

# **“Isn’t there a town named after him?” Content Knowledge and Teacher Training in Religious Education**

This paper examines the need for content knowledge as a foundation for teacher training in religious education. It argues that in educational models of religious education, where the emphasis is on a strongly cognitive approach, either in secular or denominational contexts, significant demands are made on teachers. Without adequate content knowledge teachers find it difficult to teach in an engaging and informed way. Two illustrative Canadian examples are provided, which highlight the cognitive demands of religion courses in both Catholic and secular schools. In light of this some recommendations are made as how best to match the requirements of the formal curriculum with the content knowledge of teachers.

**Key words:** *Teacher training, religious education, content knowledge*

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This paper examines the need for content knowledge as a foundation for teacher training in religious education. It argues that in educational models of religious education, where the emphasis is on a strongly cognitive approach, either in secular or denominational contexts, significant demands are made on teachers. Without adequate content knowledge teachers find it difficult to teach in an engaging and informed way. Two illustrative Canadian examples are provided, which highlight the cognitive demands of religion courses in both Catholic and secular schools. In light of this some recommendations are made as how best to match the requirements of the formal curriculum with the content knowledge of teachers.

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## **The cultural context for religious education teacher training**

Before explicitly considering the issue of content knowledge and teacher training in religious education some brief comments about the current cultural context are appropriate. This arises out of a conviction that educational discourse occurs in a particular social reality and an acknowledgment of this strengthens subsequent analysis. In the later part of the paper some more specific contextualization of Canadian Catholic schools and education in Quebec will be presented. By way of introduction here, however, some general comments on the social experience of students entering teacher training programs in religion will be made.

One way of examining contemporary culture, which has clear implications for the discussion of the content knowledge of new religion teachers, is Modified Secularization Theory, (MST). This arises from a broad sociological literature on the place of religion in culture (Rymarz, 2010). This theory offers a contextualization of the culture which has become increasingly dominant in the experiential world of present and future religion teachers. From the secularization perspective the journey of younger adults is one that leads them inextricably away from what the religious tradition regards as being of fundamental importance. This is a religious worldview where the believer is part of a worshiping community, shares in and expresses communal beliefs, is in relationship with a personal God and where beliefs have sustaining and directive force. Secularisation sees the disengagement of younger adults from a religious worldview as a continuing, albeit gradual, process (Lambert, 2005). This does not eliminate religion from discourse but transforms it to a highly ameliorated, idiosyncratic form. In this view many younger adults are moving ever more away from a religious worldview to a highly personalized, eclectic range of beliefs that although hard to categorize share at least one unifying characteristic, that is, they are not life shaping and are indeed relatively inconsequential (Voas and Crockett 2005). Mason and his colleagues (2007, 56) comment that many of these beliefs would be more accurately characterized as “inconsequential opinions on matters religious”, Rather than engaging in a formative and purposeful spiritual quest many younger adults are becoming increasingly secularised and are unlikely to reconnect with the faith community in anything other than a superficial and, in some ways, self interested way (Chaves, 1994).

In terms of teacher training very few assumptions can be made about the level and degree of religious socialization of candidates who enroll in teaching training programs. Whilst in the past

wider society may have provided a degree of religious enculturation, this capacity is now greatly diminished. If prospective teachers are to acquire background knowledge and specific content about religions, broadly speaking, they are now much more likely to receive this from dedicated and formal programs of instruction (Rymarz, 2005). Such instruction may be provided in a variety of ways but one strong method is specialized undergraduate degree programs. This is not to imply that graduates of such programs are guaranteed to be effective religion teachers, especially in educational models. As always, there is still a place for the gifted and motivated autodidact. As a general rule, however, those most likely to teach religion in an informative, engaging and educationally sophisticated way are those who have made some formal study of the related disciplines.

