

WHAT HAS FAITH GOT TO DO WITH CLASSROOM RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?

Abstract

Curriculum framework documents in religious education from various Catholic dioceses throughout Australia have in recent times sought parity with state and territory curriculum frameworks (National Catholic Education Commission, 2008). This has been done even though religious education is not part of the learning domain of state and territory education systems or curricula. This quest for parity has resulted in greater emphasis on the “educational” focus of classroom religious education and a downplaying of the attention given (if at all) to the faith dimension in Catholic schools. This paper proposes a rethink of the emphasis attributed to faith in classroom religious education by drawing on perspectives of faith in religious and secular contexts.

Introduction

In recent times there has been much emphasis on an “educational” dimension for classroom religious education in Australian Catholic schools. “Educational” in this context refers to the teaching and learning that primarily determines the level of student learning according to the achievement of knowledge centred learning outcomes. There are several justifications for this emphasis. For a number of decades diocesan leaders have focussed on ensuring that classroom religious education is an area of learning that has parity with other curriculum areas. They have generally expected the same accountability and integrity required of other curriculum areas to be applied to classroom religious education (National Catholic Education Commission, 2011). A recent investigation by the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) found that in general the approaches taken to teaching classroom religious education in Australian Catholic schools was reflective of the respective State and Territory curriculum frameworks (NCEC, 2008). It has been argued that the design of classroom religious education curriculum frameworks that draw on similar educational approaches found in state and territory curriculum frameworks would add to its credibility as a learning area (Engebretson, 2002). Furthermore an exaggerated educational emphasis on a small excerpt from a large document written by the Congregation for the Clergy’s (CC) document titled *General Directory for Catechesis* may also have attributed to the contemporary emphasis on this educational parity between classroom religious education curriculum and state and territory curriculum frameworks.

It is necessary, therefore, that religious instruction in schools appear as a scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands and the same rigour as other disciplines. It must present the Christian message and the Christian event with the same seriousness and the same depth with which other disciplines present their knowledge. It should not be an accessory alongside of these disciplines, but rather it should engage in a necessary inter-disciplinary dialogue. This dialogue should take place above all at that level at which every discipline forms the personality of students. In this way the presentation of the Christian message influences the way in which the origins of the world, the sense of history, the basis of ethical values, the function of religion in culture, the destiny of man and his relationship with nature, are understood. Through inter-disciplinary dialogue religious instruction in schools underpins, activates, develops and completes the educational activity of the school. (CC, 1998, # 73)

A survey of *Religious Education in Dialogue: Curriculum around Australia* (NCEC, 2008) would support the contention that less emphasis appears to have been placed on the introduction to Article 73 of the *General Directory for Catechesis* (CC, 1998) which emphasised a faith or catechetical dimension to religious education (religious instruction). “Within the ministry of the word, the character proper to religious instruction in schools and its relationship with the catechesis of children and of young people merit special consideration” (CC, 1998, # 73). With little attention given to the introductory statement which actually sets the context for # 73 (CC, 1998) the educational dimension pertaining to classroom religious education has been emphasised

and this has been reflected in many curriculum frameworks across many dioceses throughout Australia (NCEC, 2008).

Religious education in Queensland has been drawn upon as an example to illustrate this point. The Archdiocese of Brisbane has sought to address this dichotomy between faith and religion as an educational enterprise in its document titled *Religious Education: Guidelines for the Religious Life of the School* (Barry & Brennan, 2008). This document ultimately is concerned with the formation of the whole person. The document indicates that the Catholic school community is an environment where people are taught to be religious in a particular way and that the classroom religious education is the environment where “teaching and learning of religion” (Barry & Brennan, 2008, p. 8) takes place. Furthermore an entire document entitled, *Religious Education: Years 1 to 10 Learning Outcomes* (Barry, Brennan & Sunter, 2003) was dedicated specifically to classroom religious education. While the document acknowledged the distinct but complementary educational and faith dimensions of religious education, it emphasised the educational dimension as paramount to classroom religious education.

This document is focused on the educational dimension of religion teaching and learning in classroom settings. It is based on an outcomes approach, emphasising the educational alignment between this key learning area and other key learning areas in Queensland. (Barry, Brennan & Sunter, 2003, p. 1)

In contrast, Church documents emphasise the complementary nature between education and faith and/or catechesis (CCE, 1988, #66-70; CCE, 1990). However the emphasis in contemporary classroom religious education appears oriented towards a distinction which emphasises the educational dimension. Given the emphasis here it is debateable whether classroom religious education should be retitled *Religion Education* to comply with the language use in both documents.

