

SOME THOUGHTS CONCERNING THE STUDY OF RELIGION IN SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

Pacific societies are generally pluralistic. Fiji is perhaps the prime example but most other Pacific countries include several racial groups and several religions as well as several Christian denominations. Chinese, Indians, Vietnamese, those of European extraction, and expatriate islanders make up some of the major groups. In order that each group may value the other for the contribution each may make to the other and to the life of each nation, it seems to me that an understanding of each other's religion will help to reduce the prejudices and tensions that arise from the unknown-ness of the different groups within a particular society.

Religion, then, should be studied as a phenomenon that exists in societies and the world alongside other phenomena which are studied in other disciplines. Religious Education, therefore, cannot be just Christian Education. I see it as being the task of the churches and religions to nurture their own faiths while the task of the schools, even though they may be run by the churches, is to educate mature, responsible, discerning citizens.

WHY ADD RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?

In the context of government schools, where religion is not taught as an integral part of the curriculum, the question may be asked as to why the study of religion should be added to the school curriculum that is already overloaded. Piediscalzi and Collie suggest that the religious dimension of human history is a significant one. Religion is embedded in much of world history, literature and the creative arts, as well as in its social institutions. Because of this fact, they say that a curriculum which does not include religion is incomplete.¹

Raymond English, Director of the Educational Research Council of America's Social Science Program, puts it this way:

To study human behaviour and societies without paying attention to religious motivations is like studying chemistry without recognizing the presence of oxygen in the atmosphere. Men behave as they do for a variety of reasons, and one powerful causal factor is their value system — their beliefs about life's meaning and purpose. These beliefs are their religion — their ultimate concept of reality. ²

The American Association of School Administrators suggested as far back as 1964 that to omit religious studies from a school curriculum is to present a truncated and distorted view of human history.

A curriculum which ignored religion would itself have serious religious implications. It would seem to proclaim that religion has not been as real in men's lives as health or politics or economics. By omission it would appear to deny that religion has been and is important in man's history — a denial of the obvious. In day-by-day practice, the topic cannot be avoided. As an integral part of man's culture, it must be included.³

In summary, then, it would appear that commitment to a comprehensive view of education requires that the study of religion should be included in any curriculum designed in the light of that commitment. If this conclusion is accepted, however, some further questions still remain.

HOW IS RELIGION TO BE DEFINED?

First, how is religion to be defined for such a course of study? This is a difficult question as Jean Holm acknowledges.

Attempts at defining (religion) are always unsatisfactory. One definition that has been offered is 'belief in a supreme Being or Beings', but that excludes Theravada Buddhism which is non-theistic and it would be clearly ridiculous to say that this form of Buddhism is not a religion. Another definition that has been tried is 'commitment to a set of beliefs by which one lives and for which one is prepared to make great sacrifices', but this would include Marxism and no Marxist would want his beliefs and life style described as religious. Yet a third definition — 'that which is our deepest concern' or 'that which we value most' — embraces absolutely everyone, including the atheist. It makes religion synonymous with being human, and although it can be very useful within a religion for describing what a religious perspective on life involves, it fails as a general definition of religion because it evacuates the word of any distinctive meaning.

However, although a satisfactory definition of religion eludes us we can recognize it and we can study it.

A religion provides a coherent interpretation of the whole of human life and experience, and it also involves a way of life that is based on that interpretation. Religions suggest answers to the ultimate questions which man asks about his existence. Ultimate questions are the kind of questions to which there are no definitive answers in the human sciences, questions like 'Who am I?', 'What is man?', 'Who is my neighbour?', 'Is there any meaning in life?', 'Is death the end?', 'How do I come to terms with evil and suffering?' All these questions are about meaning. They are concerned with the meaning of man's existence, his relationship with the natural world."⁴

The writers of the Religious Education Curriculum for the South Australian Education Department state that while there is a danger in selecting a single definition, there is some merit pragmatically in choosing one that suits the purpose of developing curriculum for schools. For the purpose of their curriculum writing, they chose to define religion as

a system of beliefs/practices/experiences through which people find meaning for life. ⁵

This definition may seem to some people to be inadequate to cover all religious phenomena, but it does allow religion to be dealt with in terms of its essence rather than in its traditional forms. To me, this definition is a useful one in that from it, two different approaches to the study of religion can be made, and they are

- (1) a study of the phenomena of beliefs, practices, and experiences of the various religions and systems of belief, and
- (2) a study of the ways in which people find meaning and purpose in life.

These two approaches form a coherent basis, it seems to me, for the study of religion in schools.

Looking at it from a slightly different perspective, Piediscalzi and Collie find it necessary to utilize two different definitions of religion, one broad and the other narrower. This is their way of overcoming the problem articulated by Jean Holm. They define religion narrowly as

an institutionalised set of beliefs, dogmas, ethical prescriptions and cultic practices which center around devotion to and service of a particular deity or set of deities

Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Baha'i, for example, are religions of this type. The broad definition of religion sees it as

any faith or set of values to which an individual or group gives ultimate loyalty

Theravada Buddhism, Taoism, humanism, nationalism, and capitalism illus-

trate this concept of religion.⁶ While this division of the definition does have some advantages, I feel that the simplicity of the South Australian definition holds within it all that is necessary for a viable curriculum without becoming simplistic.

