

Study of Religion Courses in Australian Schools: A Critical Evaluation

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Introduction

A comparative and descriptive approach to classroom religious education programs has provided some much needed new life to the practice of the discipline in Australian secondary schools. In a number of schools, typically Church-related ones, teachers and students have engaged in the most disciplined and thorough studies that have ever been conducted in Australian schools. However, these religious studies courses have not met broad acceptance in Australian schools. The adoption of comparative religious study has been confined almost totally to religiously affiliated schools; little serious interest in implementing the accredited courses has been shown by other schools. Presently in Queensland - one of the first states to adopt religion studies courses - no government schools offer these courses. The adoption rate among government schools is a little better in other states, but it is no exaggeration to claim that Church-affiliated schools are the chief supporters of these courses. Even within the Church-affiliated school systems, a large proportion of school leaders has resisted the introduction of these courses, on the grounds that they do not meet sufficiently the school's aims for religious education.

In the light of this situation, some evaluation of why resistance exists in many places and what might be done to enhance interest in adopting religion curriculums in schools is called for. The fundamental argument of this paper is that while the new courses have aimed to bring about a socially responsible goal - the creation of a tolerant and understanding community - and have provided impetus to the religious disciplines, they have done so largely at the expense of students' experience and interests and without careful regard for the nature of Australian school classrooms. A note of caution should be sounded at this point: any thorough review of initiatives in this area will need to wait for a body of research evidence to be assembled on the actual implementation and consequences of these school programs. The few Australian studies so far attempted have been exploratory and limited. The observations which follow in this paper should be read in the light of this paucity of research data. It may be possible for a researcher to explore the realities of what is speculated upon here.

Affirming the Benefits of Studies of Religion

None of the criticisms which follow should detract from appreciation of the many important advances which the new courses have brought to the theory and practice of religious education in Australian schools. In no particular order, the following catalogue indicates some of the benefits these study of religion courses have brought to schools which have adopted them. Because the stated aims of the courses strictly eschew proposing any one religious tradition over another, a sense of fairness and equity encourages an open, inquiring atmosphere to prevail in classrooms. The new courses have been a catalyst for many students to appreciate the place of religion in Australia and the world and to understand religion in an even-handed and tolerant way for the good of the whole community. The courses have been accredited on students' records and therefore count towards the attainment of senior school certificates. The resultant motivation and attention devoted by students to their studies has been a desirable feature often highlighted by supporters of these courses. A further consequence of this accreditation is the greater interest shown by a number of teachers and a willingness to teach these courses. As a bonus, the courses have been comparatively well resourced: student texts, inservice teacher support and scholarly literature have been readily forthcoming and have contributed to the satisfaction levels of teachers and students.

The way of classroom religious education proposed by supporters of the study of religion courses draws much inspiration from the phenomenological method described by German-Czech philosopher, Edmund Husserl. They argue that a dichotomy exists between the sacred and the profane. A student's own experience need not be used as a basis for understanding religious experience. This idea owes something to Husserl's explanation of *epoche*, or bracketing, which entails putting aside value judgments and prior dispositions which may distort personal understanding (Cooper, 1996). This is what one teacher was responding to when she described the aims of her class as including the "hope that my students would be able to put aside, for the time of the study, their own opinions and convictions in order to receive new ideas and understanding about other religious traditions. I was not trying to convert or convince students of the ultimate truth of any tradition, but to encourage them to acknowledge the freedom of belief of religious traditions" (Beck, 1996: 10). In this way, students are helped by the teacher to engage in warm, empathic study of religious traditions without clouding their judgments of those traditions with potentially prejudicial evaluations. The aim is to understand the religion from the perspective of the believers of that religious tradition. In many cases, this has required teachers to emphasise in their presentations descriptive and historical material about various religions so as to enable comparison with other religious ways.

