

## THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PEDAGOGIES IN AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

### Introduction

All teachers have a pedagogy, or theory of teaching whether they articulate it or not. At times it is possible for a whole school or school system to have the same pedagogy or theory of education. When this happens most of the stakeholders, teachers, parents, executives, students and others do not talk about theory. Usually they do not even think about it. It operates behind their backs, as Paul Ricoeur observes.

But in times of change or when a powerful theory interrupts from either outside or inside, awareness of theory becomes vital.

For one hundred years one theory underpinned religious education in Catholic schools in Australia. It was a theory that presumed that knowledge is an object to be passed on from generation to generation within a single culture. Changes in Australia and in the church have so severely interrupted that theory that it can no longer exist as it was or support religious education as it did. To address the changes we need a different pedagogy that is intercultural and has a more subjective view of knowledge.

After describing the pedagogy that prevailed in Australian Catholic school religious education this article describes a pedagogy that takes account of a pluralist society and a church of many cultures.

### Pedagogues and Pedagogy

My first memory of the word 'pedagogue' is from an illustration in *Newnes Pictorial Knowledge*, a children's encyclopedia my father bought us when I was seven, over fifty years ago. In one of the volumes there was a drawing of a child in ancient Greece sitting at his lessons with a pedagogue (*paidagogos* – a slave) sitting cross-legged behind him. The pedagogue had a stick in his hand and his task was to hit the boy on the head or shoulders should he start going to sleep or in any other way wander from his studies.

The stick in his hand did not surprise me. At the school I was attending, and in my home, corporal punishment was taken for granted. At school it was the main form of discipline. Also taken for granted was an approach to education that regarded knowledge as complete, a collection of things that adults, especially teachers, knew and passed down and that it was our task to acquire. When we had done so, it was presumed, we would be educated. I

did not question any of this. I just tried to learn it all, sometimes because I found it interesting, often enough because I feared the stick.

Some of the things I learnt then have stayed in my head: 'London on the Thames, capital, worldwide trade. Liverpool on the Mersey River, cottonport', is just one garbled piece of trivia from a cram sheet that helped me top Social Studies in year six and that still leaps into my head at the oddest of moments. In those days, by age eleven, I also knew the whole of the *Catechism of Christian Doctrine Adapted for Australia by the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenary Councils*, the 'Green Catechism', off by heart though I understood nearly none of it. I also topped Christian Doctrine.

The pedagogues of my childhood are all now long retired from school and many have died. Their pedagogy has not died entirely alas, though now it has to contend with more useful approaches to knowledge and learning.

The English religious educator Michael Grimmitt defines pedagogy in two ways. It might be 'a theory of teaching and learning encompassing aims, curriculum, content and methodology,' or 'a science of teaching and learning embodying both curriculum and methodology'. Either way, he says, the fundamental concern of pedagogy is 'to relate the process of teaching to that of learning on the part of the child' (Grimmitt, 2000, p. 17).

Grimmitt, in *Pedagogies of Religious Education* (2000) is interested in the assumptions and consequent difficulties when religion and education are brought into relationship in the context of a secular educational system in Britain. I am interested in some assumptions and consequent difficulties when religion and education are brought into relationship in a Catholic education system in Australia.

### Pedagogy in Catholic Schools

Catholic schools of one kind or another have existed in Australia since 1826. For a long time they were taught mostly by Catholic lay folk. Then for about sixty years until the 1970s the schools were staffed mainly by nuns and brothers. Now Australia's thirty six thousand teachers in Catholic schools are almost all lay folk again. They are not lay *teachers*, of course. They are highly professional.

Until about 1970 the theory of teaching and learning in religious education in Catholic schools could be quickly ascertained by looking at the name the subject was given. It was called 'Christian Doctrine'. The theory of teaching was basically a teacher-learner model employing a reproductive hermeneutic that presumed, as my teachers did that they had a completed body of knowledge that was to be handed down to the young so that they could practise what it demanded and eventually some of them would pass it on to the next generation of the young.

Knowledge was like a rugby league football; the halfback took it from the scrum and threw it to the five-eighth. He passed it to the inside centre who passed it to the outside centre who passed it to the wing who gave it to the full back backing up who scored in the corner. One of my favourite teachers in secondary school described most things in sporting terms. Knowledge was an object, it was objective, and it was handed on unchanged. It was the same knowledge passed from one to the other. Or so the theory-in-action went.