WHAT SORT OF TEACHER?

This is the second question that must be addressed — what kind of teacher is needed to teach religion as envisaged in this definition? In its statement of the nature of religious education, the South Australian curriculum introduction presents an adaptation of the 'pair-words' developed by Panach to distinguish between the propagation of a religious faith and education about religion.⁷ They add two to his list.

The schools can provide opportunity for a discussion of religious *questions* but not impose religious *answers*.

The school's approach to religion must *open-up* the issues, not *close-down* the discussion. ⁸

This points to the need for teachers who can cope with an open, objective approach to the study of religion which is educationally authentic and not merely an excuse for religious indoctrination.

In an editorial of the British Journal of Religious Education, the question is asked, 'Do religions ask questions or offer answers?' and a distinction is made between two types of teachers: the convergent and the divergent. A convergent teacher is one who teaches his or her own faith in order to further the interests of his/her own faith while a divergent teacher is one who *because of his faith* teaches a variety of faiths, seeking to further the interests of none. The editorial continues,

But the teacher who thinks of religion as only giving answers or who finds that in his own religious life religion gives answers while life presents problems can hardly be expected to understand the position of the divergent teacher. He will not understand how one can teach a variety of faiths *because of* one's commitment to a single faith, because he will not understand how religion itself, the more one is committed to it, becomes the stimulus for constant enquiry. But in that case, the convergent teacher will not understand the connection between religion and education. He will not be able to work his way from his religious commitment to his work as an educator. He will either cease to be a true educator, or he will leave his religious commitment outside the classroom, priding himself on his professionalism. ⁹

I suspect that most teachers of religious education in the Pacific fall into the category of those who have ceased to be true educators and in fact are dealing in something less than education. The editorial concludes by stating that

When the claims of an open religious education can be supported by an enquiring model of education and also by an enquiring model of religion we shall have a rationale for the subject which will be more coherent, educationally more sound, and religiously more satisfying.¹⁰

Pacific schools, I believe, need an influx of the divergent style of teacher and teaching in religious education. For this to happen, though, Teachers' Colleges and Universities would need to provide courses of training to assist in the development of such an approach to the study of religion. This will only happen if the need is demonstrated and pressure applied to the relevant authorities. Needless to say, tertiary courses in the study of religion and the staff responsible for them must be congruent with the kind of course being outlined and the teachers that are being trained.

We come then, to the nature of the study of religion itself.

THE STUDY OF RELIGION¹¹

In the study of religion, the teacher and students together will explore the many worlds of religion and religious experience within themselves, the churches, and the community at large, both in their own country and beyond. They will observe, where possible in reality, and where not, through the media, the ceremonies and rituals of different religious communities, listen to their myths and religious songs, analyze their holy writings and beliefs, and probe their ethics and customs. They will look for dialogue with living examples of a particular faith or philosophy. They will seek a context where the depth issues of life can be openly expressed and explored. All this is religious education.

The teacher and students will be concerned to understand people through their religion. To do this they will not only discover the facts about a given religion but will also search for the meaning which that religion has for its followers. To appreciate people's values and beliefs is a major step towards respecting them as fellow human beings.

Teachers of religion must, above all, be fair. They must be fair to their students and respect their beliefs; they must be fair to the facts about a given religion; they must be fair to those who are followers of other religions; they must be fair to those who find meaning in alternative or different philosophies of life. I think that the days are gone when Pacific schools can be regarded as mission fields for particular denominations or religions. It would be naïve, at the same time, to assume that any teacher can be totally fair, impartial, and objective in any subject, whether it be history, politics or science. We teachers all have biases, assumptions, and attitudes which colour our thinking and teaching.

However, when we become aware of this fact, a more open and fair presentation of all aspects of our particular subject is more likely to occur.

Where, then, a school includes, to take a Vanuatuan example, Hindu Indians, Buddhist Vietnamese, Confucian Chinese, Protestant ni-Vanuatu, Catholic ni-Vanuatu, or ni-Vanuatu who hold beliefs of a primal religion, their differing beliefs must all be respected. A school is not the place to try and convert a student to one particular belief system, especially in the context of the academic programme of the school. As has been mentioned above, that is the task of the churches and religions, and it is a task that must be taken up outside the educational programme of the schools. This is particularly important when the majority of the population belong to one religion or denomination. The rights of the minority to freedom of religion as guaranteed in most national Constitutions must be upheld and preserved.

PROPAGATION VS STUDY

James V. Panoach, as mentioned above, has developed what he calls a set of 'pair-words' which he uses to distinguish between the propagation of a religious faith and the study of religion.

