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TEACHING WORLD RELIGIONS: DEVELOPING CRITICAL RELIGIOUS LITERACY

Abstract
If one of the main goals of teaching world religions is to increase religious literacy then the approaches used should develop critical religious literacy. For too long in Australia, teaching world religions has been strongly influenced by practices in the United Kingdom, particularly the use of phenomenological approaches. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the overly descriptive nature of such approaches does not engage the learner nor do they invite the learner to go beyond routine decoding of textual information. This paper will explore various approaches used to teach world religions and critique them in the light of contemporary thinking in the area of critical literacy.

Introduction
Religious literacy may, as Moran (1989) says, "hold the key to thinking through a developed meaning of religious education" (p. 225) just as the interaction between traditional religious language and secular language might find a new "mediation to confront ancient wisdom with modern knowledge and at the same time uncover the religious traditions in secular language" (Moran, 1989, p. 29). If this is to be achieved then we have much work to do.

In this paper I argue that religious literacy is more than the mere acquisition of knowledge and involves some, if not all, of the elements of critical pedagogy put forward by Freire. This paper is in two parts: the first section will outline some of my thinking behind the concept of critical pedagogy and critical literacy and the second section will provide a pedagogical example of using a critical literacy lens.

The term "religious literacy" is mainly used by religious educators who emphasise an educational approach to the teaching of religion and who may be reflecting the Australian Government's discourse on achieving higher levels of literacy and numeracy. For many the use of the term religious literacy means little more than that students possess a religious vocabulary which is formed and examined within the school classroom. It has little to do with society and the world in general and seldom engages in critique. This minimalist approach is a far cry from the concept of literacy in other curriculum areas where much more is hoped for.

The British religious educator, Andrew Wright (1993, 2004, 2005), employs the term and suggests it as an alternative to phenomenological and experiential approaches currently popular for teaching of religion in Britain. Although he has written numerous articles and books on the subject of religious literacy, he has yet to provide a practical application of his philosophical position for teachers.

Literacy in general is no longer simply a matter of acquiring and decoding, comprehending and producing but now includes the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate information in a variety of modes. An expanded concept of text operates to include texts of all types and cultural contexts. Literacy has been reconceived as a plurality of literacies or multi-literacies. Multi-literacies can be differentiated not only on the basis of the channel and medium of communication (print, image, page, screen), but also according to field or subject area (history, religion, science). Where being literate once meant that a person could read and write, today to be considered literate a person needs to be competent in reading, understanding and applying all manner of texts and be able to function responsibly as a citizen. Literacy is not viewed as a single unitary skill to be applied across disciplines but as an amalgam of social practices and abilities that relate to purpose and contexts and is intricately connected to practice. "In the broadest political sense, literacy is best understood as a myriad of discursive forms and cultural competencies that construct and make available the various relations and experiences that exist between learner and the world" (Giroux, 1987, p. 10).

What Is Religious Literacy?
Lo Bianco (2000) rather than defining religious literacy describes what it is not. He says it is different from religious-based literacy, a practice of devotional reading of holy books or holy words that is often restricted by gender and by age (p. 103). Wright (1993) describes religious literacy as the

ability to reflect, communicate and act in an informed, intelligent and sensitive manner toward the phenomenon of religion (p. 74). From my perspective, religious literacy must encompass the kind of competencies that Green (1988) suggests as essential dimensions of literacy: the operational, the cultural and the critical dimensions. The operational dimension involves "competency with regard to the language system" (p. 160). It is concerned with the way individuals use "language in literacy tasks in order to operate effectively in specific contexts" (Green, 1988, p. 160). The cultural dimension encompasses the meaning aspect of literacy including events that are not only "*context* specific but also entail a specific *content*" (p. 160). The cultural dimension recognises that there is a mutually informing relationship between the language system and the meaning system. The critical dimension has to do with the "social construction of knowledge" (p. 162). Implicit in this dimension of literacy is critique, which for Green means that "individuals should not simply participate in culture but should in various ways transform and actively produce it" (p. 163).

Religious literacy, at base level, involves learning and understanding the language associated with a particular religious tradition but further implies that a level of interpretation, analysis and critique is required. Indeed in today's religiously plural world, religious literacy also requires some knowledge and understanding of at least the major world religions and appreciation for the contribution religion makes to culture.

Critical Pedagogy and Critical Literacy

The insertion of the term 'critical' is often seen as a solution to a problem. Critical thinking skills are frequently introduced into the workforce as a solution to sluggish economic performance. However, when used in an educational sense, the term 'critical' means much more. A critical pedagogy consistent with Freire's ideas challenges us to understand curriculum as representative of underlying interests that structure how a particular story is told through the organisation of knowledge, social relations, values and forms of assessment. Critical literacy is a precondition for engaging in radical pedagogical work and social action.

A critical pedagogy needs to validate and investigate the production of differential readings. It should also encourage students to engage in the theoretical and practical task of interrogating their own theoretical and political positions. A classroom which reflects these principles would be one where students are encouraged and enabled to identify, examine and critique problematic, contradictory and multiple ways of viewing the world.