One of my least favourite teachers ever, a man terrified of change I later realised, tried to explain change to our Leaving Certificate class. It was 1960 and there were whispers in the church that religion could change. He told us that in fact nothing changed. It was just that the church brought out from her treasure chest new things and old, but whatever they were they had been there all the time. The pope was using his judgement to decide when we needed or could cope with them. The example this teacher used was the recently declared dogma of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary into heaven. There was no interpretation or development of doctrine here.

At the time adult religious education embraced the same pedagogy. Some priests used the school *Green Catechism* as the basis of their Sunday sermons. The lay folk were told what they were to do and to believe. Knowledge was an object to be passed on. The famous radio priest, Father Leslie Rumble came on Station 2SM on Sunday nights and gave 'the answer' to listeners' questions. These were published in various volumes of *Radio Replies* and were quoted in response to any doubters or to the unsure.

In 1958 Frank Sheed wrote a small book *Theology for Beginners*. The company that he and his wife Maisie Ward had founded, Sheed and Ward, published it in London. By 1960 the book was into its fourth impression. I read it as a seventeen year old in 1962. Sheed's aim was to nourish ordinary Catholic lay folk with theology. In his first chapter he asks the question, 'Why study theology?' His

answer, directed toward the laity is, 'we must come to an understanding of the great dogmas, so that we know them in themselves and in their power to nourish.' Sheed's book is full of intelligent, thoughtful writing. He sounds like a good teacher. He tells the story of his own early attempts to learn theology when lay people were not allowed to study it in the Australian Catholic church. But, like my earlier teachers Sheed presumes that knowledge is static and that education is learning about something. There is no hint here of critical thinking or of interpretation.

My teachers and Frank Sheed taught the way they did because at that time there was one principal discourse of meaning in the Catholic church in Australia. It was a discourse of meaning that presumed that the essential preservation of intended meaning in the interpretive event is a real possibility (Young, 1996, p. 25). My teachers presumed that the message given is also the message received. The listener is a receiver or receptacle. The listener hopefully 'understands' what is heard but understanding here means saying yes to the teacher's interpretation. This presumption was based on a view of understanding that believes that agency is never a problem; that the listener has no effect on what she understands, that meanings merely describe reality rather than create it. It presumes that authority is based on absolute truth and that discourse merely fine-tunes it.

This view of understanding believes that when there is doubt about the meaning of a text there is always only one best answer to the conundrum. In this case the answer always comes from the highest authority. In religion this is ultimately the pope.

The discourse of meaning in the church at the time was ideological in that it was a system of images and symbols that preserved the identity of the church and its members against external or internal threats (White, 1986, p. 270). It was also ideological in the sense that it presumed a fixed view of meaning.

Religious education at this time was really a matter of transmitting a complete tradition to essentially similar people. Intergenerational differences in religion were not marked and were presumed to be of little significance. Intercultural differences were not noticed either. The view of meaning as fixed which was presented to young and old alike was devoid of either ambiguity or plurality.

### **Ambiguity and Plurality**

Ambiguity is the strange mixture of great good and frightening evil that human history reveals and that is contained to some extent in every classic text that



is part of our discourse of meaning (Tracy, 1986, p. 70). The Bible is full of ambiguity as is Shakespeare. So by the way are the Harry Potter books, which is why they frighten Christian fundamentalists but are eagerly read by children.

Plurality is the awareness that 'there is no release for any of us from the conflict of interpretations if we are to understand at all' (Tracy, 1986, p. 114). All languages and forms of life have an infinite number of interpretations, as Ludwig Wittgenstein pointed out. This includes the languages and forms of life that constitute Catholicism.

Martin Heidegger added to Wittgenstein's observation the insight that every disclosure is at the same time a disclosure and a concealment, since being always both reveals and withdraws itself in every manifestation (Tracy, 1986, p. 51). When I say, 'My love is like a red, red rose,' I tell you some truth but I also tell you a lie. When Jesus says, 'The Father and I are one', he reveals something and at the same time conceals something.

Together Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and the tradition from which they are drawing these concepts have affected our understanding of interpretation as both active and passive. Any active understanding of language has plural possibilities. All understanding is historical; even the best interpretation is the best *for now* (Tracy, 1986, p. 51). What the best current understanding is may not always be best because all the understandings have not yet been thought of, and because the contexts in which understanding occurs are constantly changing.