### **Content knowledge and the teacher**

There is a wide and growing literature that explores the importance of teacher training and development as a prerequisite for quality education (Denton, 1982; Amarel, 1989; Bramald et al., 1995; Hammerness et al., 2002; Cochran-Smith and Zeichner, 2005). In the specific field of religious education there is a parallel movement which examines appropriate models for training and in servicing for religion teachers (English, 2002; Healy, 2006; Dowling, 2012). Skilled teaching requires a range of attributes. One of these is basic content knowledge in chosen teaching disciplines (Monk, 1994). This particular dimension of teacher training is one that can easily be neglected in the discussion on how best to prepare RE teachers for their role as classroom educators. Religion teachers often lack specific qualifications in the areas in which they teach (Rymarz and Engebretson, 2005; Cook, 2004; DeFiore et al., 2008). The following narrative illustrates this point further. This is not intended to be an empirical argument but it does

illuminate a key principle. As such, it serves as what Higgins (2007) calls a “type of micro-narrative,” a brief story that is both dense and illustrative.

I have taught religion teacher preparation courses for over twenty years. Very few students who take these courses have either a major or minor in theology, scripture or other disciplines that encompass religious education. In my experience, the following narrative typifies the content knowledge of a majority of students that enroll for teacher preparation courses in religious education:

My particular topic this day was how to teach scripture in a Catholic junior high setting. The heart of the lesson was a presenting a number of different approaches that could be used. To demonstrate how the various models worked in the classroom I gave, as an example, a series of lessons on St Paul and Pauline themes in the scriptures. As I was teaching I was aware that many of the students were not grasping the major theme. I stopped my presentation and asked what the problem was and what I could do to rectify the situation. After some probing it was clear that a major stumbling block was the lack of knowledge that the students had about Paul. This was not a deficiency in higher scriptural exegesis but rather a lack of knowledge about who Paul was, when he lived and what he is most famous for, namely, his teaching as contained in the epistles’ attributed to him in scripture. To encapsulate, when I asked a student who St Paul was, she replied, “I not sure but there is a town named after him.”

The contention here is that without foundational content knowledge, the ability of religious education teachers to engage their students in a manner consistent with other subject disciplines is compromised. This is especially evident in curriculum models in religious education which place significant cognitive demands on teachers as well as students in the form of specific and specialist content knowledge.

Shulman (1987) established a well known rationale for strong teacher content knowledge as a foundational principle in good teaching. For Shulman (1987, 7) teaching, “begins with a teacher’s understanding of what is to be learned and what is to be taught.” Fundamental to this process is the teachers understanding of the subject discipline that she is working in. This is the basis for the teacher’s capacity to assist students to appropriate new insights. The teacher’s task is to provide both a broad overview of the learning at hand and at the same time to give focused and practical assistance to learners who may be dealing with unfamiliar material. In this way the teacher acts like a learning architect who can both construct and envisage what a high quality classroom learning environment will be. Central to the teacher’s role is the ability to generate metaphors and other heuristic mechanisms that create an interface between students and what is to be studied. The efficacy of these techniques are dependent on the teachers own content knowledge. In Shulman’s view, teaching is a dynamic process, facilitated by ability of teachers to move easily from their deep content knowledge and into the cognitive world of the student. The antithesis of this view is where teachers only have a shallow grasp of content material and are, to use the common expression, “only a page ahead of the students”. In this case the teacher is incapable of providing a strong learning environment because they cannot cultivate appropriate metaphors and actively frame student learning.

Empirical studies have also underlined the need for basic teacher content knowledge for good teaching practice (Nye et al., 2004; Hattie, 2009). Darling Hammond (2006) in an influential study on exemplary teacher education programs drew attention to the foundational importance of content knowledge of teachers in such programs. She noted:

They understand that the subject matters. Rather than the generic notions of teaching techniques that dominated teacher education for much of the 1970s and '80s (and still characterize many programs today), these programs begin with the conviction that subject matter provides the foundation for teaching. This means that teaching strategies must be learned in the context of specific content. (Darling-Hammond, 2006, 81-82).

To illustrate what is assumed of background teacher content knowledge in the exemplary training programs that she analyzed, Darling-Hammond (2006, 91) provides the following information from one of the most highly rated teacher preparation programs in the United States:

University of Virginia students who intend to teach mathematics must complete a major in mathematics that includes at least nine courses above the calculus sequence. Two of the nine courses must be graduate level. All candidates must also complete at least three credits of computer science and the credit of educational computing.

