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A SUGGESTED PEDAGOGY FOR 'HARD TOPICS' IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Introduction

This article will be in two parts. The first is based on years of reflection both as a student and, more recently, as an educator of religious education (RE) teachers. It begins with an incident from my teaching experience and leads on to some discussion of one of the perennial, global but often understated issues in religious education, namely the poor grasp of content knowledge by students in religious education.

The second section sketches an argument for the need to give active consideration to how to tackle difficult topics in religious education and concludes with a tentative pedagogical process to teach such issues. At the outset let me be a little more precise about what I mean by the term hard topics. The first definition is somewhat flippant but does make the point.

Some time ago I was at a meeting of experienced RE teachers who had been commissioned to write some materials for use in the classroom. It came time to divide up the topics to be covered. A number of the participants eagerly volunteered to work on the unit on Relationships, one person had to be coopted to write on the interface between science and religion. Science and religion is a hard topic because no one wants to do it!

Features of hard topics include factors such as requiring specialised knowledge often including an understanding of a range of cross-disciplinary concepts and complex ideas. Hard topics are difficult to explain to others and require excellent pedagogical skills from the RE teacher. They often do not have a ready expression in human experience. Most people, for example, have some ideas on relationships; thinking about human origins in the light of Genesis and Darwin by contrast is not as immediately amenable.

Hard topics require sequential planning and can rarely be covered adequately in one lesson. Finally and perhaps most importantly, hard topics are often of critical importance in defining what makes Christian thought and practice distinctive. They establish boundaries between what Christians believe, at least in theory, and what others believe. For this reason hard topics make demands on content knowledge of RE teachers, especially in areas that relate to the religious tradition within which they are working.

Part 1: This Is Hard To Explain

Recently a student approached me for some assistance with an assessment task that she was completing. Nothing unusual here except for the image of her as she approached with a copy of her task in one hand, another sheaf of papers in the other and this coupled with a look of quiet frustration in her eyes. Her problem was that she had begun doing some research on her topic which was to plan a short classroom session on the Feeding of the Five Thousand and this had revealed some unexpected difficulties. To summarise her dilemma, being a competent and hard working student, she had commenced the task well in advance of the submission date and, prior to any research, already had some idea of what she was going to do. In fact this is where the problem lay. Her idea was to use the scripture as a lead into a lesson on preparing students for the Forty Hour Famine. This was an activity where students were invited to go without food for forty hours in order to raise money and also experience something of what it is like to be hungry.

The student was a great supporter of the Forty Hour Famine and had much experience of it both as a participant and an organiser. What had complicated matters was the bundle of papers in her other hand, which were photocopied sections of the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary.* Compared to her understanding the commentary had given a different account of what the passage was about. Rather than being a simple metaphor for the need to feed the hungry, following the example of Jesus feeding the five thousand, the commentary had introduced themes, which gave the account a far more complicated reading.

The student's dilemma was what to do now? Her main argument was that her students would never understand the complex reading, just as she had not. Her strategy, on the other hand, had a solid entry into the experiential world of the student or as she expressed it, they could relate to it. What the student was proposing was not wrong or beyond reasonable limits about what could be done in the RE classroom. Rather it was tangential to an authentic reading of the passage. We had thus arrived at a critical juncture: do we accept that students will never understand the deeper reading and go for a much looser metaphorical explanation or do we attempt to develop a pedagogical strategy which tries to open the significance of the passage to students?

As I tried to negotiate a way forward it occurred to me that this dilemma is symptomatic of a much broader problem in religious education, namely how do we encourage students to tackle difficult topics in a way that does justice to the depth and complexity of issues. The instance that I have described relates to scripture but it could be repeated in a number of areas such as Christology and bioethics to name two. At this point another thought entered my head, that of the almost universal lack of content knowledge of religious education by students in Western countries. This has been commented on in Australia, Europe and the United States (Flynn & Mok, 2002; Hoge et al., 2001). Perhaps the most eloquent statement of this is given by the eminent English sociologist Grace Davie (1999) who commented on the European situation. Davie commented that an ignorance of even the basic understandings of Christian teachings is the norm in modern Europe, especially among young people: it is not a reassuring situation.

The two thoughts gelled in my mind. If we repeated, over all years of schooling and across a number of content areas, the scenario that I have described about the Feeding of the Five Thousand we could have made considerable progress in understanding why the ignorance that Davie and others have commented on has become so normative. The student I have described was reluctant to move beyond her understanding of the passage. When challenged as to how students would ever get a more complete sense of what the scripture passage was about she referred this responsibility to other teachers, more experienced and knowledgeable, who taught at higher levels in the school.

In my experience of secondary schools it is unlikely that such teachers exist in large numbers and if they do they are unable to correct or upgrade all the teaching that has gone on before. Moreover there is a view that a reluctance to address hard topics in religious education is indicative of a commitment to life-long learning. The idea here is that as the school is committed to the concept of life-long learning at some point, just over the horizon, students will be introduced to some of the more difficult ideas – after all there is a life time to engage with these issues.