### **A Catholic Way of Living**

Australian life, like all life has always been full of ambiguity no matter how much literalists try to explain it away. If there were no ambiguity there could be no faith. But before 1965 Australia was not so much a pluralist society as one in which Catholics saw themselves as the disadvantaged who needed to maintain themselves against the odds and over against those in the community who were not Catholic. Protestants and others conspired in this. There was enough anti-Catholicism to support the Catholic desire to be over and against society. There was also a degree of social separation of Catholics and non-Catholics. For example, most Catholics were working class. Catholicism was a class thing as well as a Christian way of living.

In this social climate Catholics were fairly successful at passing on one Catholic way of being. They could pass on a particular way of living and believing, a particular view of reality from one generation to the next. This passing on of one way of living was a form of reality-accentuation. The

main means Catholics used was sending all Catholic children to Catholic schools. Another was the particular training of the teachers who were going to staff the schools. This training occurred in the novitiates, religious order teaching colleges, and seminaries that Catholic religious orders conducted in Australia up until the 1970s. Young Catholics training to be nuns, brothers or priests were sent away from the normal society to be 'formed'. These 'formed' teachers then moved into the schools to be part of the reality-accentuation technique that was Catholic primary and secondary education in Australia in the period from the early twentieth century until about 1970.

After the Second World War when Catholic migrants were coming from places other than Ireland and when the strain on Catholic schools exceeded their ability to cope even with the established Catholic population, the Catholic school's role as the main place of the kind of reality-accentuation they had been built for came under unbearable pressure. Then the old way of training teachers for Catholic schools became less and less possible too.

Now the old way of training teachers for Catholic schools is clearly impossible because there are over thirty thousand teachers in Catholic schools, because Catholics no longer enter religious life or seminaries in significant numbers, and because Australian society is not as it was. Catholics are not as they were. The old kind of reality-accentuation needed a strong culture or sub-culture to support it and this no longer exists. Australia is a plurality and so is the Australian Catholic church.

### **The Pedagogue in Context**

Now we need pedagogies that fit the present context. We need to discuss theory, as it is no longer desirable to have it acting behind our backs.

John Dewey, speaking of 'functional democracy', an ideal he develops in *Democracy and Education* (1916) says that we need to develop a theory of education for democracies which 'sees in knowledge the method by which one experience is made available in giving direction and meaning to another' (Dewey, 1916, p. 344).

In *Dei Verbum*, *The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, the fathers of Vatican II move toward just such a theory of education when they say that scripture has to be interpreted. In scripture, they assure us:

Truth is proposed and expressed in a variety of ways, depending on whether its form is that of prophecy, poetry, or some other type of speech. The interpreter must

investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances as he used contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture (Abbott, 1965, DV #120).

Here the fathers are acknowledging agency. They are acknowledging that context made a difference when the material was written and recorded, and it makes a difference when it is heard or read. The reader or hearer is an interpreter who has to be just as aware of his or her own particular circumstances and the situation of this time and culture. Following *Dei Verbum* it is part of a Catholic's brief to discover the ideological nature of our belief systems, to promote distortion-free communication, to penetrate false consciousness, and to accomplish a liberating consensus (Gallagher, 1996, p. 11).

We have to do this because we live in a pluralist society in Australia. We are pluralists. Even within the church we are pluralists. Catholics interpret as humans interpret and there are many ways to be orthodox and Catholic. Of course it is a bounded pluralism. There are beliefs and actions and attitudes that one cannot hold or do and still claim to be Catholic. But the boundaries are quite wide. The luxury of uniformity that came with working class cohesion, underdog status, immigrant culture, and a late Tridentine church is no longer ours. We need pedagogies for a pluralist church.

Michael Grimmitt, as has been said above, notes that whatever definition of pedagogy we choose, the point is that it has 'to relate the process of teaching to that of learning on the part of the child'. We need pedagogies that address how children, adolescents and adults learn in the culture we live in. The culture we live in is a culture of many sub-cultures. We need a pedagogy of interpretation.

### **A Pedagogy for Now**

The Australian educator Robert Young argues that the task of those who think about education is to address the spiritual situation of their age, to address 'the overarching meanings, goals and values for both persons and communities and the actual condition of our attainment or non-attainment of these' (Young 1996, p. 168). Religious education has always had as its aim addressing the spiritual situation of the age.

Our age is one of plurality in which religious education has to address the spiritual situation of parents, students and teachers and help them solve the problem of their own overarching meaning, goals and values both as individuals and as members of society and of the church. Otherwise it

just alienates parents, teachers and students from the life-giving possibilities of religion.