If this quest for parity between state and territory curriculum frameworks and classroom religious education becomes all consuming in a Catholic school, then the aims of religious education may appear confused. This could lead to disorientation between the intended ecclesial aims of religious education according to the Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE) and a schools understanding of its aims.

Without entering into the whole problem of teaching religion in schools, it must be emphasised that, while such teaching is not merely confined to "religious classes" within the school curriculum, it must, nevertheless, also be imparted explicitly and in a systematic manner to prevent a distortion in the child's mind between general and religious culture. The fundamental difference between religious and other forms of education is that its aim is not simply intellectual assent to religious truths but also a total commitment of one's whole being to the Person of Christ. (CCE, 1977, # 50)

From the perspective of the CCE (1997) religious classes not “teaching and learning of religion” (Barry & Brennan, 2008) form part of the school curriculum and these classes should, as previously stated, be oriented to a “commitment of one’s whole being to the Person of Christ” (CCE, 1997, # 50). If this premise is to be considered plausible then faith must also have a part to play in the religious education of children in classroom religious education and broader school context. *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* (CEE, 1982) calls for teachers to be witnesses to faith and, although the CCE (1982) seldom makes a distinction between the role of the lay Catholic educator and the lay Catholic religious educator, the concern for the inculcation of students (and teachers) into the faith must have prominence in both the religious education classroom and the religious life of the school community.

It therefore stands to reason that the classroom religious education teacher has a responsibility to be attentive to the faith dimension of each student’s experience of learning. This point is emphasised by the Congregation for Catholic Education.

Religious education is actually a right - with the corresponding duties - of the student and of the parents. It is also, at least in the case of the Catholic religion, an extremely important instrument for attaining the adequate synthesis of faith and culture that has been insisted on so often. Therefore, the teaching of the Catholic religion, distinct from and at the same time complementary to catechesis properly so called, ought to form a part of the curriculum of every school. (CCE, 1982, # 56)

The recent emphasis on classroom religious education being oriented towards seeking parity with other key learning areas (NCEC, 2011) has contributed to downplaying the faith dimension that has a rightful place within classroom religious education. An emphasis on religion rather than religious education may run the risk of orienting classroom religious education away from appropriate attention to the faith dimension which is a mandate of the Church (CCE, 1982). A place for the faith dimension in classroom religious education should be considered and reconsidered constantly.

Emphasising the faith dimension in contemporary religious education classrooms may seem problematic given the composition of students populating contemporary religious education classrooms in Catholic schools. Many students in religious education classes are not from Catholic backgrounds, some are from other religious backgrounds and others have no religious background (Liddy, 2002). In fact in some Catholic dioceses in Australia more than fifty percent of the student population in Catholic schools are from non-Catholic backgrounds (Healy, 2011b). Against this reality many educators would argue that the faith dimension should be downplayed in the teaching and learning approach and development of classroom religious education curriculum (Healy, 2011a ; see also Barry & Brennan, 2003). To downplay an appropriate emphasis on the faith dimension of in the religious education classroom in order to achieve parity with other key learning areas runs the risk of the faith dimension becoming a hit and miss area with the potential of only impacting on those students inculcated in the Catholic faith tradition and open to catechesis. This risk has been emphasised in scholarly debate:

... in a school setting ... the pupil's range over a whole spectrum of commitment: some will come from very committed Christian Catholic families and some may be themselves committed; others, the exact opposite. When, therefore, religious education is presented to pupils of such wide-ranging commitment, it will be received in different ways; some will receive it as 'catechesis', some may be evangelised by it, and others will hear it simply as religious education. (Purnell, 1985, p. 74)

It is possible to live up to the mandate of the Congregation for Catholic Education (1982) where expectations of careful attention to the total formation of the human person include the faith dimension even in religious education classrooms with student populations from diverse religious, cultural, social backgrounds.

Furthermore it is an expectation of the Congregation for Catholic Education that lay Catholic teachers teaching in non-Catholic schools still be open to the possibility that students may still encounter a genuine synthesis between faith and culture.