An alternate approach, equally committed to life-long learning, argues that this commitment should not be used to put off challenging students with important and complex ideas. Certainly proper consideration should be given to the capacity and maturity of students but this can be done with an attitude that seeks to begin the teaching and learning process and not to put it off until some later date. Rather than relying solely on the super teacher somewhere in the school, a better strategy would be to share the task of teaching hard topics among a number of teachers at a number of points in the curriculum.

The purpose here is not to provide a rationale for a more content-based approach in religious education, other than to note that a genuine educational approach to RE cannot avoid complex and difficult issues. This paper is an attempt to understand and provide a remedy to what happens at a micro level in the classroom. This leads to a third reflection. We know very little about what RE teachers actually do in the classroom both in terms of the content that is covered and in what manner and depth it is treated. Perhaps this is a consequence of the recent dominance of guidelines in religious education in Australia. The emphasis on guidelines, especially at secondary level, is to provide an overarching model of curriculum planning that empowers teachers to develop their own classroom program based on the principles and ideas provided. The focus, nonetheless, is not on what is actually done in the classroom but rather what could or should be done.

The best studies that I know of that investigate RE teaching in the classroom relate to how scripture is taught at both primary and secondary levels (Grace, 2003; Stead, 1996). These reach conclusions that are supportive of my general argument, that is, when we look at what teachers do in the classroom we find that they use a very limited range of scripture passages, do not give a satisfactory exegesis and stick to explanations that do not extend the students' thinking. I suspect that if we examined what teachers do in other areas we would find a similar pattern. To select one example consider Christological themes. This is a hard topic, especially if the teacher wants to move the discussion beyond simple metaphors that liken Christ to a good person or role model.

Starting with the human dimension of Christ is an appropriate pedagogical principle. Such a strategy has a firm foundation in the Rahnerian notion of an ascending Christology (Egan, 1998). It is also the second requirement of what Macquarrie (1990) calls a Christology for today. A key question is where does the classroom teaching go once the human Christ has been presented or to use the Rahnerian metaphor how does our teaching reflect an ascending Christology? I suspect that what often occurs in religious education when hard topics are covered is that what is offered is a type of introduction, without any adequate subsequent development.

In the case of Christological themes too often all students hear are examples of Christ helping others or how he is like us. At the very least students will

become bored with the repetitive nature of this presentation. The more perceptive students will also question the very basis of the analogy, that is if Christ is just like us then what do you make of other issues such as the Resurrection. There is no doubt that teaching about Christ the God/Man is difficult, a brief survey of Christian history reveals this (Cross, 1988). To be faithful, however, to an educational approach to religious education leaves the teacher with no alternative than to attempt to cover difficult but pivotal topics such as this.

Part 2: A Pedagogical Approach to Teaching 'Hard Topics'

The first step in developing pedagogy for hard topics in religious education is a commitment to tackling these issues in the curriculum. Without this it is unlikely that any satisfactory program can be developed, due to the inherent difficulties that many of these topics present to RE teachers. What is outlined below gives an idea of how to approach hard topics in a classroom situation.

STEP	DESCRIPTION
Recognition	Make a clear commitment to teach hard topics in the curriculum. This does not mean that every lesson should involve such themes but teachers should have a firm realisation that these will arise and should be planned for.
Orientation	Examine the existing curriculum to see how the topic has been covered in the past. Also recognise that it may be covered again in the future. Hard topics often require a number of treatments in a four or six year program. Ask yourself what aspect of the topic will be covered here and what will be done later. Be aware of the age and prior learnings of students.
Research	Identify a number of key resources in the area. These can be divided into two types. Firstly, teaching resources used by others to teach this topic. Secondly, sources that help teachers understand the topic themselves. Be aware that a good deal can be achieved here by some guided selective reading. Whilst higher degree qualifications are always desirable the aim here is to improve teaching and learning about hard topics and not to become experts in one particular theoretical area.
Focus	Work with others if you can to encapsulate as briefly as possible the heart of the issue. What is it that makes this topic hard and why do students have trouble understanding it? What is their thinking about the issues involved and especially what common misconceptions exist?
Response	Repeat the focus step but encapsulate the Christian teaching on the topic or another authoritative source that you want to convey to the students.
Educational Goals	Using outcome language, or similar terms, write down what you expect of students who have completed this unit of work. Some teachers may prefer to do this step after completing the teaching strategies.
Teaching Strategies	This is the critical step. You are now at a stage where you are ready to start developing a series of teaching and learning activities that will engage students. Rely here on your knowledge as a skilled teacher. Give some thought to how many lessons you are going to devote to the topic. Also plan assessment strategies that will enhance the learning of the students.
Review and Consolidation	Try to make some judgement as to the success of your lesson sequence and record what was successful. Also start to develop a pool of resources that have been helpful so that when this topic is tackled again you have a starting point.