If Catholicism is to contribute to the overarching meanings, goals and values of students and teachers in Catholic schools, Catholicism and the people it serves have to learn from each other. This kind of approach to religious education offers the possibility of appealing to all those in Catholic schools even those who are not Catholic or Christian because it seeks to support a vision of shared knowledge, shared spirituality, and the general good of the whole universe. That is, it is in no way sectarian or insular. It is constantly open to the condition of this time and place (Young, 1996, p. 169). It is based on the idea of the shared good which does not presume that Catholicism in the future will look the same as it does now because the shared good, and the Holy Spirit might lead it somewhere else.

To achieve these ends we need a pedagogy based on a theory of intercultural communication.

If we want to have a pedagogy based on intercultural communication there are three attitudes we have to avoid, according to Young (Young, 1996, p. 168). One is the 'totalising' perspective that thinks all of social life is conditioned by one set of influences; for example economics or national efficiency. In the church *uniformity*, or one person or group's view of what it means to be Catholic, could become a totalising perspective just as survival or identity might.

The second condition that destroys intercultural learning is where cultures square off against each other with each having no intention of learning from the other. In western countries the danger is that Islam and Christianity will do this. Churches are just as prone to this condition as any other institution, though there is lots of evidence in Australia that Catholic schools make strong efforts to avoid this danger. The experience we have long had of knowing that Catholics can be from any culture or any land, combined with a hunger for social justice have stood us in good stead on this point. The bigger danger within the church is the deeply divisive squaring off between the different groups who think they represent the only true way of being Catholic.

Young identifies a third condition that denies the possibility of intercultural learning. He calls it atomism (Young 1996, p. 168). Atomism sees everything as a *commodity* so that in *all* spheres of life we turn to advertising to make markets for products, including those in which we define the value of life and life-values (Young 1996, p. 169). Religions that use advertising are in danger of



atomism if they see what they are doing as something to sell, or something to force on everyone else. In this situation success can depend on who has the biggest advertising budget and the best access to propaganda, and so the particular vision of different cultures is lost.

Atomism is the destruction of all cultures for the sake of one narrow culture. This individualisation of culture is the destruction of culture because it removes it from what keeps it alive. Real culture can be sustained only by a vital, diverse way of life (Young, 1996, p. 170). This is why the preservation of culture and community is such a critical issue for religious educators. Atomism reduces schooling to consumer demand or imposed ideology, not the common good and so it becomes just another business where the connection between schooling, culture and democratic citizenship is broken (Young, 1996, p. 170).

Consumer demand is measured by product surveys and profitability charts, and often enough it is manufactured by monopolies that limit our choice. It is a numbers game. The common good is much harder to gauge and is discovered only by the kind of discernment that involves interpretation of our cultural classics, scripture and tradition in the case of Catholic education, as well as profound listening and conversation in which all Catholics of all ages and cultures are involved. Gauging the common good requires intercultural learning.

### Encouragers of True Learning

Young identifies three conditions that make intercultural learning possible. Each of them presumes the ability both to acknowledge and to welcome difference. The first condition is a commitment to the notion of shared good.

What we need in Catholic education and in the church is a concept of the shared good that is enough to sustain common faithfulness and which extends to the good *we all derive* from the presence in our society of culturally diverse groups (Young, 1996, p. 170). This is a pedagogical approach in religious education that will ensure the flourishing of Catholic schools because true education is about introducing teachers, parents and students into the search for an understanding of the possibility of a shared life. It abhors the oppression of individuals or minorities. It is not simply a life defined by the absence of oppression, but a life defined positively, in terms of possible goods, including the welfare of the community, cultural diversity, and the good of the individual (Young 1996, p. 171).

This kind of pedagogy presumes that education is in part the solving of the problem of the individual in the public domain. It is solving the problem of

the individual in society and of the individual Catholic in the whole church. In Catholic education this approach grows out of the Vatican II *Declaration on Religious Freedom* which declares, "The children of God who receive freedom as a gift from their Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit, assert it within the church as well as within the world, always for the sake of the world and the Church ." (Abbott, 1965, p. 674).

This kind of education occurs when the church learns in much the way that individuals do by understanding the possibility of a shared life that nourishes the individual, the cultural diversity within the church, and the wider community of which the church is part. This is an example of education as "participation in an unfinished universe" that can take place only in a milieu of freedom to be oneself in community though here it is an example of religious education as "participation in an *unfinished Church*".