### **Content knowledge and the religion teacher in Catholic schools: The general case**

One of the most significant developments in religious education in Catholic schools, in a variety of cultural contexts, in recent decades has been the movement toward what can broadly defined as educational paradigms (Rossiter 1982, 1988; Buchanan 2005). One of the characteristic features of this approach is the religious education in Catholic schools should be a serious, rigorous and academic discipline. This is spelled out in Roman documents such as the *General Catechetical Directory*, produced by the Congregation for the Clergy

Religious instruction in schools [must] 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. 73

In an educational model great emphasis is placed on increasing the understanding or knowledge of students as opposed to having a directly catechetical intent. To be sure religious education can assist or compliment catechesis but its primary goal is an increase in knowledge. This is again in keeping with official Roman documents such as the *Religious Dimension of Education in the Catholic School* produced by the Congregation for Catholic Education.

the relationship between religious instruction in schools and catechesis is one of distinction and complementarity: 'there is an absolute necessity to distinguish clearly between religious instruction and catechesis... 68.

### **A study of teacher content knowledge: Religious education in Canadian Catholic schools**

The curriculum used in Canadian Catholic schools is not clear and unambiguous and can often conflate catechetical and educational goals (Rymarz, 2011). The program of studies produced by the Canadian Conference of Catholic bishops does, however, make significant demands on students and teachers in terms of the level of cognitive content that is expected to be covered. This is evident in the textbooks used in the final years of high school. The Year 11 text, *World Religions: A Canadian Perspective* contains eleven chapters. It examines religious pluralism, Catholicism and Christianity, Canadian aboriginal spirituality, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism. It concludes with chapters on modernity and religion and living faith today. The scope of this book is broad and the level of content knowledge required by teachers to be able to engage with the variety and complexity of topics covered is quite high. This is especially so if teachers are to move beyond acting as conduits of information and toward being architects of learning in the manner envisaged by Shulman. It seems reasonable to assume that



for quality teaching and learning to occur in this program, teachers require some specialist background knowledge in world religions (Van Doorn-Harder, 2007; Locklin, et al., 2012). As with the Quebec curriculum model which will be discussed next, this requirement seems to be particularly important for teachers who wish to deal with aboriginal spirituality in their classrooms.

In a similar fashion the year 12 program, in Canadian Catholic schools, *In Search of the Good*, assumes a high level of content knowledge on the part of teachers. This course of study is devoted to what is called a Catholic understanding of moral living. Rather than give an overview of the course, a brief description of one chapter of the mandated text gives an illustrative sense of the content knowledge that is expected of teachers. Chapter Two of the text is headed, “You are what you do”. It sets out to explore the nature of human action. It introduces concepts such as naturalism, logical positivism and free will. It surveys the thought of Wittgenstein, Ricoeur and Freud. Such content has a very strong philosophical foundation and teachers without background knowledge in modern philosophy will have difficulty in animating this content for students. Other chapters have a similarly deep philosophical grounding.

It is clear that in both a theoretical and practical sense religious education teachers in Catholic schools have significant expectations placed on them in terms of their own content knowledge. In Catholic schools in Canada and elsewhere religious education is offered in multiple places in the school curriculum and this necessitates large numbers of teachers to deliver the programs in the classroom. The official position, as set out in Roman documents, sees religious education in Catholic schools as a serious scholarly discipline that places on students and teachers the same

demands as other subject disciplines. The examples provided here of religious education in Canadian Catholic high schools seems to exemplify this point (Rymarz, 2012).

The assumption made about the content knowledge of religion education teachers in Catholic schools can be extrapolated to other contexts as well. What are common in these situations are the high demands placed on teacher content knowledge without much consideration given to what preparation teachers need to meet these demands. Before making some recommendations on training of religion teachers, an example of religious education in a secular context will be given.

