

Crawford and Rossiter (2006) proposed that the key characteristics of this new spirituality were:-

- Personal relationships were central to both human development and spirituality.
- The development of community was central to the development of personal relationships.
- The psychological dimensions of spirituality needed articulation – religion (theology, scripture and spirituality) needed to be perceived as relevant to people’s lives which led to a ‘psychological Christian spirituality’.
- Authentic liturgy involved: - community, participation, communication and celebration (contrasting with the earlier emphasis on: - individual, attendance, silence and awe). While liturgy was still regarded as the ‘human interfacing with the divine’ the emphasis shifted more towards the ‘human experience’ side of the equation.

While one of a number of arenas where the new Vatican II spirituality was being forged, the senior school live-in retreat was important for three reasons:-

- Those religious personnel involved in the new communitarian school retreats became influential spirituality leaders in the Australian Catholic community.
- The Vatican II spirituality of the new retreats became embedded in Catholic schools where this culture of Catholic spirituality affected generations of Catholic educators; in the schools, it probably had a more significant influence on teachers (especially religion teachers) than on the students.
- The school students, who became the successive generations of Catholic laity, absorbed this new spirituality from the schools, and in particular from its special expression within the communitarian retreat.
From this perspective, the school communitarian live-in retreat made an important contribution to the development of Australian Catholic spirituality after the Second Vatican Council.

3 Application of humanistic psychology and group dynamics theories to religion/spirituality and education

The work of Carl Rogers (and others like Rollo May, Gordon Allport, Abraham Maslow) in humanistic psychology in the 1960s impacted on popular culture in Western countries by underscoring the importance of the development of relationships within the overall developmental task of ‘becoming a person’. On becoming a person (1961) was the title to one of Rogers’ most influential books. As suggested above, the relationship dimension to spirituality became prominent in the 1960s and humanistic psychology was a significant influence on this development. The human and psychological dimension to spirituality focused on the human side of the quest for God and the spiritual. Hence the word ‘relevant’ became prominent in spirituality – that is, the application of spirituality to everyday life; it needed to make sense by being applicable to ordinary life.

As well as having applications to clinical practice in therapy and counselling (Kennedy, 1977), the use of encounter groups, personalist psychology and group dynamics also spread to the business world where they informed organisational development and were used for staff professional development programs (Schein and Bennis, 1965; Rogers, 1972).

Rogers (1969) also applied his psychology to education with the popular publication Freedom to learn. He claimed that “There is no resemblance between the traditional function of teaching and the function of the facilitation of learning” (Rogers, 1983, p. 135), and in so doing, contributed to the development of contemporary thinking that emphasises ‘learning’ while underplaying ‘teaching’ – the latter tends to be replaced by the idea of ‘facilitating’ (a development critiqued by Moran, 2008).

While not the only forum where humanistic psychology was impacting on religion/spirituality and education, the early communitarian school retreats were important opportunities for their retreat leaders at the time to explore (both for themselves and their students) the interfaces between religion/spirituality, humanistic psychology (and the social sciences in general) and educative processes. For them, this highlighted a psychological perspective on religion and it fostered the development of a psychological spirituality (Crawford and Rossiter, 2006, p. 173). It emphasised the quality of personal relationships as a key to personal development – and hence to spirituality. The persistence of the Catholic Institute of Counselling in Strathfield (Sydney), which continues to offer personal development programs for adults (since the 1960s), remains one prominent organisational testament to this movement.

The personal interactions and community development on school retreats meant that a strong personal development emphasis became prominent in the school retreat movement – along with the more traditional spiritual dimension. It became an area of work for educators where humanistic psychology was affecting their understanding of both personal development and spirituality. The live-in retreat was probably the most appropriate school venue where humanistic psychology might be relevant to student learning. The idea of facilitating personal learning makes more sense in the retreat situation because in effect it is structurally like an ‘intensive personal development seminar’.

4 Psychological insights into youth spirituality

The special circumstances for enhancing teacher-student relationships in the live-in retreat helped Catholic educators (both in the first communitarian secondary school retreats, and on a continuing basis since the 1960s) develop more insight into, and greater professional interest in, youth spirituality. This special interest in youth spirituality has influenced the thinking and professional practice of generations of...
teachers and educational leaders within Australian Catholic education. In turn this has contributed positively to the spiritual/moral dimension of Australian Catholic schooling.

The retreat provided adults with a privileged situation for talking over questions about spirituality with young people. The founders of the communitarian retreats in the 1960s believed that the retreat experiences were important for them in coming to a better understanding of the personal and spiritual needs of young people, as well as of what they considered to be the ‘big’ spiritual/moral issues in their lives and the world at that time. While this question was not raised specifically with the participants in the study, it was likely that the retreat still provides some stimulus to educators to think about contemporary youth spirituality and how they might best promote its development. Further research could check whether retreats provided educators with more significant insights into youth spirituality than their corresponding classroom experience.

The leaders of the first communitarian retreats considered that the psychological dynamics of retreats were favourable for promoting attitudinal change. While the teachers in this study did not specifically refer to this possibility in the same psychological terminology of attitudinal change, they indicated that the promotion of personal change and the development of spirituality were regarded as important aims for retreats.

The range of issues for contemporary youth spirituality identified in the literature (for example in Crawford and Rossiter, 2006; Engebretson, 2007; Hughes, 2007; Maroney, 2008A, Maroney, 2008B) provides a profile of spirituality that could inform the work of school retreat leaders. It is not that all young people could be adequately described by a single profile, but familiarity with the trends and issues could be helpful for retreat leaders in shaping retreat activities that would be more in tune with the spiritual starting points of their students. Also, some of the issues themselves could well become useful content for inputs at retreats (E.g. the way that a consumerist ideology and practice can affect young people’s identity development.).

Given the overall interest of retreats in developing young people spiritually, it is suggested that a study of youth spirituality should be an essential component of any professional development program or book resource for retreat leaders. Also of importance for retreat leaders, would be some appreciation of the nexus between spirituality and humanistic psychology that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s (as discussed above) because of its importance for understanding both the development of Australian Catholic spirituality as well as of the psychological and spiritual dynamics of live-in retreats.

5 The communitarian retreat: A significant ‘grass roots’ education innovation and example of school-based curriculum development

In writings about the development and implementation of school curriculum, much attention was given to the progression from system policy to the operationalising of change and innovation at school level. Even school-based curriculum development (SBCD) was usually driven by central system-wide policy. The literature often proposed approaches to make system-wide, government-mandated and ‘top down’ models of curriculum change work more effectively (Print, 1987; Fullan, 1991; Brady and Kennedy, 2003; Slattery, 2006). The origin and consolidation of the new style communitarian retreats in Australian Catholic secondary education was quite different. It represented a significant grass roots innovation in Catholic schools commenced by practitioners and maintained by schools that eventually became a mainline practice in Australian Catholic education.

The innovation was carried forward and supported by religious orders. The original pioneers and the ‘early adopters’ of the new style retreats were members of religious orders and their work in school retreats was quickly endorsed by authorities in the orders. In turn, the religious orders further supported the new retreat movement by instituting travelling retreat teams, setting up retreat centres and commencing.
programs for the professional development of teachers as retreat leaders. While not as prominent in Catholic diocesan religious education guidelines as might be expected, retreats are still regarded as making a distinctive contribution to the Catholic schools’ overall religious education program. Rossiter (1981, p. 110), in his review of religious education in Australian schools, considered that retreats were perhaps the most distinctive feature of Catholic school religious education in this country.

