

THE ISSUE OF TRANSCENDENCE IN STUDIES OF RELIGION

Arguably one of the most influential texts that formed the basis for the study of religions in Australian schools is *When Religion Goes to School* (1982) by Basil Moore and Norman Habel. This work drew in part upon an earlier Australian work, Gerard Rummery's *Catechesis and Religious Education in a Pluralist Society* (1975), which began as a doctoral thesis under the supervision of Ninian Smart. Smart was at that time Professor of Religion Studies at Lancaster University and known for his dimensional approach to the objective study of world religions. Rummery's discussion on "teaching about religion" and "education in religion" amongst other issues continued in Moore and Habel's text. In this paper, I wish to further this discussion and begin by revisiting the typological approach to the study of religion as outlined in *When Religion Goes to School*.

Moore and Habel's work begins with an outline of three conditioning contexts, which they argue determines the framework for any possible curriculum approach to the study of religion in Australian schools. Firstly, from Moore and Habel's perspective, a religion studies program needs "to be consistent with western patterns of thought" because we are "heirs of the Enlightenment and its child, modern scientific thought", and this involves "certain categories of thinking and ways of organising the world" (Moore and Habel, 1982, p. 3). Secondly, a religion studies program needs to acknowledge "the social fact that Christianity ... will either consciously or unconsciously play a major role in informing their judgements, at least initially, of what is to count as a religion" (p. 4). And thirdly, a Religion Studies program needs to be "practical": "Erudite philosophical, sociological, psychological, or research definitions will not necessarily meet our specific requirements for the classroom". (p. 4). They consider, for instance, that an "existential definition" of religion may be "helpful" for the "deeply troubled person" but it is not "practical" in the classroom and is thus excluded (p. 4). In summary, Moore and Habel write:

Thus the context in this book in which we ask 'what is religion?' is the western world where Christianity provides us with our dominant paradigm. And more specifically, we want to know what 'religion' means when it 'goes to school' in our western world (p.4).

Following this line of thinking, Moore and Habel

chose to avoid any particular definition of religion but rather to focus on a typological approach that "emphasises the generic types of religions and religious phenomena". It is these types and phenomena, which they consider students will most probably encounter, who share in a western consciousness and live in a historically Christian culture (p. 8). Their eight "basic categories of religious phenomena": beliefs, religious experience, sacred stories, sacred texts, ritual acts, social structure, religious ethics and sacred symbols read like parts of a religious anatomy, similar in kind to Smart's dimensions. This type of approach is essentially scientific – the "heirs of the Enlightenment" approach – and like science it is orientated towards description and quantitative information. The educational idea behind this approach is that once these categories are firmly established in the minds of students, then students can use them like a type of mental grid that can be placed on other world religions and thus create a certain defined body of information and understanding.

Although the use of Moore and Habel's typological approach as a comparative instrument in the studies of religion is supportable, albeit from within the specified contexts outlined, its effectiveness could be further enhanced through modification. Some postmodern theorists may say that comparing religions exhibits intellectual imperialism, universalism, anti-contextualism and so forth. But comparing religions can be supported on certain grounds. As Jonathan Smith outlines, "the process of comparison is a fundamental characteristic of human intelligence ... the comparison, the bringing together of two or more objects for the purpose of noting either similarity or dissimilarity, is the omnipresent substructure of human thought" (Patton & Ray, 2000, p. 77).

However, as Smith also makes clear "as practiced by scholarship [in the field of the human sciences], comparison has been chiefly an affair of the recollection of similarity. The chief explanation for the significance of comparison has been continuity ... The issue of difference has been all but forgotten" (pp. 25-26). And, it could be added, if the dissimilarity in religions is measured solely against the Christian tradition, as in the case of Moore and Habel's typological approach, then what is documented as different amongst religions will be limited in scope, if not distorted. This point, however, cannot be pressed too far for every judgement, whether we like it or not, is culturally

bound in some form or other. But, nevertheless, we still need to be aware of this fact and try to make our judgements as unbiased as possible.

Another issue of the typological approach that needs to be considered is the inevitable distortion that occurs when religious phenomena from unhistorically related religious traditions are compared. To compare is to abstract. It is to artificially "lift" from a supportive cultural matrix a phenomenon that can only make sense in its historical context. And then to attempt to compare such unrelated "specimens" against each other can only lead to a double case of artificiality.