Teachers who would wish to develop critical religious literacy in students need first to gain this themselves. As critical educators they would do well to examine the social and political interests that shape their worldview and identify and acknowledge their own biases. Critical educators are also learners. Their task is to broaden their conception of how they actively produce, sustain and legitimate meaning and experience in classrooms. This involves a critical attentiveness to the web of relations in which meaning is produced.

The concept of critical literacy draws from a variety of theoretical perspectives but is distinguished from the routine decoding of textual information and from "compliantly participating in the established, institutionalized textual practices of a culture" (Unsworth, 2000, p. 6). Unsworth (2002) describes the steps in the process towards critical literacy as moving through three phases: recognition, reproduction and reflection. Recognition literacy involves learning to recognise and produce the verbal, visual and electronic codes that are used to construct and communicate meaning as well as cultural practices present and central to common experience of everyday life. Reproduction literacy involves understanding and producing the conventional visual and verbal text forms that construct and communicate the established systematic knowledge of cultural institutions. Reflection literacy necessitates an understanding that all social practices and literacies are socially constructed. Reflection literacy involves learning how to read inclusion and exclusion, analysing and interrogating verbal and visual codes to expose how choice of language and image privilege certain viewpoints and how other choices of visual and verbal resources could construct alternative views.

How Might the Teaching of World Religions Engage with Critical Literacy?

Religious education in Australia in more recent years has included units on world religions and most state education authorities have introduced religious studies as part of the senior secondary curriculum. Their syllabuses were originally modelled on the British experience and therefore tended to adopt a phenomenological approach. Terry Lovat who helped shape the original NSW syllabus *Studies in Religion* admits that, while phenomenology is a useful tool for the study of religion, there has been a weakness in classroom educational materials based on phenomenology. Australian approaches have focused too narrowly on Smart's dimensions and have been used primarily as a means of explanation of the world's religions without taking cognizance of the theoretical discussion out of which phenomenology emerged. While on the one hand Smart's

dimensions have proved to be a useful tool, they nevertheless limit the educational process and in many cases confine teaching to the level of description and type.

World religion text books frequently display a kind of 'banking approach' to knowledge. The use of short definitions and over simplified explanations display a 'glossary approach' which often appears trivial and superficial, neglects a deep understanding of the nature of religion and its practices and limits opportunities for students to engage with the subject matter itself (Homan, 2004). For example, one text book describes Jihad as "struggle against evil" (Penney, 1995, p. 48). This definition is too brief: it does not mention the fact that some use the word to describe Holy War, nor does it refer more correctly to Jihad as the inner struggle one engages in to become a better person. Such a definition does not allow layers of meaning to emerge.

If not treated carefully, the glossary approach to the teaching of world religions remains at the level of recognition literacy and never reaches the level of reflection literacy, let alone critical literacy.

Critical pedagogy requires exploration and discourse rather than definition. When studying religion students should be encouraged to discover shades of meaning and applications of religious terms and issues in diverse settings and cultural contexts.

Classrooms are places where students learn about worlds through socially constructed texts. Freire says that for critical pedagogy to take place we need to survey received ideas. The texts we present to students are received ideas. In religious education, as in all subject areas, we select, distil and organise information on behalf of students. Often we omit polemic texts so that students are rarely invited to engage in critical analysis and we seldom provide students with texts that present other than a mainstream view. Even when we do we hardly ever ask students to analyse where the text is from, who wrote it and from whose perspective it is written.

While many of us use a hermeneutic of suspicion when reading biblical texts, few of us apply the same hermeneutic of suspicion to text books and information related to the world's religions.

Considering a Pedagogical Example of Critical Literacy

The following is an example of how senior secondary students are encouraged to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion and how the principles of critical pedagogy and critical literacy could be developed for use when teaching about world religions.

Text Analysis

Texts employ devices of various types to construct one textual reality rather than another. The text will also position the reader to make meaning from a particular worldview or ideology, which has implications for how we understand a particular aspect of religion, how we act in the world, how we see ourselves as local and global citizens and as moral agents.

Students are invited to read and examine this short text from ***The Australian, Monday 22 March, 2004*** entitled *A Persecuted People Seek Peace down by the River* (the written text is accompanied by a large colour photograph of Mandeans during a baptism ceremony in the Nepean River).

> It was a scene that could have been set on the banks of the Jordan River 2000 years ago – a robed high priest standing waist-deep in the water baptising his flock.
>
> The modern-day venue for the high priest, or nasoraea, of the Mandaean religion, was the Nepean River on Sydney's western outskirts yesterday.
>
> To the scream of jetskis, Haghem Saed performed the group baptisms in the ancient language of St John the Baptist, Mandaic, a close relation to the Aramaic spoken by Jesus Christ.
>
> "This is a very busy time for us", said Nasoraea Saed whose congregation of Sabean Mandaeans are followers of John the Baptist.
>
> The religious minority is celebrating, over five days, the creation of the universe, one of the most important dates in their religious calendar.
>
> Considered infidels in their homeland of Iran and Iraq, Sabean Mandaeans suffer discrimination and persecution.
>
> They are not allowed to handle food in public as many Muslims consider them unclean, Nasoraea Saed said.
>
> They number just 100,000 worldwide and about 2000 in Australia. Increasing numbers are fleeing Iraq.
>
> "There is only the law of the jungle at the moment," Nasoraea Saed says of Iraq,

where members of his family have recently suffered violence and kidnapping.