A further perceived benefit often referred to by teachers owes something to another aspect of Husserl's thought. Husserl described the presence of eidetic vision

as an important aspect of phenomenology. Eidetic vision refers to the “attempt to see common typological-forms through the study of their various manifestations: thus our understanding of, say, worship might be bettered through looking at the ways worship occurs within Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and so on” (Arthur, 1995: 452). It is common to hear students’ responses to this aspect of their study: consideration of an aspect of another religion assisted understanding and appreciation of that dimension in their own religious tradition (McGrath, 1996: 23). Some have argued that this dimension should be taken into account as a useful, if not explicit, goal of religious studies programs. The programs could help to produce “a greater number of well-informed and committed religious individuals” even if the courses did not explicitly set out to achieve this (Lovat, 1992: 4). Supporters typically argue that religious studies courses in fact achieve the kinds of outcomes that other confessional approaches seek to achieve, but do so in a way that does not threaten students’ freedom or encourage a narrow, insular concentration on one familiar religious tradition.

Without doubt, then, the study of religion courses have provided an academic focus and respectability which have been lacking in many senior secondary school religious education programs. They have brought into the discussion the need for attention to religions other than Christianity, and for students to study religion in a way which does not require or presume a personal faith response. However, the introduction of these courses into schools has not been without problems, some of which will be discussed in the following section.

Limitations and Difficulties of Religious Studies Courses

Along with the undoubted benefits of a systematic and unbiased study of religion, it is possible to describe a number of limitations which arise when these courses are implemented in Australian secondary school classrooms. The level of scientific detachment and disciplined fairness essential to the phenomenological approach carries a number of unhelpful, unintended side-effects. Many, though certainly not all, complain that the courses are simply boring, too overloaded with descriptive data and attractive only to a restricted group of students. Graham Rossiter has expressed this concern in the following way:

If religious education does not make connections with what young people see spirituality to be about, there is a greater likelihood that they will look at the religious education content in a kind of clinical anthropological way - interesting, because it exists and people believe it, but the overall impression is that it has no compelling links with what students themselves experience as important issues of life (Rossiter, 1996: xxv).

Furthermore, critics have argued that the study of religion courses in secondary schools are examples of an educational imperialism which has pushed the particular

- and sometimes arcane - interests of religious scholars in universities onto the curriculums offered to Australian teenagers. How interested can we really expect the average Australian teenager to be in the those features which distinguish Hindus and Sikhs? And what might comprehension of such distinctions mean for their lives here and now? Few religious educators today advocate a return to the rampant experiential approaches to classroom religion curriculums of recent eras, but any school teacher knows the perils of facing a class of uninterested students with material which is not seen as relevant or meaningful to them. This criticism is not meant to belittle the necessary and important work of religious scholars who study the world's rich variety of religious expressions; I am seeking to draw attention to the relevance and applicability of sharing the fruits of this research with adolescent students in secondary school classrooms.

Also, the question must arise, do we have the teachers who are able to teach these new religion courses, in the way that they have been conceived? Patricia Malone has argued, in relation to the New South Wales Studies of Religion course, that students are required to "recognise the reality of the history, beliefs and practices for the practising member of the tradition. They are able to synthesise their learning and to contextualise it within the Australian reality" (Malone, 1966: 13). Despite the wealth of resources which has been produced to support the new courses, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that a proportion of teachers has struggled to comprehend and teach the diverse material required by these courses (Malone, 1996). Only the most able teachers with significant academic preparation in religion seem to have escaped these difficulties. Perhaps this is not surprising given the breadth of the challenge which these courses pose to teachers' pedagogical knowledge. Many "teachers have to struggle with the logic of each religion, not so much because students are going to grasp the essence or deep structure, but in order that one can start with a few intelligent questions. . . . The teacher who might have spent twenty years trying to master the language of just one of those religions cannot pretend to understand these religions" (Moran, 1989: 104). In the face of such educational challenges, it would not surprise anyone if it could be demonstrated that many teachers are simply offering information about a number of religious traditions, rather than finding ways to critically engage their students in the study of them. One is left to await further research to see how widespread is the kind of teaching which provoked one student to categorise her experience of the New South Wales course as "handouts, highlighted, filed, memorised and then reproduced" (Malone, 1996: 15).

In any curriculum area, classroom teachers need to feel comfortable with and confident about their subject matter in order for them to design creative ways to engage students with it. It might have been expected, then, that in terms of the selection of content to be studied, Australian experience has apparently mirrored that of British schools: when given an opportunity, teachers and students have exercised a choice to study Christian material. McGrath has noticed that most schools which have adopted Studies of Religion in New South Wales, have done so because

of the potential to study Christianity in depth. He adds that “it is likely that the subject would not have thrived without this capacity” (McGrath, 1996: 24). This choice is perhaps not surprising when one considers the background and prior preparation of teachers and students. And yet, the exercise of the Christian option disguises a broader reality to which I wish to return at length below.