To counter these issues – and this is where my suggested modification of Moore and Habel's typological approach begins – religion studies in schools needs to examine more closely the unique origin, in its particular cultural-historical context, of each tradition being studied. And to use in this study, as far as possible, direct and authenticated source material from that tradition. There is certainly no shortage of excellent translations to call upon in this regard. In Moore and Habel's approach each of the eight phenomena is given equal significance as expressions of the sacred. I would argue that the initial generating experience or the unique origin from which a religious tradition develops should be the beginning point of any study of world religions. This is not listed as one of Moore and Habel's phenomenon, but is common to all religions. Not only does this show to students, from the outset, the inherent and positive differences in religious traditions but it also highlights the fact that without an understanding of a religion's initial generating experience such a thing as a *tradition* could not exist. Furthermore, it points to the fact that it is only in reference to a beginning point that the development of a tradition's so called religious phenomena can make any possible sense. This approach, however, needs to take heed of Ninian Smart's plea that "the history of religion must be more than chronicling of events ... it must be an attempt to enter into the meaning of those events ... we must penetrate beyond what is publicly observable".

Smart outlines his own version of where religion studies should begin when he writes, "we need to come to an intelligent understanding of what a religion is ... so that a cogent educational plan can be evolved" (Smart & Horder, 1975, p. 47). This is not dissimilar to this paper's line of argument, but neither Smart nor Moore and Habel supply this "intelligent understanding of what a religion is". Sealey, in his following critique of Smart's dimensional approach could equally be referring to Moore and Habel's eight "basic categories of religious phenomena":

We cannot too lightly overlook the ambiguities built into the six dimensional model [of Smart's nor of Moore and Habel's eight categories]. We should now be aware, for example, that not all rituals, morality, organisations, doctrines and so on are necessarily religious and may be, at best, peripheral issues for the teacher of religion. What of these dimensions a teacher wishes to teach must be referred, with a certain amount of critical consideration, to the concept 'transcendence' (Sealey, 1985, p. 19).

In examining the issue of transcendence and how it may be incorporated in a typological approach to the study of world religions, I am indebted to the Buddhist scholar Douglas Fox and in particular his work, *The Vagrant Lotus: An Introduction to Buddhist Philosophy*. What is useful to our present needs is Fox's distinction between religion and philosophy. He writes that during the course of history

A man (*sic*) or group of men profess to have discovered a truth so compelling and inclusive that it demands the total loyalty of our hearts and minds. It has been found not by a simple process of rationality alone, but by the bursting in upon men of an understanding for which our ordinary modes of thinking are not adequate. It is a truth that is somehow transcendent (beyond the range of our daily experience) yet which encloses us in a value or purpose or a meaning that transforms us, makes us "whole," and fulfils perfectly the longing for meaning and completeness. The truth that has been immediately encountered may be called God or Void or Being or the Absolute or a hundred other names; it may be discussed in personal or impersonal terms, but it will certainly be felt to be a true foundation for adequate living and thinking. There will be a sense of having "leaped" to understanding; or having broken through (or having been delivered from) a bondage composed of commonsense, conventional logic, and "worldly enslavement". (Fox, 1973, pp. 51-52)

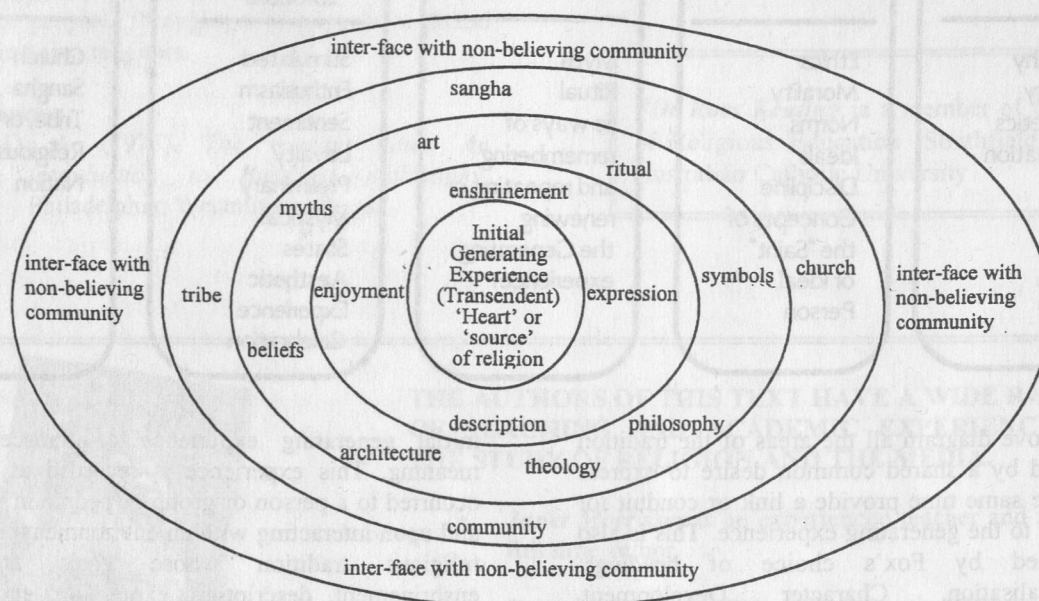
Later, Fox elaborates further that this experience of "truth" engenders a personal commitment beyond that which a mere philosophy can arouse. For its "object of commitment is not an idea or a system of ideas but something which eludes adequate verbalisation, so that even words as 'God' or 'Truth' are not proper designations for it" (p. 52). Fox calls this shocking experience a "pristine sense of the Transcendent" and for him it is the

“generating experience” around which a [religious] tradition grows whose purpose is the “enshrinement, description, expression, enjoyment and perpetuation of the original experience itself” (p. 52). From this perspective the common noun, religion, meaning to reconnect with some original generating experience makes sense.