Lay Catholic teachers should be influenced by a Christian faith vision in the way they teach their course, to the extent that this is consistent with the subject matter, and the circumstances of the student body and the school. In doing "this, they will help students to discover true human values; and even though they must work within the limitations proper to a school that makes no attempt to educate in the faith, in which many factors will actually work directly against faith education, they will still be able to contribute to the beginnings of a dialogue between faith and culture. It is a dialogue which may, one day, lead to the students' genuine synthesis of the two. This effort can be especially fruitful for those students who are Catholics; it can be a form of evangelization for those who are not. (CCE, 1982, # 49)

Given that such expectations are placed on lay Catholic teachers in non-Catholic schools it would be difficult to argue that religious education teachers in Catholic schools would appear justified in ignoring a responsibility to acknowledge and attend to addressing a faith dimension in classroom religious education. How teachers actually do this could be the focus of another paper.

Having established a premise for attention to a faith dimension in classroom religious education it is vital to explore how this might be achieved in a way that is sensitive to a diverse student population while at the same time respecting the aims of Catholic education which adhere to the evangelising mission of the Church (Second Vatican Council, 1964). The research of Fowler (1981) and Dantley (2005) may prove helpful in contemplating a way forward in addressing a faith dimension in religious education classroom populated by students from diverse backgrounds. Fowler (1981) sought to research the faith development of people by

interpreting the life stories of three hundred and fifty-nine research participants aged between three and a half years and eighty-four years. The interviews took place between 1972 and 1981 and he drew in structural and developmental psychological theorists (see Erikson, 1968; Kohlberg, 1969; Maslow, 1968) to identify certain stages of faith in the life of an individual. These stages were related to experience and to cognitive and personal development. It was generally accepted that Fowler's research on stages of faith transported understandings about faith development beyond the constraints of religious contexts. That is, faith development was not perceived as exclusively the domain of religious contexts. While this concept may help to contribute to the argument about to be put forward, it should be noted that ninety-six per cent of the people who participated in Fowler's study were from Judaeo-Christian backgrounds. In fact ninety-seven point eight per cent were white Americans, eighty-one point five per cent were Christians, eleven point two per cent were Jewish, three point six per cent were Orthodox Christians and another three point six per cent were not specified as having any religion (Fowler, 1981, p. 315). Fowler's (1981) theory on stages of faith development has been applied to non-religious and religious contexts of education (Engebretson, de Souza, Rymarz & Buchanan, 2008).

Stage	Brief Description	Learning strategies
Pre-stage: Primal Faith (Infancy)	Gained from interaction with primary care giver which exposes the infant to experiences of trust	Learning about eco-spirituality students could learn about dependency and commitment in nature by looking at animal nurseries e.g. visit a zoo, a children's farm, a dog or cat shelter.
Stage 1: Interactive-Projective Faith (Early Childhood)	Meaning is made mostly through intuition and imitation. A tendency to copy and reproduce patterns of behaviour closely related to adults.	Students could imitate scenes from the bible e.g. the nativity scene, Jesus at the temple as a young boy etc.
Stage 2: Mythic-literal Faith (Childhood and beyond)	Sorting out the difference between real and make believe. Reality is seen as something that can be seen, touched, heard, tasted or smelt.	Students could be introduced to signs and symbols in the Church and learn to distinguish between what can be seen (crucifix), touched (holy water), smelt (incense), tasted (Eucharist) etc.
Stage 3: Synthetic-conventional Faith (Adolescent and beyond)	Individuals conform their thinking and acting to the expectations and concerns of others beyond their immediate family e.g. school and social net works.	Students could use graphic organisers to identify how they would respond to a given situation depending on those who are present. They should then be invited to reflect on their responses noting any similarities and differences.
Stage 4: Individual reflective Faith (Young adulthood and beyond)	Individuals take responsibility for their own commitment, beliefs, values and attitudes	Students could be encouraged to keep journals that allow them to record their own thoughts, feelings, values, attitudes toward particular issues.
Stage 5: Paradoxical-Consolidative Faith (Early midlife and beyond)	Individuals come to terms with their own past and rework it to find new meanings and multiple ways of making meaning.	While this stage is generally presumed to occur beyond school years. Senior students should have opportunities to engage in retreat like experiences and learn about the benefits of spiritual direction as an option as they journey through life and faith.
Stage 6: Universalising Faith (Mid-life and beyond)	Individuals have reached a stage of unity with the ultimate. No longer do they see themselves as the centre of the universe. They have put the universe at the centre instead.	Students could learn about people who are perceived to have reached this stage of faith and reflect on the significant attributes and contributions such people have made.