### **Content knowledge and the religion teacher in a secular context: The case of contemporary Quebec.**

One lapidary theme in understanding contemporary Quebec is to recognize the seismic changes that have taken place there since the middle of the twentieth century. These changes, which have generated a wide literature, have been given the collective title the, Quiet Revolution (McRoberts, 1975; Posgate and McRoberts, 1976; Bibby, 2004). The key aspect of the Quiet Revolution was the sudden and precipitous decline in the influence of the Roman Catholic Church on wider Quebec culture and on the lives of individual *Quebecois* (Bibby, 1993). In its place there evolved a robust secular mentality characterized by, amongst other things, a marginalization of religion to the periphery of personal and public life (Beyer, 1993). As is characteristic of fractured pillarized social structures that had heavily supported religious socialization, the collapse of Catholicism in Quebec was both unanticipated and tumultuous (Dekkar and Ester, 1996). The legacy of Catholic cultural hegemony, however, are evident throughout the province, perhaps most notably in the history of educational institutions which

had for centuries been under the control of religious organizations (Boudreau, 1999; Dickinson, 2008). The sudden rupture with past practice, however, has produced successive generations who have very little knowledge or lived appreciation of Quebec's religious heritage. Previous models of religious education are no longer used as these were tailored for denominational schools. In Quebec schools are no longer funded along denominational lines and only secular schools now receive governmental support. A new approach to religious education in a secular context with no denominational affiliation has now been developed. This program, nonetheless, makes significant assumptions about the preexisting content knowledge of teachers.

### **A study of teacher content knowledge: The ethics and religious culture course in Quebec**

In their 2005 document, *Establishment of an ethics and religious culture program*, the Quebec Ministry of Education acknowledged a type of phenomenological framework for the study of ethics and religious culture. One common pedagogical approach in this schema is to divide the field into a number of sub categories or types and then to study each in turn (Moore and Habel, 1982). This typological methodology intends to build up a diverse understanding as it allows for a range of areas to be examined (Rymarz, 2012B). The intention is to facilitate a communality of focus. This should emerge because the types of phenomenon that are examined can be applied to a variety of religious positions or worldviews.

The new ethics and religious culture course in Quebec has at least three noteworthy features. Firstly, it is mandatory. No exemptions or alternatives for families who objected to the program are allowed. This ensures that large numbers of teachers will be required to teach the course. Secondly, the curriculum is stipulated for use in all schools in Quebec be they public or private. Lastly, the curriculum whilst non-confessional seeks to provide a comprehensive approach to

ethics and religious education for all ethnic and religious groups in Quebec. This last feature, in particular, ensures that teachers will require a relatively high level of content knowledge to be to teach the courses effectively.

One prominent aspect of the new Quebec curriculum is the bold educational goals that it sets itself. Students are expected to understand religious beliefs, values and attitudes across a variety of cultural contexts. This poses significant challenges for teachers (Morris, Bouchard and DeSilva, 2011; Van der Wee, 2011). In the Quebec model there is an explicit understanding that students will study a number of religious traditions as well as giving considerable time to the home tradition which in this case is the historical example of Catholicism in Quebec. This later focus presents some very contemporary challenges that are germane to a secular context. What is being studied is not so much a lived reality but a chain of memory, albeit modified from the concept developed by Hervieu Leger (2000). In approaching the study of Catholicism, therefore, teachers must be aware of the new cultural reality in Quebec and teach not only the traditional, or perhaps classical, Catholic beliefs but also how these have been supplanted by a new secular worldview amongst most Quebecers. Add to this the complexity of teaching about other world religions and you have very serious demands being made on teachers and students who take this course. Any world religion brings with it a diverse and complex range of beliefs, practices and internal culture as well as a range of historical expressions (Berling, 2004). Take for example the complexity inherent in teaching about Judaism. The Quebec curriculum sets for itself the task of helping students understand the cultural diversity of modern Québec. This would include Orthodox and Hasidic expressions of Judaism which are relatively easy to engage with. There are visible minorities of Orthodox Jews in major cities especially Montréal but in addition there are larger numbers of much more secular Jews who are not easily described in the categories that

apply to the Orthodox. The curriculum must address this intrareligious diversity if it is to be true to its aims.