For Moore and Habel’s intended audience who are “heirs of the Enlightenment and its child, modern scientific thought” the idea of an experience of transcendence (which may be experienced as immanent or within a person) is outside their purview for it runs counter to or is beyond their usual way of viewing the world. And yet, it could be argued that Fox does present an accurate, and therefore a scientifically sound, acknowledgement

of the essential mystery that lies at the heart of religions from the standpoint of the religions themselves. Indeed, not to include transcendence in religion studies would be like discussing the formation of clouds in a science class yet avoiding mentioning the fact that they float in a mysterious empty space without which the clouds would not exist.

So instead of presenting to students a static picture of a religious tradition as a conglomeration of ahistorical phenomena, the concept of transcendence as the source and dynamism behind religious manifestations would be presented. And in this way the beginning of an element of religious “logic” is introduced into religion studies. This can be represented diagrammatically as follows.

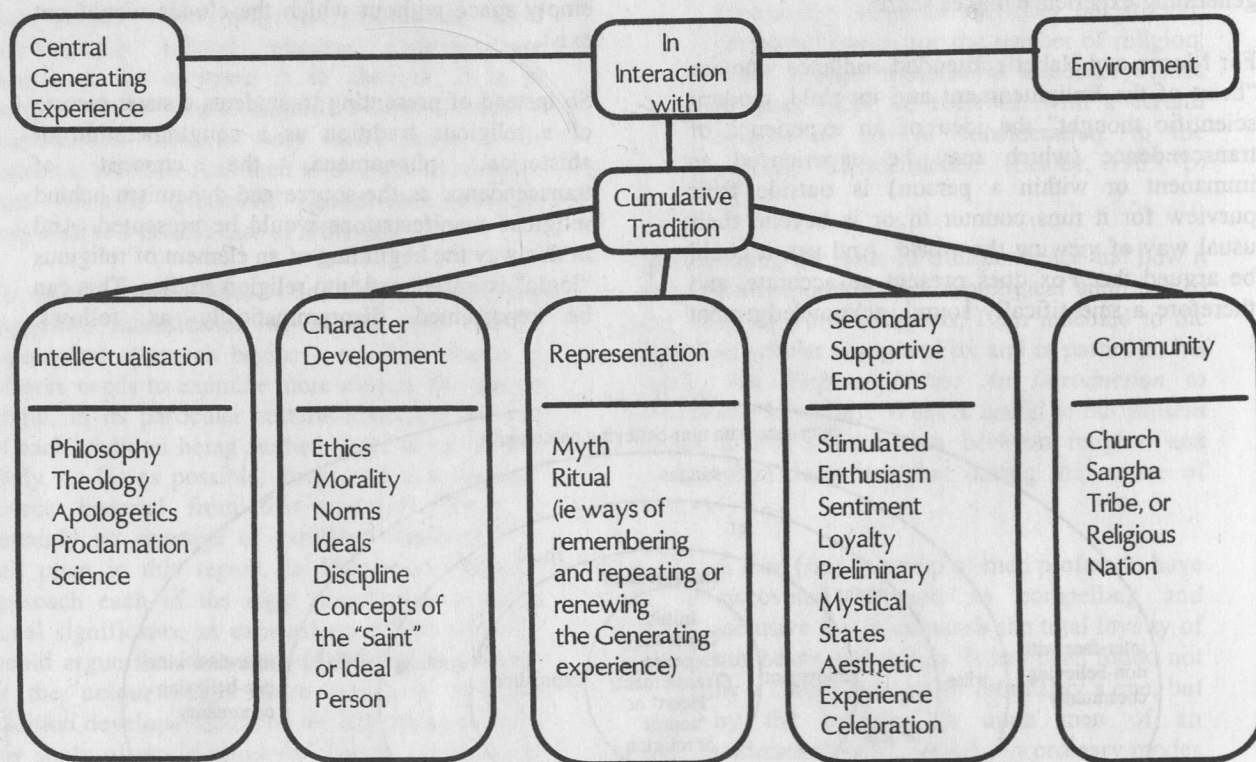


In the above diagram, the first circle of “logical” development extending from the initial generating experience indicates the nearly instinctive, human response to a profoundly felt experience of momentous value. The second circle developing from this represents the human attempt to more concretely capture this experience as an artist tries to express the depth of an initial moment of inspiration in his or her work. The third circle indicates the establishment of a religious community of people who find their identity in this concrete expression of the previous circle and through which they make contact with the original generating experience. And the last circle indicates the placement of that community of followers in a context of people who don’t share their same religious identification. This alternative typological picture for religion studies presents religions as having an organic life of their own.