The Sources of the Problem

The logic offered by significant British religious educators in the 1970s and 1980s was subsequently accepted by a number of influential Australian religious educators. In paraphrase, the argument went like this: there is a problem in a compulsory classroom with presenting exclusively Christian material in a way which presumes Christian belief and practice on the part of teacher and students. The way to overcome this difficulty is to introduce material on other religious traditions to complement the Christian material. No one religion is to be favoured; all are to be given equal treatment. In this way, it was thought, Christian presumptions could not dominate. On the face of it, no fair-minded person would want to be seen to dispute such logic. Fairness and equality appeal to a majority of Australians and are words often mentioned by religious studies supporters along with ‘freedom’, ‘open’ and ‘non-presumptive’.

The largely unquestioned acceptance by Australian religious educators of the British experience has meant the importation of a number of difficulties that, if they are admitted to at all, are soon dismissed. This extends even to the naming of these courses in many places. When the name of these courses is Study (or Studies) of Religion a double difficulty is introduced which detracts from the wider acceptance of religion courses in secondary schools. First, the name is not like other subject areas which have real status in the school: no one seriously argues for subject descriptions like Studies of English, Studies of Mathematics or Studies of History. The discipline name - History, Mathematics, English - is guarantee enough that a viable discipline worthy of examination exists and can be taught and learned in a relevant and appropriate way without seeking to indoctrinate students in one particular ideology specific to the discipline. The use of the term ‘study’ as a prefix to an uncertain discipline acts as insulation against the fear that someone might say something personal in a classroom, as if it was necessary to confirm this at every point. It is a guarantee against the possibility of indoctrination. The use of the word “study” operates somewhat like the word ‘education’ when it was added to the name of subject areas where people were not totally convinced either that it really was a discipline area, or if it should be studied at school. Anyone can supply their favourite example: Consumer Education, Driver Education, Religious Education. . .

Further, there is a more insidious consequence, because it is more subtle. The word ‘study’ indicates that students have a real purpose and something serious to do in these courses, but the teacher does not. Why choose the word ‘study’ otherwise?

Why not call the course 'Teaching of Religion/s'? The main reason, again, is the discomfort many have that the teacher may secretly - even unconsciously - seek to indoctrinate or lead students to a favourable or preferred religious position. The only place where a classroom teacher can fit in a studies of religion is as a fellow student or fellow searcher, and thereby forfeit the potential for their classroom teaching in religion to be equivalent to teaching in other curriculum areas. The simple solution, though not one I imagine would be generally agreeable, is to call the subject 'Religion' as a way of indicating its status with other curriculum areas - History, Geography, Mathematics - to indicate that the subject is an intelligent examination of the way religious people exist in the world, rather than a study of philosophers' and social scientists' explanations of religious traditions.

Beyond the issue of how to name these courses are concerns which focus on the general aims and course content. It is too simplistic to see Australian culture as one in which Christianity is merely one of many options open to people, although this is a common theme in writing about study of religion courses (Beck, 1996: 9; Lovat, 1995: 2). While this may come to be true at some point in the future, the reality of Australian culture at present is that Christian presumptions predominate. One has only to glance at the census statistics to understand this point. Or better, to look further and consider the way in which discussions about religious issues are conducted, with the heavy reliance on Christian terms and concepts. It would be difficult to conduct any discussion on religious themes in an Australian school classroom without using words with a distinctly Christian heritage and a consequent Christian bias. Words such as theology, person, even the word religion itself all have taken on a meaning which owes something to the Christian tradition. The way that Australian society has been constructed owes much to Christian ideas and ideals. Even students in Australian classrooms who do not have a Christian background have a particular insight and acute awareness of the Christian domination of Australian society.