Apart from the contribution of the religious orders (who provided retreat centres and travelling retreat teams E.g. Prout, 1995; Mogg and Prout, 1998; Mulligan, 1994), the development of communitarian live-in retreats in Catholic secondary education was almost exclusively the initiative of the schools and not of systemic authorities. Similarly, the resourcing and training of retreat leaders was primarily school-based. This gave freedom to the schools but it also tended to leave retreats vulnerable in the long term because their future was too dependent on the situation in particular schools. Change in school staffing could deplete the retreat team and also change the culture of acceptability of retreats within the school. If retreats were generally regarded as an important part of the school’s religious education program, then it could be expected firstly, that this position would be reflected in diocesan curriculum documentation. And secondly, there should be a commitment to the development and resourcing of retreats as well as to the leadership training of teachers.

6 The communitarian retreat: Providing insight into the spiritual moral dimension to school curriculum

The links between educational practice and personal change in pupils (in beliefs, attitudes and values) have always been complex and tenuous, and are influenced by many non-school factors. The retreat was like an intensive personal development seminar where its psychological dynamics were considered as contributing to attitudinal change (Neville, 2007; Rossiter, 1978). The psychological dynamics of retreats suggested that personal change is more likely to be promoted in a personal environment where there is:-

- freedom
- supportive community setting
- friendly and fun activities
- friendship and scope for friend-making
- small group discussions favourable for exchange of personal views
- a favourable psychological environment in which new thinking about potential personal change could occur, together with the ‘imagining’ and ‘rehearsal’ of what such personal change might be like
- opportunity for personal reflection
- informative stimulus material for discussion.

A favourable place for such opportunities is when students ‘go away’ from the formalities and routines of school and home life. This view also suggests that the potential for promoting personal change in the classroom setting is different – where it is more concerned with an intellectual engagement with spiritual/moral issues in the format of a regular, open, inquiring, informative study; in other words, a different channel towards personal change that is a natural part of the academic school subject.

According to the scheme of Crawford and Rossiter (2006, p. 305), the same principles and safeguards that applied to personal learning in the formal classroom context should apply to the live-in retreat, and in particular to its small group discussion. However, the live-in retreat provided a naturally more personal and informal environment than the formal classroom, making it particularly suitable for personal reflection and discussion; this situation could not easily be replicated in the classroom. Hence, it could be expected that there would be more scope for personal discussion on the retreat. It would then be reasonable to conclude that the retreat had greater natural potential for prompting students towards a review of life and consideration of possibilities for personal change than could be expected in the classroom.
The contribution of classroom discussion towards personal change is more indirect through the channel of informed inquiry (Crawford and Rossiter, 2006, p. 282). By contrast, the distinctive channel towards personal change in the retreat is more psychological and emotional. It is not that one channel is better than, or should be preferred to, the other. Both can be used to provide personal development opportunities for young people at school. Understanding the distinctive possibilities for promoting personal change in the retreat goes hand in hand with appreciation of the complementary possibilities in the classroom.

According to Crawford and Rossiter (2006, p. 414), acknowledgment of the distinctive potential of retreats for prompting personal and spiritual change in pupils was evident in some commentaries on religious education. These commentaries tended to regard the retreat as a more of a ‘catechesis’ like experience (that is, a faith-sharing and faith-developing experience) than was the case in the classroom teaching of religion; in turn, this tended to equate ‘emotionality’ with ‘faith development’, identifying the retreat (and ‘personal sharing discussions’) as more effective in promoting faith development than classroom religious education. Crawford and Rossiter considered that this terminology reflected a problematic interpretation of the nature of faith. Their view would acknowledge the distinctive potential of the retreat for personal reflection and interactions, but it stopped short of labelling this somewhat unconditionally as faith development. Their approach was concerned with identifying educational strategies that could point young people in the direction of personal change (and faith development) while not presuming that any pedagogy could make this happen on cue; this emphasised the students themselves as the authentic authors of their own personal change.

The psychological, community and spiritual dynamics of retreats: How some of these same dynamics are evident in other community activities

1 Different meanings associated with the word ‘retreat’

The word retreat has extensive common usage in referring to some degree of withdrawal from the demands of the ordinary life and/or work situations. It includes the notions of escape, relaxation, refreshment, renewal and rejuvenation. This opportunity for ‘recharging’ the individual’s physical and mental ‘batteries’ may be focused on preparing for a more healthy, purposeful return to ordinary life. In addition, the retreat may be used as an opportunity for reflection as a part of important personal decision-making; and for ‘finding the self’ – a phrase referring to a review of personal identity and the appraisal of behaviour that has identity consequences; this could include reflection on the possibility of new thinking and new behaviours. Thus the retreat in its most generic sense has an important natural place in personal and social life and it is not surprising that the term came into religious usage with the added connotation of renewing spiritual health.

Hence the word retreat has been applied to a special room or place in one’s house or place of work, to a holiday house, to a rehabilitation centre and even to the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum – as well as to the psychological encounter group.

While at an ordinary human level, and in the religious situation, there was always a ready understanding of the purposes of a retreat, the development of humanistic psychology, and in particular, the sensitivity or encounter group by Carl Rogers and other psychologists, led to more systematic reflection about the psychological dynamics of personal change through group methods. This was encapsulated in the title of Schein and Bennis’ (1965) seminal book: Personal and organisational change through group methods. This psychology identified the potential for personal change within a complex of the following aspects or qualities of the live-in retreat.

- removal to a new situation;
• the relative isolation put individuals temporarily out of contact with the home situation and their usual reference groups of family, friends and workplace;
• the new situation was a stimulus to personal change with community support;
• making new acquaintances and developing new friendships, and / or the enhancement of old friendships were exhilarating;
• community building occurred, often resulting in good feelings about group identity;
• the isolated retreat situation, as well as the group interactions, could prompt individuals to reflect and review their personal lives and perhaps talk about this in the group;
• group discussions and one-to-one interactions provided scope for imaginative rehearsal of new thinking, new values and new behaviour (personal renewal);
• the group could provide an understanding and supportive reference point for experimenting with new thinking and new behaviour;
• there was scope for preparation to return to ordinary life with a new outlook.

On the basis of this list, we have identified a range of contemporary institutions, events and practices that show up the operation of some of the same psychological and community dynamics identified in secondary school retreats. While it is beyond our scope in this article to describe these similarities in detail (as presented in the research thesis), the following is an example list of events that illustrate the parallels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Events, organisational structures and television programs</th>
<th>Notes on purposes and psychological dynamics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public events</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Retreat.</td>
<td>The APEC Retreat was held in Sydney, 2007 – conducted “in an informal, relaxed retreat setting in which leaders addressed issues of strategic importance” (APEC Australia, 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Corporate structures</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Corporate Retreats; An example: Sheila Campbell; USA. President of Wild Blue Yonder, Training, Retreat Design and Facilitation (Campbell et al., 2006)</td>
<td>Corporate retreats have continued within the business world in the same vein as extended staff meetings or special professional development events to involve participants in creative thinking, strategy development and projected changes to organisational behaviour within a corporate culture, and enhancement of corporate identity and team spirit.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Community health structures</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hospital rehabilitation / physical therapy.</td>
<td>Injury related rehabilitation and trauma related therapies remove people from their usual environment (or from the regular hospital) to provide special treatments to improve their health and help them recover sufficiently to be able to return to full independence when they return home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental/psychiatric institutions</td>
<td>Patients are removed from their usual situation which is often stressful, to experience physical and mental recovery, often making use of medication. Counselling and individual/group therapy (including personal story telling) may be included to improve mental health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehabilitation Centres for substance abuse.</td>
<td>Individuals admitted themselves to these centres which effectively removed them from their usual substance abusive situation and provided programs (including individual and/or group counselling sessions) that attempted to help them break away from addiction and develop more resilience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adolescent youth structures</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation Flinders: a South Australian-based program (Operation Flinders, 2009).</td>
<td>A government-sponsored project in South Australia called Operation Flinders sponsored young people at risk aged from 14 to 18 to attend an eight-day retreat-like experience with adult mentors.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**School structures**
School Camps and/or alternative campus experiential programs. | School camps were usually conducted in bush camp sites that were away from the school with an emphasis on physical activity, often including experiential programs as a part of environmental education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Television programs</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brat Camp; Reality television: USA and United Kingdom.</td>
<td>Brat Camp (Isaacs, 2005) was a television program showing how anti-social young people were affected positively by being in a wilderness setting away from their regular environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ladette to Lady: Reality television program. UK and Australia.</td>
<td>A small group of young women were taken out of their ordinary life situation to an institution for grooming under ‘culture authority figures’ – making a significant ‘break’ with the assumptions and behaviours that went with their home situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Abbey: Women experience life in a monastic institution.</td>
<td>A television documentary entitled The Abbey (Sidwell, 2007) showed how five women lived in a women’s religious monastery for 30 days. The participants experienced a life of withdrawal from their usual environment, regular spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation, silence and community life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 2 Similarity with the community and spiritual dynamics of World Youth Day