Fox also elaborates upon the actual development of a religious tradition after the initial generating experience has occurred. He sees it start as a sort of sub-culture that, with time, modifies the dominant culture to become a way of life during a certain historical period: pre-modern Islam and medieval Christianity are two examples of this occurring. He then sees it developing various attributes to fill its role as defender and endorser of the newly established social order. Some commentators would add that the tradition pays a price for its cultural dominance, for inevitably at this point splinter groups form and break away from it in an attempt to re-align themselves with the all-but-forgotten purity of the initial generating experience of its origin. In other cases, the tradition may simply develop into an end in itself and loses sight totally of its initial generating experience.

In the important beginning stage of the development of a religious tradition, represented by circle two above, the intention of early followers appears to be to find concrete ways and means of linking themselves more fully and simply with the

initial generating experience. Fox, using the following diagram, shows this intention as manifesting on all possible levels of human responsiveness:



In the above diagram all the areas of the tradition are linked by a shared common desire to express and at the same time provide a link or conduit for followers to the generating experience. This is also exemplified by Fox's choice of headings: Intellectualisation, Character Development, Representation, Secondary Supportive Emotions and Community, which suggest this linking in terms of human involvement. The area of Secondary Supportive Emotion is an interesting inclusion. Under this heading is included such things as the aesthetic mood of the Zen tea ceremony; the stimulated enthusiasm of an American Protestant Revival Meeting; also Buddhist trance states which are cultivated as part of their religious practice. This is a very important area to have listed for it tends to be overlooked in religion studies programs. It also highlights the fact that the generating experience is much more than an emotional feeling. And, it needs to be also noted at this point that once this "cumulative tradition" as Fox calls it becomes firmly established it provides "the vehicle upon which the generating experience can move across time and space" (Fox, 1973, p. 59).

Following on from this discussion, religion could be defined as being that which springs from an

initial generating experience of transcendental meaning. This experience is recorded as having occurred to a person or group of people in the past and upon interacting with an environment created a religious tradition whose goals are the enshrinement, description, expression, enjoyment and perpetuation of the original experience itself. And while this definition of religion may seem clumsy, it is an attempt to place the transcendent at its centre and give some sense or logic to the study of world religions. Other approaches to religion studies of a typological model that neglect the idea of transcendence can only give students a scientific look at religion and in so doing neglect to show that religion has its own inherent meaning.

What is needed in religion studies is a definition of religion that encourages students to seek depth and not just broaden religious content as well as a typological approach that helps them to become aware that religious traditions have an organic life and logic of their own that makes sense. One obvious task which would allow this sort of depth and logic to occur is for students to examine how a particular religious tradition, in a particular place and time in history attempted to express, or perhaps ignore, its initial generating experience. This task could even be carried out within the same tradition

at different places and times in history and so yield useful material for comparison of an inherently religious nature. Alternatively, students could undertake tasks of a more specific focus without losing sight of the total picture of a religious tradition. For example, the traditional Hindu Yoga system could be studied under Character Development and seen as one way followers of that tradition attempt to obtain liberation or union with the initial generating experience of their religion. In Christianity, the work of Teilhard de Chardin could be studied under Intellectualisation, as an attempt to understand science in the context of the initial generating experience of Christianity.

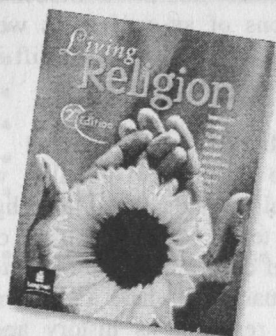
In conclusion, the idea of transcendence needs to be the defining element in religion studies for it helps students make sense of religions, their developmental patterns, and why most of the world's peoples, throughout history, have found value in being religious.

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The new edition of *Living Religion* has been rewritten and reorganised to address the specific changes in content and emphasis in the revised (1999) New South Wales HSC Studies of Religion Syllabus. The emphasis remains on 'living religion' — how the major world religious traditions and the beliefs and spirituality of Aboriginal Australians are lived out in the day-to-day life of multicultural, multi-faith Australia of the twenty-first century.

THE AUTHORS OF THIS TEXT HAVE A WIDE RANGE OF TEACHING AND ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND THE MEDIA.

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