The simple solution of giving more air time to a wider range of religious traditions ignores a fundamental reality of Australian society and neglects to concentrate on something which Australian classrooms are eminently well prepared for: a critical and evaluative study of Christianity in Australia. Such a study would require many points of reference to religious ways which are not Christian, but this is not the same as an extensive descriptive study of a broad number of religious traditions for the purpose of dispassionate or disinterested comparison. Gabriel Moran (1989: 104) has argued that "testing the student's relation to one and then several religions at what seem to be key points is enough to attempt in a school course. Unless a curriculum on the world's religions is kept very simple it will be intimidating to all but the most avid fact gatherers". This kind of testing of students' understanding of the relation of a familiar tradition to a number of other traditions is increasingly important as Australian society becomes more culturally diverse. To be sure, Australia needs more experts, not less, who can explain and interpret the meaning of religious

traditions for the whole community and engage with the great public issues of the day. But we should not expect to create such expertise among adolescents in schools. It is enough that schools can foster and teach students to speak intelligently about religious matters, but no more so than we would expect in history, mathematics or other school curriculum area. Importantly, these religion courses ought to *mean* something to these students.

For this to be achieved, the school courses need to honour two aspects common to all school programs. That is, that they be descriptive *and* evaluative. It is not sufficient that school religion courses merely describe and compare religious ways as a means of guarding or protecting the claims to truth of the various traditions studied. The demands of student interest and personal relevance rely upon some play of the imagination on the part of students. Elliot Eisner has given some sense of this vision of students' classroom experience when he speaks of those occasions in the classroom when it is possible for students to "think imaginatively about problems that matter to them, tasks that give them the opportunity to affix their own personal signature to their work, occasions to explore ideas and questions that have no correct answers, and projects in which they can reason and express their own ideas" (Eisner, 1995: 762). Students in classrooms need to be allowed space to consider what they think about a particular matter. Classrooms in which teachers do no more than distribute information for students to 'learn' and file for later examination do not meet the vision articulated by Eisner.

The ability for students to exercise their imagination requires a further distinction than is admitted in much of the literature on study of religion courses in secondary schools. These courses ought to allow students to distinguish between truth and meaning. Frank Kermode has observed that "all modern interpretation that is not merely an attempt at 'recognition' involves some effort to divorce meaning and truth. This accounts for the splendours and miseries of the art" (Kermode, 1979: 122). Separating truth and meaning allows for the texts of any religious tradition to be honoured and respected while at the same time allowing students the space to explore alternatives and imagine other possibilities which are a part of any living tradition. Too much of the new courses requires students to engage in little more than recognition of the truths of a variety of religious traditions, lest students' personal judgments do some violence to the truths of those traditions. In fact, a viable religion course need not question the truths of a religion, but ought to be engaged in a search for the possible meanings and alternatives that tradition provides. Here, evaluation, imagination and critical judgment can and should come to the fore. The play of imagination required still conforms to the need for a critical distance from students' own personal faith responses, but it does give students opportunities to display and develop the kinds of talents which are essential to their other school studies.

I suspect that the reforms I am suggesting here actually describe much of the work that teachers and students are already conducting in the best and most effective study of religion programs in secondary schools. That is to say, despite the rhetoric

and advice contained in the scholarly literature, teachers are selecting predominantly Christian material to explore with their classes in an open, non-presumptive and critically evaluative way. They are making appropriate and relevant cross-reference to other religious traditions in relation to the themes and issues that arise in their study of Christianity. And, they are able to do this in a way which enhances the personal religious response of a number of students, but does not impinge on their personal freedom and imagination. In conducting their classes in this manner, these teachers are avoiding the detrimental aspects of the kinds of approaches to teaching religion that religious studies theorists have correctly warned against. These teachers have found ways to avoid the mere presentation of one dominant view of the issue they are exploring. They have introduced students to some of the controversy, diversity of opinion and duality which surrounds any aspect of a living tradition. In the spirit of John Stuart Mill's claim that "he who knows only his side of the case, knows little of that", these teachers have sought to open minds rather than require students to demonstrate desirable predetermined beliefs, attitudes, values or behaviours. This kind of activity has been conducted because it matches the limitations and possibilities of teachers and the needs and interests of their students.

Conclusion

Any school curriculum area must provide a conception of the curriculum which balances the claims of the academic discipline, the educational requirements of the wider community and the needs and interests of students. Proponents of comparative religion studies have issued a strong challenge to faith-forming approaches to school religion programs. But the appropriate educational response does not come down to a simple choice of one way in preference to the other. The articulation of a viable curriculum which is likely to suit the needs and interests of Australian senior secondary school students, must be attuned to the realities of their situation as much as to the demands of the religious disciplines.

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