A serious concern in the Quebec context is what is to be made of the religious and ethical beliefs of the significant number of indigenous groups in the province? The arguments put forward about the complexity of world religions apply in greater force to indigenous groups, which in Quebec span Inuit groups in the north to Algonquin communities along the St Lawrence (Richards 2011). To do justice to these groups much attention must be placed on teaching about indigenous beliefs in terms that the local communities find acceptable (Bell, 2004; Sarra, 2011). There is a strong tendency in teaching on indigenous religious beliefs, practises and culture to present these in Eurocentric terms and to try to transpose them into a standard model when the content itself actually defies easily categorization (McPherson, 2011). This is not to say that this is a hopeless task but rather that it requires special attention and considerable planning and adequate ongoing support. All of these issues place considerable demands on all involved in the successful implementation of the curriculum.

A key question here, is whether teachers adequately trained and properly supported to be able to deal with the complex content knowledge that is implicit in the study design? At present there are no specific background requirements for either teachers working in schools or teachers who are being trained to teach the new religion and ethics courses. Wright (2007) has commented on the significant demands on teachers in the United Kingdom who teach with a typological or phenomenological framework. They need quite sophisticated knowledge of not only a range of religions but also of religion as a sociological phenomenon. These concerns seem equally valid when applied to the Quebec approach as the religion curriculum is based on similar foundations

## **Training Religion Teachers: Some Recommendations**

The need for large numbers of religion teachers to run the mandatory religious culture and ethics courses in Quebec and the high school program in Canadian Catholics raise fundamental issues about the likely utility of these programs. The implications of this discussion has relevance, however, for any curricula models in religious education, broadly understood, which assume high levels of content knowledge amongst teachers. In dealing with these demands it seems that a number of options, not necessarily completely mutually exclusive, suggest themselves.

One course of action is to raise the expectations and requirements of teachers entering training programs. A number of European countries follow a curriculum that allows for a broad study of religion and ethics that have some similarities with the new Quebec curriculum (Meijer, et al., 2009). These countries, however, place significant expectations on teachers who enter training programs to teach these courses (Willaime, 2007). In Finland, for instance, religion teachers are expected to have a least a master's degree in a relevant discipline before they are allowed to teach about religion or ethics (Mikkola, 2001; Tirri, 2009). Following on from this argument, in religion courses processes need to be put in place to ensure that teachers entering the profession have the background and capacity to deal with the significant curriculum demands placed on them. This is not just a question of content knowledge but without a sufficient background it is unlikely that teachers will be in a position to develop the pedagogical and other skills that educational models place on them. To reiterate, requirement of teachers to have strong formal qualifications in religion based courses does not negate the need for specialist training both in teacher preparation programs and also once they are working in schools

Programs could also be modified to lessen demand on teachers. For instance, in the Year 12 curriculum in Canadian Catholic high schools the philosophical edge of the program requires teachers to be familiar with modern existential philosophy as personified by Ricouer. This part of the course could be modified so as not to expect teachers to have this specialist knowledge. Such amelioration would make the content knowledge demands on teachers less onerous but would, at the same time, change the intent and outcomes of the course of study. The curricula goals would be less ambitious in their scope but they allow for greater clarity about what students are really doing in class. For instance, if students are not going to rigourously engage with the thought of existentialist philosophers more thought can be given to what actually will be covered in the curriculum and appropriate plans made. In the case of Quebec, for instance, is it realistic to expect teachers to engage students about the complex interface between religion and secularity if the teachers themselves do not have specialist knowledge in this area? This is not, of course, an argument against a strongly cognitive approach to religion. It is, however, recognition that without specialist background as a foundation, teachers will be challenged by the curricula demands of these courses and it may be more productive to modify demands in the first instance.

A final, more strategic option, which does not lessen the cognitive scope of courses, is to alter the mandatory status of many religion courses. In both Canadian Catholic schools and public schools in Quebec, severe systemic demands are made because the obligatory nature of religion courses ensures that large numbers of teachers are required to teach these courses. If courses were made optional then this would very likely reduce the number of students taking them. This

in turn would require fewer teachers and because of the reduced number more concentrated efforts could be made in recruiting and training religion teachers. In this approach, to be sure, fewer students would take religion course but at the same time it is much more likely that the stated lofty goals and objectives of religion programs would be met. In addition, as with the previous option, some more thought could be given to developing alternative, more general, religion programs which are not premised on high expectations of teacher content knowledge. .

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