The psychological and spiritual dynamics at work in the secondary school retreat were also identifiable in a number of other situations – in particular, the Catholic World Youth Day (WYD) program in Sydney in 2008. The parallels included:

- the going away – even to another country;
- an association of religious activities with community development and friendship;
- the generation of positive emotions and euphoria through the acquaintance process and community activities;
- generation of a tangible sense of group religious identity;
- negotiating the problems in saying goodbye to new friends and in ‘re-entry’ to ordinary life after a significant emotional experience.

Hence, the claims made for World Youth Day as a significant experience of evangelisation (WYD Syd, 2006; AYCS and AYCW, 2007A, 2007B) could be equally applied (and perhaps even more so) to the school retreat because of the potential for ongoing follow-up after the event back at school, together with the ongoing religious education through the school’s formal classroom religion curriculum. While at World Youth Day, the religious activities were of a more traditional type (Latin Mass, Benediction, traditional Stations of the Cross, the Angelus in Latin etc.) at the communitarian retreat, there was greater scope for making the prayer and liturgy more relevant to contemporary youth spirituality; and there was more scope for student involvement and engagement in the liturgy as growing out of, and as a celebratory climax to, the development of community during the retreat. Like at the World Youth Day Mass, the tangible sense of community at the retreat contributed to both the prayerful and the emotional dimensions of the celebration.

The public documentation used in preparation for World Youth Day showed the intention of making the event a significant religious experience for youth that would be accepted as a type of ‘New Evangelisation’ (Pope John Paul II, 1988, 1990; WYD Syd, 2006). This could help renew their sense of Catholic religious identity; and there was also the hope that it might lead youth to more engagement with the local Catholic parishes, and their religious life. Arrangements for follow up activities to facilitate new relationships with parishes were organised. Similarly, the idea of New Evangelisation could be applied to the school retreat.

One significant difference between the retreat and WYD, apart from the size and international scope of the latter, was the public pageantry of WYD. Both young people (and adults), who were participants or observers, were impressed by the pageantry of the World Youth Day Stations of the Cross and the Papal
mass – as they have become accustomed to expecting pageantry in public events and celebrations. The religious content of WYD was associated with the pageantry, colour, music, good feelings and community energy that have come to be expected of large scale public events. In addition, another difference was the way that large numbers of youth involved in the WYD helped generate a tangible sense of Catholic religious identity. The overt prominence of Catholics at the event translated into a feeling that the Catholic Church was both large and multi-national in its membership. For those who may have felt that being Catholic was the experience of a religious minority in a secular society, WYD made them feel, often with pride, part of a substantial religious group.

When it comes to appraising the success of WYD and the retreat, there are difficulties in deciding on what criteria this should be judged. There was an initial natural tendency to judge the experiences as a success if the participants enjoyed them; on this count, participants at both experiences reported positively. Another approach to appraising the events was to ask participants to comment on whether they felt that the experience enhanced their spirituality. Again, on this score, both events were regarded as positive religious experiences (Flynn, 1985, 1993; Flynn & Mok, 2002; Maroney, 2008A, 2008B). Whether or not the experiences would lead to more participation in Catholic parishes was more difficult to determine. As far as retreats were concerned, there has been no data collected on this question; also, as yet, there is no substantial data as to whether WYD has affected youth parish participation.

It is considered unrealistic to expect that either of these experiences should make a significant difference to youth participation in parishes. The option for young Catholics to be an active part of a parish depends on a number of factors, the principal one being whether or not their parents are regular church goers – but this is not always a guarantee that youth will follow the example of their parents. Other factors would include:– the perceived spiritual relevance of the Church; the relationship between the spirituality experienced at WYD or the retreat and the perceived spiritual practices of the parish; the religious dispositions of individuals’ principal group of friends.

It is evidently important for Catholic authorities to know that events like WYD and school retreats are effective and relevant spiritual/religious experiences; if not, then it would be difficult to justify their costs and resourcing, as well as for retreats the disruption of the school timetable for year 12 students and teachers. These spiritual/religious experiences are holistic in the sense that enjoyment, good feelings and community identification have infused the religious practices, and to that extent become somewhat inseparable from them. It is therefore problematic to try to differentiate the ‘human’ gains from the ‘religious’ ones – and the human enjoyment from the potential religious development. Also, it is considered problematic to try to measure spiritual/religious effectiveness and relevance in a way that puts too much emphasis on changes in parish participation.

We consider that retreats provide a positive and healthy spiritual/religious influence on young people, but this does not necessarily dispose them towards becoming regular Sunday mass attenders. It is our judgment that the cultural decline in formal church participation in Australian Catholicism over the last 60 years cannot be reversed in a significant way by any program or religious experience – WYD, school retreat etc. Hence, our conclusion is that the potential enhancement to personal spirituality in these experiences should be offered to youth unconditionally. Criteria for addressing youth’s spiritual needs are required for appraising the value of experiences like retreats. While hopefully such experiences might favourably dispose some youth towards voluntary participation in parish life, this result should not be taken as an absolute criterion for measuring their success.

Conclusion

A number of the judgments and evaluations made in our study are controversial; not all Catholic educators would interpret the results in this same way. Nevertheless, we have identified important issues and questions about the place and conduct of retreats in Catholic schools in historical perspective. Further
study and research are needed to determine the extent to which this retreat agenda is evident elsewhere in Australian Catholic education. In turn, systematic research on retreats, particularly from the perspective of young people, is needed to inform the maintenance and further development of retreats as a valuable component of Catholic secondary schooling.