Fowler (1995) argued that faith in the universal sense can be experienced by the underlying formation of beliefs, values and meanings. His research has been considered both within and beyond religious contexts (Fowler, 1981). His stages of faith development can be drawn upon as a means of addressing a faith dimension in classroom religious education - especially classrooms populated with students from diverse backgrounds.

The Table above provides an overview of Fowler's (1991) stages of faith and how they may be used to attend to the faith dimension of religious education. Incorporating learning strategies that may help one become attentive to the faith dimension may at a later stage lead to the individual encountering a synthesis between faith and life in their own life (CCE, 1982).

In recent times Dantley (2005) has explored expressions of faith in secular contexts and the growing willingness amongst populations to talk about and publically express faith. He claimed that recent tragedies such as major acts of terrorism and natural disasters have unlocked those inhibitions that once held back members of secular society from talking about faith. Faith has become very much "an integral part of our secular life as it is the religious" (Dantley, 2005, p. 6). In fact, coping with serious tragic encounters produces populations of people who are all too aware of the specific reality of tragedy and disaster and it is something people come to terms with by drawing upon faith. Faith enables them to contemplate a better future. One that may not yet be fully realised or as Dantley (2008) indicated "our faith releases us to envision a better future that leads to our acting and constructing assiduously, a new reality that can be replete with changes grounded in justice, equity and morality" (p. 8).

A recollection from a past tragedy is drawn upon here to illustrate Dantley's point. On the 7th day of February 2009, news telecasts brought to the attention of the whole world the devastating loss of life and destruction of homes resulting from the bush fires in Victoria, Australia. The fires surrounded and engulfed a very large portion of the state. For most of 2009 (and particularly the early part) the Victorian community was grief stricken. The outpouring of raw emotion and the experience of individual and communal vulnerability was beyond the comprehension of this population which had not previously encountered such devastation and loss in its own backyard. However many stories of hope for a brighter future were shared. One particular story involved a fire fighter and a Koala. In the midst of fighting the bushfires a fire fighter saw a Koala with burnt paws walking across burning ashes. The fire fighter became oblivious to all around him except his focus on rescuing the Koala. The fire fighter helped the Koala to drink water from his water bottle and the Koala placed her paw on the fire fighters hand to support herself while she drank from the bottle. Footage of this amazing event can be found on YouTube, *Koala saved after bush fires* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUk0EjDNA-k&feature=related>). The Koala was given a name (Sam) and taken to an animal shelter to recover from the injuries she received from the bushfires. Sam received worldwide media coverage and populations of people affectionately envisaged a brighter future for Sam. Another YouTube film clip titled *Koala Rescued from Bush Fires*, originally reported on Sky News in the UK (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vp_7GopNMso&feature=related) highlighted the concern for the survival of this poor creature. Sam captured the hearts of many. She had survived the bush fire, she was reported to have found love in an animal refuge with a male Koala and while we celebrated her hope for a better future, many people were saddened to learn that she had to be put to sleep due to other health complications. However, many rejoiced in knowing that everything possible was done to give her a better chance at survival and eventually a dignified death. According to Dantley (2005) human intervention such as the one portrayed in this example, which is oriented towards a envisaging a better future, is an expression of faith in a secular context.

Faith expressed in the secular is reliant on the hopes of individuals and communities to envision and hopefully bring into reality a better future. Expressing faith in the secular can be associated with a natural theology that holds at its core that human beings are ultimately responsible for visualising and creating a better future. Dantley (2005) suggested some human characteristics such as hope, justice, compassion, and co-creation are drawn upon to express faith in secular contexts because they help people to envision a better future. He also purports that faith is such a significant attribute to knowing beyond the measurable that it is able to affirm

the existence of truth without physical validation. Many people who had lost everything in the Victorian bushfires continued to look towards a better future without physical validation of their vision (YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaaLUctj1JU&feature=related>).