A Worked Example: Teaching about Jesus in Junior Secondary

STEP	DESCRIPTION
Recognition	Obviously teaching about Jesus is an important aspect of religious education in Christian schools. Teaching about Jesus should involve something of the

	complexity of the topic and how the church has understood Jesus over the centuries. What we would like to cover here is the basic teaching of the Council of Nicaea, that Jesus is really God. We will tackle the natures of Jesus in Years 9 and 10 with a focus on the development on the doctrine in the external study, Religion and Society in Years11/12. We plan to spend five lessons on this topic.
Orientation	Currently Jesus is presented at two stages in the curriculum. In Year 7 there is an emphasis on Jesus the storyteller. In Year 11 Jesus is presented as part of the school's internal RE program. This does not seem an over concentration on Jesus and the augmentation suggested makes our approach more comprehensive. The teaching strategies that have been identified all relied on presenting Jesus as a human figure and role model. Students are presently challenged with statements such as – what would Jesus do in this situation?
Research	A really useful resource here for teachers is Frances Thompson's book *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*. This is an excellent introduction to classical Christology. A number of resources in the school library were identified but these were somewhat dated.
Focus	We decided that the really hard thing here is the idea of Jesus as God/Man. It's easier if you stress either the humanity or the divinity of Jesus but to combine both is a challenge. Many of our students see Jesus as a sort of superman, with great powers but different from the creator God. At a push some of them say that if Jesus were God then he is just pretending to be a human being.
Response	Jesus and God are the same essence.
Educational Goals	(This list is not exhaustive but indicative of what can be done) By the end of this unit students will have: • participated in a role play that depicts the character and views of Arius and Athanasius; • viewed and made notes from a video on the Council of Nicaea; • produced a timeline that depicts the key events leading up to and following the Council; • described the Catholic teaching on the relationship between Jesus and God; • contrasted the Catholic view with that of Arius; • explored some of their questions about the origins of Jesus; • discussed some of the difficulties and objections associated with teaching the Council of Nicaea; • listed and defined some of the key terms used in Christological discussions.
Teaching Strategies	(This list is not exhaustive but indicative of what can be done) • Give some historical background; introduce the key players Arius and Athanasius. Get students to interview each character and try to draw out the different understanding about who Jesus is. • Show a video which gives some background to the Council of Nicaea. • Brainstorm the question, who do you think Jesus is? • Use artwork to get across the message about who Jesus is. Many icons represent Mary and Jesus. The depiction of Jesus here is quite different from what students may be used to. The man/child Jesus sitting enthroned on the lap of Mary is a powerful image of Jesus as God. • Provide students with a simple statement of the Catholic understanding of Christ's origins. • Design a worksheet that helps students define some key Christological terms. • Use selected scripture that is relevant to the origins of Jesus. • Invite students to record in their diaries how they react to the idea of Jesus as God.

	• Discuss the difference in calling something similar in contrast to identical. • Imagine that you were speaking to the greatest expert on Jesus in the world, what questions would you ask? • Research one aspect of the historical period under review, themes such as the Council of Nicaea, the Emperor Constantine or some heterodox positions such as Docetism.
Review and Consolidation	What went well was the information about the argument between Athanasius and Arius and students could really relate to the personalities. Students found some of it tough going, especially how to understand how the divine Jesus could coexist with the human Jesus. This is acceptable because this is difficult and we have another chance to explore this issue in Year 9. The main assessment tool was the cumulative work diary the students had to submit – two completed worksheets, a narrative dialogue between Arius and Athanasius, a report on the Nicaea video, an analysis of two scripture passages, a timeline for the period before and after Nicaea and a statement of the Catholic teaching about who Jesus is

Conclusion

I have noted that our knowledge of what teaching actually occurs in the religious education classroom is inadequate. I suspect that hard topics are being avoided. In light of this I have outlined here a pedagogical process for teaching difficult topics. These are an important part of a religious education curriculum that takes the educative aspect of the discipline seriously. They are not, however, the only topics that should be covered. The key to a good RE program in the school setting is balance (Rossiter, 1997).

One could easily construct a curriculum that was too heavily weighted to hard topics. I do not see much danger of this at the moment. A greater concern is an avoidance of these topics in the name of making the curriculum comprehensible and amenable to student interest. It is a matter of contention what, if anything, could make religious education popular with students (Flynn & Mok, 2002). I would argue that a religious education curriculum that approached hard topics with confidence and expertise is as likely to meet students needs, to extend them and help them negotiate their own identity in relation to the home tradition as one which is self-consciously based on an experiential appeal to relevance.

The fact that students find some issues in religious education difficult is not germane to the argument here. Students find many disciplines difficult but this is an indication that the study has serious academic and intellectual claims. An important part of the role of religious education should be to try to broaden and deepen students' understanding of topics that are a critical part of the Christian tradition. The key question is how to teach hard topics better. I believe a research focus on this issue is long overdue.

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