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Endnotes

1. The doctoral research study of Tullio (2009) was in two parts:-
   - Part 1. An historical documentary study of two areas. Firstly, the spirituality background to Catholic retreats, dating back to the origins of retreat like experiences in the spirituality of the early Church desert fathers through to contemporary retreats. Secondly, the origins and development of the communitarian school live-in retreat dating back to the mid 1960s. This included notes on youth spirituality which informed the work of retreat leaders.
   - Part 2. A qualitative empirical study of the views of teachers on the nature and conduct of senior school live-in retreats. Data was collected from semi-structured interviews with a sample of teachers from one metropolitan Catholic diocese.
Peter Tze Ming NG*

RELIGION AND SOCIAL HARMONY: 
THE CASE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN HONG KONG—CHINA

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to expound the ideological conception of social harmony in the Chinese cultural contexts and to explore the possible roles religious educators can have in today’s secular and plural society such as the one found in Hong Kong. The concept of “seeking harmony without uniformity” is found to be a vital feature in Chinese culture. The present study attempts to explore its relevance to the creation of a harmonious society, especially in the context of a religiously pluralistic society. The author will proceed to illustrate the contribution made by one higher institution in Hong Kong, namely Chung Chi College of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Introduction

Social cohesion is a current issue in religious education. It has become not only a primary issue of religious education in Hong Kong, but also a core concern of the Chinese government in recent years. (Wenhuibao, 2006, p.1). The present paper attempts to expound the ideological conception of social harmony in the Chinese cultural contexts and to explore the possible roles religious educators can have in today’s secular and pluralistic society such as the one found in Hong Kong. The author will proceed to illustrate the contribution made by one higher institution in Hong Kong, namely Chung Chi College of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Over the past years, the Chinese government has promoted the construction of a harmonious society in China, by advocating “harmony without uniformity” as a guiding principle and a prerequisite for it. According to Premier Wen Jiabao, “harmony without uniformity” is a vital feature of Chinese traditional culture. In a speech delivered to a Harvard University audience on December 10, 2003, he insisted that “as a great idea cherished by ancient Chinese thinkers, harmony should accommodate differences and diversity should not rise to conflict, so that harmony shall favour co-existence and mutual growth, and diversity benefit prosperity on the part of each... This idea helps us form and sustain friendly relations with neighbours, and can be beneficial to the international community in its endeavours to tackle inter-social conflicts”. (Han, 2005). Shortly after that incident, Premier Wen developed the same idea in another speech entitled Respecting Diverse Cultures and Building a Harmonious World during his visit to France. Exploring the prospect of solving present-day world conflicts in the spirit of ‘seeking harmony without uniformity’, he said,

From ancient times, the Chinese have regarded harmony as a virtue, correlated harmony with differences, and found in harmony the possibility to cause a myriad of things to flourish. Since we
regard ‘harmony as a virtue’, we believe that solidarity, mutual assistance, and friendly relations between nations, peoples, and individuals must be the best we can hope for and acquire. Harmony is therefore a cardinal element of the Chinese culture and spirit, and an ideal that the Chinese have always aimed for. (Wen, 2006)

At the Sixth Plenary Meeting of the 16th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) which adopted the Decision of the CCP Central Committee on Some Major Issues Concerning the Construction of a Socialist Harmonious Society, it was concluded that a socialist, harmonious society must be able to stimulate social vitality and to effect harmony amongst different political parties, nationalities, religions, classes, and Chinese people inside and outside China. (Zhang, 2008). The inclusion of religions as one of these five important relationships gives evidence to the essential role religions can play in the construction of a socialist harmonious society. It was clear that a socialist society can by no means emerge without the participation of religious people, nor can a harmonious society evolve without all religions in harmonious environments. Hence, it was affirmed that religions would have a part to play in the construction of a socialist harmonious society in China. (Ng, 2008).

Like Samuel P. Huntington, many Western scholars tend to believe that religions today are a matter and source of conflicts, hence the “clash of civilizations”. (Huntington, 1997). They presume that diversity in religions leads to opposition or rejection and therefore different religions cannot co-exist harmoniously. A Beijing university professor, Tang Yijie however suggests a different view. According to Tang, conflicts prevailing among present-day world religions are the consequence of the hegemonism present in the Western culture, whereas “universal harmony” and mutual absorption and assimilation are the predominant features of Chinese Confucianism. Tang believes that, since advances in human civilization have generally coincided with such mutual absorption and assimilation, the Chinese Confucian concept of “universal harmony” tallies best with the goal of “peace and development” cherished by the entire humanity and is the best expression of the spirit of “harmony without uniformity”. Tang also argues that this view ties in with the underlying Confucian value which is the toleration of the difference between the self and the other and the search for union and equilibrium in the pursuit of the "coexistence of civilizations". (Tang, 1994 & 2005).

With this perspective as a point of departure, the present author will attempt to explore the concept of “harmony without uniformity” and to review the different roles religious educators can have in today’s secular and pluralistic society such as the one found in Hong Kong. This will be seen more clearly from the case of Chung Chi College of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, regarding how religious educators could contribute to the construction of a harmonious society in China today.

The Concept of Harmony in Chinese Traditional Culture

The expression hexie (和諧 “harmony”) first appeared in The Book of Guoyu (國語)¹, and is expounded in many later classics. In Origin of Chinese Characters (說文解字), he 和 is explained as the state/quality of being “compatible” and xie 諧 is given as the state/quality of being “well-coordinated”. The more
detailed statement about the concept “harmony” is found in Confucius’ thought where harmony is explained as the “harmony without uniformity”. This kind of harmony does not lend itself to being mistaken for conformity and allows for the unity of the many. Harmony is not singularity or oneness and it is not a condition where something unique goes undisputed. In short, harmony is a state where a thousand different things are “compatible” with one another and remain “well-coordinated”. Such a state is the result of a process whereby the many get together to find their sameness and yet keep their otherness, not a process in which the otherness is eliminated and the sameness kept to result in a solid oneness. In other words, multiplicity is a prerequisite to harmony which is an idea found in many of Chinese popular sayings such as “a balance is achieved when many things get together,” (the four corners and eight faces), and “all things in this world consist of a dark side and a bright side (hence, the idea of yin and yang) and it is the interaction of these two that causes all things to be well balanced.” (the complementarity of yin and yang). We may take examples, for instance, from our daily experiences, “the same tones do not create a harmonious music, the same shapes do not form a pattern, the same flavours do not produce a savoury meal, and the same words do not generate a discourse”. Music is one good example. “When a music is created only by the same tone (or the same musical note), it cannot give any sense of harmony.”

Confucius said, “The exemplary man seeks harmony without uniformity,” (「君子和而不同」) (The Confucian Dialect 《論語·子路篇》), which is to say that when people deal with one another, differences of opinion are inevitable. The wisest thing is to handle such differences in the spirit of “harmony without uniformity” and to realize that “harmony causes things to reproduce themselves, and uniformity brings everything to a stop”. In the Discourse of Zhengyu (鄭語) in The Book of Guoyu (國語), the royal historian addressed his majesty Huangong (桓公) in these terms:

“Harmony causes things to reproduce their young ones but uniformity brings death in all.”
(「和實生物，同則不繼」) (The Discourse of Zheng, ch.6).

The truth is that the pursuit of uniformity would by no means enable things to grow, but instead it would weaken and annihilate them. Hence, harmony cannot be identified as uniformity and the recognition of differences and the acceptance of diversity would give more vitality and creation of new ideas and new life, and in the long run lead to the development and welfare of all the parties concerned. We believe that these ideas can serve well as guiding principles in our joint efforts to achieve genuine peace, mutual growth, and prosperity between diverse cultures and religions. (Zhuo, 2008).

The concept of “harmony without uniformity” is fundamental for social cohesion, especially for religious social harmony. It entails the “seeking of uniformity while maintaining differences” which encourages the practice of toleration. The concept entails also an adjustment to discrepancies between various religions and takes mutual respect for granted. Furthermore, it also requires that each side express its willingness to co-exist peacefully and seek occasions to concretize such willingness. This combination of attitudes and actions will secure true harmony. Thus, “harmony without uniformity” is a better choice that denotes the broad-mindedness. To achieve such harmony, it is necessary for religious believers to open themselves for dialogues and genuine communication with people of different faiths and to work frankly for mutual
nourishment. Hence, social harmony is a process by which different religious groups would accept to differ and, at the same time, no party is annihilated or assimilated into another. As a result, different religions would meet and work together, not only for their mere co-existence, but also for mutual nourishment.