The school may sponsor the *study* of religion, but may not *impose* any particular view.

The school may *expose* students to all religious views but may not *impose* any particular view.

The school's approach to religion is one of *instruction* not of *indoctrination*.

The function of the school is to *educate* about all, not to *convert* to any one religion.

The school's approach to religion is *academic*, not *devotional*.

The school should *study* what all people believe, but should not *teach* a pupil what he should believe.

The school should strive for student *awareness* of all religions, but should not press for student *acceptance* of any one religion.

The school should seek to *inform* the student about various beliefs but should not seek to *conform* him to any one belief. ¹²

In other words, religion should be studied as an integral part of the school's academic programme when it neither gives preferential nor derogatory treatment to any single religion or religion in general, and when it is not introduced or utilized for devotional purposes.

This should hold true for both government and church schools. The church school, however, has the prerogative of introducing students to the worship,

devotional, and confessional aspects of its sponsoring religion outside the academic area of the school's life. Personally, I would also argue that if any promotional activities for the sponsoring religion are to occur in the school, it should also be as an extra-curricula activity with the students having a choice as to whether or not they attend.

What are the goals of this kind of religious education? Piedsicalzi and Collie delineate five. They are to develop a broad and discerning understanding of:

1. the religious dimension of human experience and the many and diverse ways in which it is embodied and expressed in historical groups and individual lives;
2. the way in which religions function in history and culture; with special emphasis on how religions influence institutions and in turn are influenced by them;
3. the meaning and significance of making a religious commitment and living by it;
4. the numerous ways in which religion may be studied;
5. the difference between practicing and studying about religion."¹³

The South Australian Syllabus expresses its aims in this way:

"After twelve years of religious education, some outcomes of the students should be:—

- an understanding of the presence and influence of religion in life and society;
- a development in the students' understanding of themselves and of their beliefs;
- a sensitive understanding of the beliefs by which people live, including Christian, non-Christian, and traditionally non-religious beliefs;
- a greater respect for and tolerance of others and their beliefs."¹⁴

These latter aims appear to be more "human" than the former which are particularly ambitious and "academic". Perhaps a combination of the two would produce a better blend.

To put it another way, the aim of the study of religion should be to develop religious literacy. The role of the teacher in this process should be to enable the students to raise and consider three main questions:

1. What is religion?
2. What are the significant religious traditions?
3. What is the relationship of religion to culture and the way of life of those who espouse it?¹⁵

Failure to examine these elements as integral and inter-related parts of a complex whole leads to a distorted and inadequate understanding of religion.¹⁶

In summary, then, a school is a place where students engage in the pursuit of truth; a community where teachers and students join in an objective study of events, beliefs, practices, issues, facts, and skills. This applies either to a university, an "academic" school, a vocational school, or in a non-formal learning situation. Such study should lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of all aspects of our lives and the lives of others. The study of religion is one aspect of this wider field of endeavour. I trust that these random thoughts on the subject will lead to continued and wider discussion on this somewhat sensitive issue.

1. Piediscalzi, N. & Collie, W. **Legal, Theoretical, and Practical Issues** in Piediscalzi & Collie (eds.) "Teaching About Religion in Public Schools" Niles, Illinois, Argus Communications 1977 pp 13-22.
2. English, R. **Focus on Religious Ideas**, Scholastic Teacher, 22 September 1968 : 12.
3. **Religion in the Public Schools: A Report by the Commission on Religion** (Washington, D.C.: American Association of School Administrators, 1964), p 55.
4. Holm, J. **Teaching Religion in School** London, Oxford University Press, 1975, pp 7-8.
5. **Religious Education Syllabus Years 1 – 12** Education Department Of South Australia, December 1977 p 9.
6. See Piediscalzi & Collie, Op Cit p17.
7. See p. 25
8. Education Department of South Australia, Op Cit p10.
9. **British Journal of Religious Education**, London Winter 1980, Vol3 No. 2, p42.
10. Ibid,p43.
11. For much of this section I am indebted to the ideas expressed in an unpublished statement by a group of tertiary lectures in the study of religion in South Australian College of Advanced Education.
12. Quoted in Piediscalzi & Collie, Op Cit p15, from Bracher, P. (et al) **PERSC Guidebook, Public Education Religion Studies: Questions and Answers**, Dayton, Ohio: Public Education Religion Studies Center, 1974, p2.
13. Piediscalzi & Collie, Op Cit p17.
14. South Australian Education Department, Op Cit, p3.
15. See Spivey, R.A. and Allen, R.F., **The Supreme Court Speaks:**

Learning About Religion in the Public Schools ' Tallahassee, Florida; Religion-Studies Curriculum Project, Florida State University, 1972, pp26-27.

16. Cf. Smart, N., "What is religion?" in Smart, N & Horder, D, (eds.) **New Movements in Religious Education**, London: Temple Smith Holm, J., Op Cit, pp 7-11.