Drawing on Fowler (1995; 1991; 1981) who illustrated stages of faith in a universal sense beyond the scope of religious constructs (though relevant to religious contexts) and Dantley (2005) who argued that faith is very much a part of our secular life (as well as religious), it would seem a negligent act on the part of educators to not give appropriate attention to the a faith dimension in classroom religious education. In the context of Catholic education systems that accommodate student populations from diverse backgrounds (both religious and non religious) in classroom religious education programmes, the mix of students should be no justification for ignoring a faith dimension. All students have a right to classroom learning that incorporates a faith dimension as faith is not exclusively expressed by religious people (Dantley, 2005; Fowler, 1995, 1991; 1981). Classroom religious education in a Catholic school is an appropriate place to be attentive to the faith dimension. Furthermore it is the mandate of the Congregation for Catholic Education (1982, 1977), the Congregation for the Clergy (1998) and it plays an essential role in helping the Church to achieve her mission (Second Vatican Council, 1964). It is also a human experience obtainable by all (Dantely, 2005; Fowler, 1995; 1991; 1981).

For centuries, the Christian Tradition and the Catholic Tradition have understood that certain characteristics of faith, like Dantley's (2005) analogy of faith, call human response and experience beyond the measurable and truth, are not dependent on physical validation. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) (1994) there are six key characteristic of faith. They are:

Faith is a Grace

Faith is a gift of God, a supernatural virtue infused by Him. "before this faith can be exercised, man must have the grace of God to move and assist him; he must have the interior helps of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart and converts it to God, who opens the mind and 'makes it easy for all to accept and believe the truth" (CCC, 1994, # 153).

Faith is a human act

In faith, the human intellect and will cooperate with divine grace: "Believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth by command of the will moved by God through grace" (CCC, 1994, # 155).

Faith and Understanding

... methodical research in all branches of knowledge, provided it is carried out in a truly scientific manner does not override moral laws, can never conflict with faith, because the things of this world and things of faith derive from the same God" (CCC, 1994, # 199)

The Freedom of faith

The act of faith is of its very nature a free act. ... Christ invited people to faith and conversion, but he never coerced them (CCC, 1994, # 160).

The necessity of faith

"... without faith no one has ever attained justification, nor will anyone obtain eteranal life ... "(CCC, 1994, # 161)

Perseverance in faith

To live, grow, and persevere in the faith until the end we must beg the Lord to increase our faith, it must be "working through charity" abounding in hope, and rooted in the faith of the Church (CCC, 1994, # 162).

Faith – the beginning of eteranal life

Faith is the beginning of eteranal life ... we walk by faith, not by sight ... (CCC, 1994, # 163 & 164)

These characteristics of faith in the Catholic Tradition should be introduced and reinforced through classroom religious education. They help young people in Catholic schools who are very much a part of the secular world know that faith can be experienced beyond the concept of human relationships. It has the potential to help them connect with, and nurture their relationship with God.

Conclusion

Faith is expressed by human beings in religious and secular contexts. In a secular country such as Australia, where the vast majority of Australians identify themselves as belonging to a particular religious tradition, there is an obligation on educational institutions to be attentive to a faith dimension. In Catholic schools it should be perceived as more than an obligation to enable every student to be attentive to a faith dimension in their own lives and communities. Classroom religious education has an obligation to be vigilant in exploring ways and means of nurturing a faith dimension in the lives of students. Attention to this requires a rigorous and vigorous critical evaluation of the emphasis on the educational focus of diocesan curriculum frameworks. The analysis should be critiqued in the light of a relook at the relevant documents of the Congregation for Catholic Education and scholarly perspectives on faith in the universal (Fowler, 1995; 1991; 1981) and / or secular (Dantley, 2005). An audit of current curriculum frameworks pertaining to classroom religious education in Catholic schools should be undertaken to identify the proportion devoted to attending to the faith dimension. A hit and miss approach similar to that conveyed by Purnell (1985) is an abrogation of responsibility to fulfil the mandate of the Congregation for Catholic Education which is at the service of the Church's mission (Second Vatican Council, 1964). Closer attention to the faith dimension in classroom religious education may require a rethink and reconstruction of many diocesan curriculum framework documents. It would also require some creative thinking about appropriate classroom strategies that give suitable attention to incorporating the faith dimension in classroom religious education. However, this is not the domain of this paper but rather a recommendation for future consideration and further research.

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