Religions’ Attitude towards Social Harmony in China

Both Mainland China and Hong Kong are societies that practice religious pluralism by allowing many religions to co-exist peacefully, without rejection and conflict. This is obviously the result of Chinese traditional culture and of the present government’s policies concerning religion. As early as in July 1994, leaders of the five major Chinese religions (namely: the Taoism, Buddhism, Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Islam) met in Beijing for the founding of the Peace Committee of Religions in China. The committee organized a pray-for-peace week every year and set its goals “to foster friendship, peace, development and cooperation; to uphold the tradition of loving both country and religion which was shared among Chinese religions; and to promote unity and fraternity among the various religions in China”. (Wang, 2000, pp.76-80). With the religious leaders as standing members, the Committee provides a platform where the various religions can exchange views and join hands in promoting a harmonious society. On September 26, 2004, at the conference held in celebration of the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Committee, religious leaders all pledged their willingness to accommodate their differences and to maintain, in the spirit of dialogue and moderation, a harmonious co-existence with other religions. (Song, 2004). For example, Taoism aspires to the notion that universal harmony and peace will be achieved when people of all nationalities and religions are respectful and tolerant of one another. Similarly, Buddhism recommends “clemency as the central emotion”, and considers as its main task “to come to the aid and rescue of all creatures”, hence to “promote love for and harmony with nature and the universe”. China’s Protestantism and Catholicism too stand up for world peace and oppose hegemonism and terrorism. Their adherents practice the teaching found in the Bible, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers (and sisters) live together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1). Muslims in China share also the same views and attitudes. China’s Islam preaches benevolence and forgiveness and is determined to maintain world peace. It is clear therefore that the goals and efforts of most of the religions in the world are to bring about human happiness, harmonious society, and world peace. (Song, 2004).

In Hong Kong, religions play a significant role in promoting social harmony too. Since 1978, a Correspondence Secretariat of Six Religious Leaders was formed. Initiated by the six religious leaders who take turn as chair each year, the Secretariat stated its goals as follows:

“In dialoguing, religions should be faithful to their beliefs and doctrine but at the same time remain open-minded in order to be informed of one another’s beliefs. They should show mutual consideration, appreciation, and respect because each religion has its own truth that would not be denied by the others. It follows that in any such exchange no religion should try to preach its own faith to the other, and by no means should any one religion deprecate the other. On the contrary, religions need to manifest open-heartedness to one another and give up prejudices and intransigence. They should instead stand for benevolence, fraternity, patience, and tolerance. In the course of dialogue, they should also
learn to share one another’s religious experiences, be aware of one another’s religious doctrine, and appreciate one another’s religious practices”. (Committee for the Forum of Leaders of Six Religions, 2003, p.16).

The Buddhist Master Jueguang praised highly these principles saying, “the fact that the six major religions have co-existed peacefully in Hong Kong is a fine instance of social and universal harmony”. (Committee for the Forum of Leaders of Six Religions, 2003, p.6). In the past thirty years, the Secretariat has frequently sponsored extensive forums and discussions on themes such as “Communication of Religious Ideas”, “Religious Beliefs and Family Harmony”, “Media Ethics”, “Legalization of Gambling.” Etc. These forums greatly facilitated the exchange of their different opinions on religion, politics, society, and matters of morality. Each year, the Secretariat issues a joint New Year announcement, organizes New Year greetings ceremonies, and plans visits among the various religions. It has organized delegations to Guangdong Province in Mainland China to call on local religious organizations and people for genuine dialogues.³

Harmony could be achieved by religious dialogues. In genuine dialogues, every religion would, on the one hand, be steadfast in its religious faith and, on the other hand, be ‘open-minded’. Therefore, it needs to learn about the doctrine of other religions, create friendship ties with these organizations, and come to respect and appreciate them. (Committee for the Forum of Leaders of Six Religions, 2003). A genuine dialogue cannot take place without toleration and appreciation for one another, or without the respect for one another’s right to hold different positions. Religions in Hong Kong have not only played a role in promoting harmonious relations amongst themselves, they also served as a means between individuals and between organizations in their endeavors to bring about a harmonious society in a city that remains open and pledges social and religious pluralism. For instance, in their annual Spring Festival Greetings to the people, six religions join hands and bear witness in wishing Hong Kong peace, prosperity, and good luck. At the same time they always keep a keen eye on what happens in the society and continue their commitment to cultivate healthy environment for the society and to promote a harmonious society in an atmosphere of good manners, propriety, and gentility. (Lee, 2003, pp.2-3).

The Case of Chung Chi College, CUHK

The concept of seeking “harmony without uniformity” is fundamental and significant for achieving social harmony in today’s pluralistic world. As we have seen in the previous paragraphs, religion does have a role to play. A harmonious society cannot be emerged without religious harmony; and, without an inter-religious dialogue that is conducive to religious harmony, it will be difficult to achieve world peace. In the following paragraphs, the author will proceed to present the case of Chung Chi College at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). What has been done in Chung Chi College at CUHK shows how religious educators can help to create an environment and to conduct educational activities among various religious groups that would bring about a harmonious society.

Freedom of Faith—the Environment Essential for a Harmonious Society
Chung Chi College was established in 1951. Literally meaning “adoration of Jesus Christ”, the name Chung Chi (崇基 Chong Ji in pinyin) is the expression of the Christian endeavour to “seek truth faithfully, promote morality humbly, and serve lovingly.” (Ng, 2001a, p.3). As a Christian college, Chung Chi ensures the provision of Christian worship and nurture in college life, yet at the same time it advocates freedom of belief and emphasizes constructive inter-religious dialogues in a climate of open-mindedness and religious pluralism. (Ng, 2001a, pp.3-4).  Chung Chi runs a chaplaincy office which serves all members of the College and the entire University, without any religious discriminations, whether they are Christian believers or non-believers. The chapel is open for meetings or meditation workshops even from the Buddhist associations. The chaplain will call for agape dinner for all leaders of different religious groups in the campus at the beginning of each academic year, to get acquaintance with new members and draw their attention to the religious policy for a harmonious society of the College. The example of Chung Chi College leads us to believe that freedom of belief is an element indispensable to an environment conducive to a harmonious society.

Knowledge about Other Religions—A Prerequisite to a Harmonious Society

Since Hong Kong is a multi-cultural and multi-religious society, Christianity is considered as one amongst the many religious traditions in the world, alongside of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Hence, besides programs and courses on theological studies, there is a wide range of courses offered on other religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and various folk and new religions at CUHK. Chung Chi College also offers introductory courses such as ‘Introduction to Religious Studies’, ‘World Religions’, ‘Religion and Natural Science’, ‘Psychology of Religion’, ‘Sociology of Religion’, ‘Philosophy of Religion’ etc. to help broaden the students’ knowledge of religion. (Ng, 2001a, p.17).  For Religious Studies majors, the undergraduate courses are set in five categories: Theological Studies and Methodology; Religious Traditions; Religion, Classics and Literature; Religion, Education and Modern Society; Language, Research and Special Studies. The courses are designed, not to advocate any single religion but, with the aim to create an academic and educational atmosphere, so that students learn to study critically and objectively religious matters without letting their own religious convictions or values interfered. The College also makes sure that its courses enable students to conduct interdisciplinary studies in fields such as anthropology, sociology, comparative religions, psychology, cultural studies, political science, and history.  This is another way to broaden their perspectives in approaching religions. Students would be aware that all religions are regarded as ‘perspectives of life’ worthy of scholars’ attention and the study of religion can be a respected discipline within the academia. Indeed, students and teachers would come to realize that without an adequate and appropriate knowledge of religion, it is impossible to understand religious behaviours and to enter dialogues and communicate properly with religious believers, especially those of other religious traditions. Getting well informed about one another’s religion is, therefore, a crucial factor of a harmonious society.

Inter-religious Dialogue—The Key to Harmonious Society

Being situated within a secular university and a multi-religious society, Chung Chi College has envisioned its
mission to promote an academic study of religions and develop possible channels for inter-religious dialogues. To realize such a mission, Chung Chi College founded in 1996 the Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society and had since then worked hard to provide a platform for academic and educational dialogues among the various religious traditions in Hong Kong. (CSRCS, 2006, p.21).