It is what John XXIII described in *Pacem in Terris* in 1963 (before Catholics became aware of the need for inclusive language in the church!):

The dignity of the human person requires that a man should act on his own judgment and with his own freedom. Wherefore in community life there is good reason why it should be chiefly on his own deliberate initiative that a man should exercise his rights, fulfill his duties, and co-operate with others in the endless variety of necessary social tasks.

### Conclusion

When Australian Catholic schools could fairly claim to have one culture they might also have reasonably embraced a theory of teaching and learning that emphasised the community rather than the individual. When they saw themselves as oppressed by the predominant culture they might have been excused for teaching as if knowledge is an object. This was after all a common pedagogical approach in the rest of education in Australia at the time.

Neither of these conditions, a mono-cultural church or a mono-cultural Australian society any longer exists. Catholic religious education needs a pedagogy that offers the possibility of a way of educating where each culture is respected and protected in the dialogue with other cultures as they change toward a place of inculturation where, in the case of Catholicism, a better local church emerges.

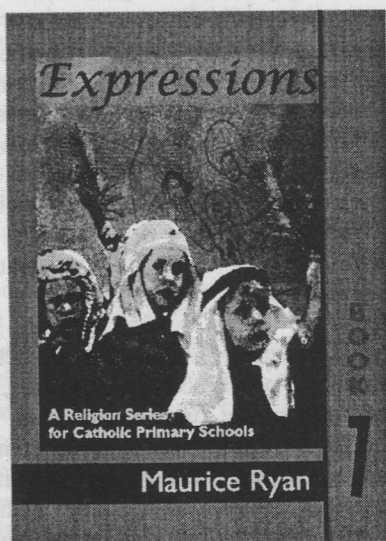
This local church will never be complete though. Dewey insisted that we are all participants in an unfinished universe. It is in fact an unfinishable

universe and within it there is this unfinished church that Catholic educators, living in the Spirit are in the process of developing, as each generation is educated.

## References

- Abbot, W. M. (1965). *The documents of Vatican II*. London: Geoffrey Chapman.
- Berger, P., & Luckmann, L. (1991) *The social construction of reality*. Ringwood: Penguin.
- Campion, E. (1988). *Australian Catholics*. Melbourne: Viking Books.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York: Free Press.
- English, G. (1999). *Participants in an unfinished church*. Doctoral thesis, Faculty of Education: University of Sydney.
- Fogarty, R. (1959). *Catholic education in Australia 1806-1950*. Melbourne University Press.
- Gallagher, S. (1992). *Hermeneutics and education*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Goffman, E. (1984). *Asylums: essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Grimmitt, M. (2000). *Pedagogies in religious education*, Essex: McCrimmon.
- Heaps, J. (1998). *A love that dares to question: A bishop challenges his church*. Melbourne: Aurora.
- Klemm, D.E. (1983). *The hermeneutical theory of Paul Ricoeur*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.
- O'Farrell, P. (1977). *The Catholic church and community in Australia: a history*. Melbourne: Nelson.
- Rummery, R. M. (1975). *Catechesis and religious education in a pluralist society*. Sydney: E. J. Dwyer.
- Schreiter, R. J. (1993). *Constructing local theologies*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Tracy, D. (1986). *Plurality and ambiguity: Hermeneutics, religion and hope*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- White, E. G. (1986). *Itineraries of meaning: Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic of the idea of the sacred*. PhD thesis. Department of Religious Studies, University of Sydney.
- Young, R. E. (1990). *A critical theory of education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Young, R. E. (1992). *Critical theory and classroom talk*. Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.
- Young, R. E. (1996). *Intercultural communication: Pragmatics, genealogy deconstruction*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

**\*Dr Graham English** is Senior Lecturer in the School of Religious Education at Mount Saint Mary Campus of Australian Catholic University.



**SOCIAL SCIENCE PRESS  
AUSTRALIA**

The *Expressions* series comprises seven graded resource books that focus on topics commonly addressed in Australian Catholic primary school religion programs. Each book provides teachers with blackline masters, teaching ideas, related internet resources and background commentary on each topic. In addition, generic teaching approaches are described that can be applied to the design and presentation of any religion topic. Each book also contains materials to assist teachers in the implementation of their classroom religion programs: assessment schedules, planning guides, learning centres and contracts, and advice on constructing curriculum materials. These books are designed to provide teachers with a comprehensive range of resources for the planning, teaching and assessment of the classroom religion program. Contributors to this series are all experienced classroom religion teachers who provide practical applications of contemporary theory in religious education.