In the past years, the Centre hosted more than eighteen regional or international symposia. (CSRCS, 2006, pp.45-49). It strives to maintain an image of open, free, tolerant, and harmonious research institution and to bring about an academic environment where teachers, students, and College members (believers and non-believers) can freely study issues of religious harmony and co-existence. Worth mentioning are the two conferences on ‘Christian-Confucian Dialogue’ and a third one on ‘Christian-Buddhist Dialogue.’ The first Christian-Confucian conference was held in 1998 on “Humanity and Civilization in the Twenty First Century”. (Lai, 2001). It was a good example of an inter-religious dialogue where participants exchanged opinions on an equal footing and in a spirit of mutual respect. The second Christian-Confucian conference was held in 2001 on “Life and Morality from Christian and Confucian Perspectives.” The participants discussed their respective positions on life and morality, focusing on ecological and environmental ethics. (Lai and Lee, 2002). It is noteworthy that these dialogues were inter-religious and interdisciplinary in nature. The Christian-Buddhist dialogue held in 2006 provided a great chance for scholars and Christian/Buddhist believers and non-believers from Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and even from Japan, America, Canada, and Europe to engage in discussions under the theme of “Kingdom of God, Pure Land, and the Human World.” During the discussions, participants not only presented ideas about their own religious traditions but also entered dialogues in an open atmosphere of harmony.

Free from discrimination and prejudice, these activities provided participants—believers as well as non-believers—with the opportunity to freely voice their positions and still be respected by all. They agreed to seek agreement out of their differences, all in the spirit of “harmony without uniformity”. If, on the contrary, they had sought for “uniformity while allowing for differences” or “uniformity by eliminating differences”, the meeting would have ended in “hegemonism,” with the participants split in partisan groups preaching and defending their own religion to the exclusion of the others. “Harmony without uniformity”, by contrast, is based on an open and genuine dialogue and a better understanding of one another; it is achieved when all sides can speak for themselves, respect one another, and recognize differences. Furthermore, these inter-religious dialogues not only enhance the participants’ willingness to learn from and appreciate one another, they also increase the participants’ knowledge of their own faith, deepen their spirituality, and expand their understanding of other religions. The academic and educational environment offers therefore the best chance for inter-religious dialogue. (Ng, 2003).

A sizeable number of scholars have been invited from Mainland China and Western countries to give lectures, participate in international symposiums, and pursue research related to religions and Chinese society at CUHK. Many of them are not Christians nor do they belong to any religious circles, whereas local religious groups do not have any opportunities to participate in international, academic discussions on religious issues. Chung Chi has provided great opportunities for them to meet and consequently, CUHK has been urged to establish in the following years more research centers such as the Humanistic Buddhism
Study Center (June 2004), the Centre for Catholic Studies (November 2005), Taoism and Chinese Culture Study Center (February 2006), and the Center for Christian Studies (December 2006). (CSRCS, 2006b). Through the establishment of these academic centres, CUHK becomes a renowned educational institution where inter-religious dialogues implementing the concept of “harmony without uniformity” and realizing a truly harmonious society.

**Education of the Young—Development and Promotion of a Harmonious Society**

More than 50% of the Hong Kong schools are run by religious bodies (Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, Taoist, Islamic, Confucian), which provide in their schools respective religious education from the various religious traditions. (Ng, 1996, pp.4-7). Chung Chi College, with the backing of CUHK’s Department of Religion, is committed to training school teachers how to conduct courses on ethical, civic, and religious education in schools. Students, therefore, not only begin thinking about religion and life-related issues, they can also learn to have dialogue with people of other faiths, so that they will learn to respect people of different religions and hence contribute to a harmonious society. From 1998 to 2003, the following projects were run: “Promoting Ethical, Civic, and Religious Education in Schools”, “Religion and Life: the Pursuit of Quality Life Education”, “Education for Quality Life: Upgrading Middle School Ethical, Civic and Religious Education”, and “Promoting the Teaching and Learning of Religion in Secondary Schools of Hong Kong”.

Of all the educational activities launched in these programs, three significant events are useful to illustrate the point:

(1) At the beginning of each academic year, there is a launching ceremony for all participating schools. Besides the school principals, religious studies teachers and their students, the top religious leaders from the six great religions of Hong Kong, namely: Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam and Taoism are invited as sponsors to attend the ceremony. Their presence signifies their willingness to co-exist peacefully and to help together to promote the harmonious relationship and co-operation among the religions in Hong Kong, that despite one another’s differences, they would accept to differ and would join together to educate the younger generation for social harmony. This would definitely have great impact to the school teachers and students from all participating schools and to the society as a whole.

(2) There has been a successful event called: “Heart-to-heart Online Forum”, in which top leaders or the delegates from the six major religions were interviewed at the Chinese University’s recording studio while students from 19 different religious schools (from various religious traditions) watched on-line in their own computer laboratory/ classrooms and asked questions directly on-the-spot. The religious leaders were able to encounter with the students and to respond immediately to the questions raised. While making sure that the students were raising honest questions from whatever religious backgrounds they belong, the religious leaders were free to engage in “heart-to-heart” encounter and enter dialogues with students from the various religious backgrounds.
Another feature was a concert on the theme of “Seeking Harmony in Religious Music”, in which music groups from the various religions were invited to contribute musical programmes. In this concert, both teachers and students came to listen to music from the various religious traditions and to experience the spirit of “harmony without uniformity” in a very vivid way. It helped them to learn that “seeking uniformity or rejecting others” does not result in “harmony”, whereas “recognizing and appreciating differences” can. As part of the concert, the six religious leaders issued a Statement of Joint Conviction and expressed their determination to construct a harmonious society. The statement says:

“We are conscious that, due to separate paths and diverse life experiences, the human race has come to cherish a diversity of religious beliefs. However, in the same way that many music notes, when harmoniously arranged, combine into a marvelous piece of music... the harmonious co-existence and interaction of diverse religions help constitute a harmonious society.... We are also aware that education helps sustain humanity’s experience and wisdom. Those who implement such education are fulfilling the spirit and mission of genuine religious education by raising new generations filled with the spirit of benevolence and tolerance. In addition, we are certain that, as a result of sincere dialogue and mutual appreciation, we will respect one another, avoid meddling in one another’s affairs, and increase goodwill between us, all for the purpose of further enriching human life”. (CSRCS, 2006a, p.2).

Other activities involved student visit of religious places, such as Catholic or Protestant Churches, the Taoist Wong Tai Sin Temple, Muslim Mosques, and Hindu or Buddhist Temples. These outings provided students, believers and non-believers alike, with opportunities to meet people from different religions and to learn about their history, doctrines, and rituals. These were very rich learning experiences with fruitful communication and reflections for students. The students were given the chance to participate in Leadership Training Camp, which allowed them to live with fellow students of different religious traditions, and experience the spirit of “harmony without uniformity” as lively manifested in their relationship with one another. Finally, the programs entailed trips by study groups to Mainland China, which allowed teachers and students to visit places of religious interest and thereby broaden their understanding of religion in Today's China. As a result, students acquired a sharper vision and their minds are broaden; having a greater adaptability to a culturally and religiously pluralistic society, and a deeper understanding of the concept “harmony without uniformity.”

Conclusion

So far from the case study of Chung Chi and the discussions thereon, we now arrive at the concluding remarks. Seven points need to be taken into serious consideration. They are, namely: 1) Religious harmony is a prerequisite to a harmonious society. 2) The concept of “harmony without uniformity” is an appropriate guiding principle in the quest towards a harmonious society. 3) Freedom of belief helps create the environment necessary to the implementation of a harmonious society. 4) The understanding of differences between religions is a necessary element of a harmonious society. 5) Dialogue among religions is the key to harmonious society. 6) Inter-religious dialogue is most likely to be constructive when performed within an academic and educational environment. 7) Education of the young is a very important element and a most
effective key to promoting a harmonious society.

Among these concluding remarks, inter-religious dialogue is particularly noteworthy because it leads to a true understanding of what religion is and represents a path at the end of which harmony can be developed. The case of Chung Chi has well illustrated that such dialogue is essential because it helps interlocutors to become aware of their differences, and make them realize the importance of toleration. (Said, 2001; Ng, 2001b). The implementation of harmony cannot be the result of a propensity to unify, rather it comes from the respect and recognition of differences; it is the result of the willingness to accept to differ and the readiness to learn from one another for mutual nourishment that leads to “harmony without uniformity”. This is precisely what religious educators can contribute to the promotion of social harmony in the global world of religious pluralism today. (Cox, 1982; Knitter, 2005).

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1 The 國語 (Chinese: Guoyu) is a classical Chinese history book that collects discourses by Chinese nobles and historical records of numerous states from Western Zhou dynasty. Its author is unknown, but Zuo Qiuming, a contemporary of Confucius, is sometimes attributed. The Guoyu was probably compiled beginning in the 5th century BC and continuing to the late 4th century BC. The earliest chapter of the compilation is the Discourses of Zhou.

2 The 說文解字 (Chinese: Shuowen Jiezi; meaning - "Explaining Simple and Analyzing Compound Characters") was an early 2nd century CE Chinese dictionary compiled by Xu Shen for the Han Dynasty. This classic edition of Shuowen is still reproduced in facsimile by various publishers, e.g., in Taipei by Li-ming Wen-hua Co Tiangong Books (1980, 1998).

3 The places visited included Guangdong Union Theological Seminary, Guangxiao Buddhist Temple, Huaihesh Mosque, Shishi Catholic Church, Taoist San Yuan Temple, and Confucius Cemetery.

4 Christian-Confucian dialogues were conducted in international symposiums in Hong Kong, Boston and Berkley in 1988, 1991 and 1994, respectively.

5 These programmes aimed at equipping high school teachers with proficient knowledge regarding Hong Kong’s religions, culture and tradition. Related activities included setting up websites, multi-media resources center, training teachers, giving awards for excellent teaching plans, running workshops and exhibitions of textbooks and teaching resources.
ISBN 9780981061405 $24.95

Bibby is Canada’s premier sociologist of religion and his latest book is highly recommended as a valuable addition to the burgeoning field of millennial studies. Millennials are defined here as those born after 1990 and can be seen as successors to the post boomers. This study focuses on 15 to 19 year olds and as such has great interest for all teachers but given Bibby’s background there is much here of especial interest to those working in religious education. This Canadian study offers a valuable insight into an increasing global teenage culture and is based on survey data gathered from 5,564 teenagers. The study has a notable longitudinal aspect as Bibby’s first work in this area dates back to 1984. He positions Canadian millennials as lying on a continuum between the more religious American teens and those of secular Europe and Oceania. Bibby’s study provides a fascinating counterpoint to Smith and Denton’s American study, *Soul Searching* and Mason, Singleton and Weber’s Australian work, *Spirit of Gen Y* (2007).

One of the key findings was the continuing ascendency amongst teenagers of personal referents as a basis for morality and ethics. One chapter heading, “everything’s relative”, succinctly describes this sentiment. Whether this is a distinctive feature of millennials is, however, an open question as Bibby notes that many of the strong trends he observed amongst millennials go back to studies of teenagers in the 1980’s. The primacy of friendship as a source of fulfilment amongst teenagers, for example, is a finding that has remained resolute over several decades. The importance of interpersonal relationships is also reflected in strong identification with core values such as trust and honesty amongst teenagers. Attachment to family is another constant. Bibby records, however, a growing disaffiliation amongst teenagers from religious communities, again this is a trend that has been established for some time but in this latest study there is further evidence of a deepening disengagement. The number of teens who, for example, find religious groups as providing a great deal of enjoyment stands at 26% on a national level. This is a large number in absolute terms but is far lower than other options such as friends and music and moreover the trend appears to be heading downward and is indicative of a continuing decline in the importance of religion as a source of fulfilment for teens.

Here, perhaps, is one of the most significant findings of Bibby’s study for religious educators. He identifies a growing polarity amongst teens between those who retain a link with a worshipping community and a growing and already very sizable number that have little or no connection whatsoever. This suggests that religious education must be aware of the needs of two quite distinct groups. For many teens religious questions are something that they remain open to. For Bibby this group, with some existing affiliation, are the ones most likely to benefit from efforts, educative and otherwise, by religious communities to nurture greater commitment and involvement. For many other teens, however, the strong trend is best described as falling within a classical neo secularisation paradigm. The movement is ever away from a religious worldview and responsiveness to religious claims and a strong generational effect is also seen. Bibby puts this position well when he reports, on page 169, “a very important finding”: 

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In Quebec and elsewhere, the adult change has not involved a movement to outright atheism so much as a movement from decisiveness about belief in God to tentative belief or increasing agnosticism. With teens we see what amounts to an intergenerational shift – from tentativeness to agnosticism, and from agnosticism to atheism.

For students of religious culture the truly astonishing collapse of Catholicism in Quebec is well illustrated here even 50 years after the Quiet Revolution. In 2008 only 9% of teenagers in Quebec identified as Roman Catholics (the figure outside of Quebec by way of reference is 23%). A feature of the book that may appeal to some readers are commentaries on Bibby’s data and analysis provided by a well known Roman Catholic priest Ron Rolheiser and a police and community educator, Sarah Russell. I found these commentaries largely superfluous, as Bibby’s style is very engaging and relatively devoid of sociological jargon.

**Dr Richard Rymarz**  
**St Joseph’s College, University of Alberta, Canada**

**Congregation for Catholic Education.** (2009). *Circular Letter to the Presidents of Bishops’ Conferences on Religious Education in Schools.*  
The main intention of the review is to bring the document to the attention of those working in the field. The Letter is divided into four sections; 1) the role of schools in the Catholic formation of new generation; 2) nature and identity of the Catholic school: the right to a Catholic education for families and pupils – Subsidiarily and educational collaboration; 3) religious education in schools; 4) educational freedom, religious freedom, and Catholic education.

Statements of this nature by the Congregation for Catholic Education and similar Roman agencies are not frequent but one can, over decades, see the development and reinforcement of a number of seminal notions. This document repeats the now well-known argument about the distinct but complementary nature of religious education and catechesis. It also draws attention to the right of parents to choose schools that are reflective of their religious sensibilities and the irreplaceable role of the family in catechesis. It reiterates the ideas that Catholic schools are an expression of ecclesial communion and the authority of the Church alone to guarantee the authenticity of school based Catholic religious instruction. The document repeats the point made in *Catechesi Tradendae* that the special character of Catholic schools is closely aligned with the quality of religious instruction proved by them.

Section III deserves a close reading. It addresses religious education in schools and discusses this within the context of what is described as an increasing marginalisation of religious education. This is seen when “religious education is limited to a presentation of the different religions, in a comparative and ‘neutral’ way it creates confusion or generates religious relativism or indifferentism” [12]. Roman documents are always addressed to a global audience but one of the most interesting applications of this Letter is in countries such as Canada where the existence of Catholic schools is under threat. In both the provinces of Quebec and Newfoundland/Labrador Catholic schools have in the recent past been abolished despite pre-existing constitutional guarantees. This has inevitably led to a reconceptualization of how religious education is presented in schools. In Quebec there has been considerable public debate on a new religious studies curriculum that has been mandated in all schools, even private schools outside the provincial funding orbit. The religious education curriculum in Quebec can be described in broad terms as a world religions approach. Currently parents have no right to withdraw their children from these classes. This seem to override what in terms of this document is a fundamental right of parents, namely, to determine what type of religious education is most appropriate for their children. To quote directly “in a pluralistic society, the right to religious freedom requires both the assurance of the presence of religious education in schools and the guarantee that such an education be in accordance with parents’ convictions” [11].
This is a short document, less than 6 pages, and well worth examining for those interested in religious education, especially those who work in Catholic educational institutions.

This document can be retrieved from the following website:  

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ISBN: 9780980331998

This little book came across my desk earlier this year and immediately captured my attention for a couple of reasons. Firstly, I do like Pro Hart’s work (and I acknowledge that this is a personal appreciation which may not be shared by others) and secondly, I am always interested in the combination of images and words that may be used to inspire and/or provoke responses from students in different situations, including during times for quiet reflection and prayer. As such, this little book is a gem, filled as it is with a collection of forty-four pictures depicting Pro Hart’s paintings. In her introduction, Raylee Hart says “Pro Hart had a fundamental belief in the goodness, the strength and the guidance of the Lord… His belief system was personal and deeply held… and often took to the easel with no more than the Word of God to guide him”.

The religious content is ostensible with the subjects for most of the paintings being drawn from the Christian Scriptures, for instance, there are a series of images that follow the nativity story with titles such as: The wise men follow the star, An angel appears before the shepherd, and The flight into Egypt among others. Each of the pictures bear the Pro Hart characteristics of Australian settings, peopled with elongated figures and painted with the distinctive brush strokes, strong colours and lines which are so clearly reflected in his work. Others include images inspired by the Australian bush and poetry. For each painting there is a selection of scriptural quotations which are identified as favourites of the artist and, in some instances, these correspond well with the images portrayed. However, not all the quotations and images matched each other so well which, I believe, is unfortunate as it would have been more useful, for application in classrooms, to have words and images that were better aligned. Nevertheless, this is a minor point and does not detract from the usefulness of this little book for classroom practitioners who use contemplative and meditative exercises as part of their religious education program. Alternatively, if used with appropriate music, the combination of sound, images and words may be used as a multisensory resource during periods of writing and art or, indeed, to enhance an experience of quiet and stillness.

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ISBN 978 1 74223 0313

Mary Ryllis Clark, a graduate from London University migrated to Australia in 1974 and took up a teaching post at Loreto Mandeville Hall, Toorak, where she taught European History. In1985 she went back to her original career as a freelance writer and historian. For thirteen years, she wrote the Discover Historic Victoria” newspaper column for The Age. Her books include Crown of a thousand years: Pen portraits of British kings and queens (1978, Discover historic Victoria (1996), In trust – The first forty years of National trust in Victoria (1996) and Timbertop – Celebrating 50 years (2003). In her most recent book Mary Ryllis Clark writes about astounding women who have lived brave, compassionate lives with a sense of
independence that enabled them to be adaptable. The book traces the story of the members of the Loreto Institute; also known as the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Australia right back to 1875. In that year a small group of Irish nuns arrived in Ballarat under the leadership of Mother Gonzaga Barry and from then on have had a significant influence Catholic education in Australia. This book would appeal to readers with interests in areas such as religion, history and Catholic education.

With the turning of each page the reader is constantly being drawn into the world of the Loreto Institute and taken on a very special journey where the one cannot help but celebrate the triumphs, mourn the losses and be ignited by the strength of communal and personal hope. From the onset one cannot help but be inspired by the vision, courage and spirit of Mother Gonzaga Barry. In Chapter 4 her vision for girls’ education in Australia was reported in 1890 and its sentiment would still hold credibility with any contemporary educator who is concerned with educational philosophies oriented to approaches in which “the whole child is educated” (p. 61).

The current education agenda of the Federal Government of Australia has called for an education revolution. Mother Gonzaga Barry’s also believed in an education revolution where social justice would forge an educational agenda that would “give that talented daughter of the poor man as good a chance of distinguishing herself as the daughter of the rich man” (p. 61). She believed that in a new country the education of its women was a priority of great national importance. As an educator the insights into the formation of members of the Loreto Institute in Chapter 8 enables the reader fully appreciate their educational philosophy and their spiritual life. The transition from Vatican I Catholic life to that of Vatican II shows vividly the amazing ability of the members of the Loreto Institute to be guided by the spirit and to adapt and encounter profound renewal.

Approaching the concluding chapters of this book a desire for even more insight into the most current and future impacts of the Loreto Institute upon Australian society was something I longed for. But I must concede that this was not the agenda of this inspirational book and I can only wait in hope that Mary Ryllis Clark might one day surprise us with a follow on publication down the track.

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ISBN 1-905785-16-X.

The author, Dr. Caroline Renehan is a Teaching Practice Co-ordinator and lecturer in Education at the Mater Dei Institute. Her vast experience in education in secondary schools in Dublin and in an advisory capacity to the Irish Bishops' Conference, the Archdiocese of Dublin, the School Chaplains' Association and the Religion Teachers' Association provide a solid foundation to explore this complex and multi layered topic. This book investigates gender differences in attitudes and classroom practice between male and female student teachers. Indeed, the subject matter of this book is of interest to a broad audience as few would disagree that this is a contentious area where debate and discussion abound. In educational circles, an awareness and understanding of gender issues is of growing importance and this book helps to better understand the realities of students in initial teacher training whose gender biases can affect their approaches to teaching and learning.

Renehan (2006) argues that an examination of official policy documents suggests clear progress has been made in the area of gender, education and social equality, however careful consideration and reflection reveals that, as is often the case, the rhetoric does not always match the lived experience and opportunities provided. Renehan (2006) explains “The legacy of a gender divided society remains with people struggling to shake off the vestiges of conventional expectations” (p. 12).
She convincingly outlines a background and context to this study. She acknowledges concepts from Piaget, Kohlberg, Gilligan and Ruether to explore key concepts in education and religion, although the work of some of these theorists has been critiqued. The research conducted involved students in their final year of initial teacher education in various institutes throughout the Republic of Ireland. Whilst the implications in regards to religious education are of particular relevance to readers with an interest in religious education, the research and its findings are of use to all educators as the focus of the research was primarily gender based. Drawing on a relatively comprehensive treatment of quantitative data, complimented by qualitative research conducted in actual classroom settings, we are able to better understand gender differentials and draw on the in-depth interpretation of results.

Chapter six specifically examines the implications of differential attitudes and classroom practices for the teaching and learning of the “Religion and Gender “part of the Irish Leaving Certificate Religious Education Syllabus (2003, 51-58). The particular focus for discussion here draws upon three key themes upon which this section is based, namely Gender, Religion and Society. This validates the findings that aspects of gender stereotyping and sexual divisions are evident and applied to specific objectives and topics within the syllabus. This becomes problematic when the teachers gender biased predispositions conflict with the aims of a syllabus. Student teachers attitudes, perceptions and classroom practices have been traced and a useful summary of recommendations for student teachers are provided on page 124-126 which can enrich classroom experiences and widen opportunities and expand choices for all students.

In summary then this book may serve as a stimulus and useful resource for all who value the place of gender equality and more especially for those who seek to understand and educate the teachers of the future.

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Articles on the following are welcomed:
- religious education in various contexts;
- the religious needs of young adults in the immediate post-school period;
- 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@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.

Contributions on the following are welcomed:
- Ideas for Practitioners
- Internet Resources
- Research
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- Notes on Resources
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The views of the contributors are not necessarily those of the editorial advisory committee of Journal of Religious Education.

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