Extremists are killing or trying to convert them to Islam.

He said his two sisters were kidnapped last year and were expected to convert to Islam and marry Muslims. They escaped from Basra to Baghdad with the help of friends and family before fleeing to Jordan where they had applied for refugee status in Australia.

About 44 Sabena Mandaeans are in detention centres across Australia. A family - accompanied by two guards – was released from Villawood Detention Centre yesterday for four hours to join in the baptisms.

Examine the text and answer the following questions:

- What version of reality is foregrounded here?
- Whose version is this? From whose perspective is it constructed?
- What possible versions are excluded?
- Whose/what interests are served by this representation?
- By what means – lexical or syntactic – does this text construct (its) reality?
- How does this text position the reader? What assumptions about readers are reflected in the text? What beliefs, assumptions and expectations (ideological baggage) does the reader have to consider in order to make meaning from the text?

In order to discover what is excluded we need to investigate the text from an interdisciplinary perspective.

After this critical examination students begin a *Construction of Reality:*

- Mandaeans are peaceful people
- Followers of the Mandaean religion are persecuted by Muslims
- Mandaeans are in Australia
- Mandaeans baptise people during a five-day feast which celebrates the creation of universe
- They dressed for the occasion – white, archaic
- Men and women
- There are 100,000 world wide
- 2000 in Australia
- Increasing numbers of Mandaeans are fleeing Iraq
- 44 Sabean Mandaeans are in detention in Australia

Putting this together we find a construction of the Mandaeans as a persecuted people in their home land and as a people who are put into Australian detention centres. The forty-four held in detention centres are not being treated as genuine refugees. Some sympathy has been expressed toward them as a small number of them have been allowed out of detention, under guard, for four hours to take part in this ceremony.

Students are invited to analyse how the reader is positioned by the writer of the newspaper report. Some possible responses might be:

- The reader is positioned to make meaning from an emotive rather than a rational or informed standpoint. The photo dominates and the caption sets the tone. The text conveys little factual information – it uses wording like "persecuted people" "detainee", "laws of the jungle at the moment", "extremists are killing or tying to convert them to Islam". The text is surrounded by other articles promoting a moral stance.
- The article is situated in *The Nation* section of the paper.

In addition to this story, the page contains a lead story *Beattie Forced To Own Up on Crashes.* Other articles on the page include a report of a Muslim US leader warning Muslim clerics to use cautious language when speaking of the Israeli-Palestine conflict; a shorter article criticises John Howard on his joining the coalition of the willing and another article is entitled *Push for Unproven Verdict in Sex Cases* – all articles on the page have moral and or religious overtones.

- The Mandaean story is dominated by the picture.

- The caption states: Nasoraea Saed baptises Villawood detainee Shahla Jazan on the banks of the Nepean River, near Penrith in western Sydney.

- Sympathy for the group of refugees is called for. As a reader-citizen we are encouraged to call for such refugees to be released. The 2000 Mandaeans already in Australia could welcome the 44 currently held in detention.

- Apart from of an emotive basis for making meaning, the reader is invited to respond to a propaganda devise known as 'testimonial'. The high priest says "There is only the law of the jungle at the moment ... Extremists are killing or tying to convert them to Islam". It constructs the reader-citizen as a friend of persecuted peoples.

- To make meaning the reader is required to operate from the following sorts of assumptions and beliefs which are profound ideological overtones persecuted for religion, unable to handle food in public in Iran and Iraq, peaceful people (water, white), refugees need your support, these refugees are a minority within a larger group of detainees who traditionally view them as an enemy.

Students decide what further exploration needs to take place:

- Investigate the Mandaeans, their history, their beliefs, practices and so forth. Why do they follow John the Baptist? What else do they believe?

- What is the situation of the Mandaeans in Iran, Iraq, Western Europe, United States, Australia?

- Locate range of texts relevant to situations similar to the Mandaeans – religious persecution, Catholics in Ireland 19th century.

- Ensure that the texts reflect different perspectives.

- Identify and describe key differences in the perspectives.

Use a range of texts to present different perspectives on religious persecution:

- Religious exclusion / persecution in the world's religions;

- Some people benefit from persecuting others;

- People and countries are implicated directly and indirectly in processes, relationships and structures of religious persecutions;

Other areas of investigation:

- Identify countries where religious persecution has taken place throughout history. How has this history been retold? What religions were persecuted? What religious group did the persecuting?

- Where in today's world is religious persecution taking place?

- Which religions are most affected?

- In what ways have human activities impacted on religious plurality?

- What consequences does religious persecution have in today's world?

- Are there different views on religious exclusion and persecution? If so how do they differ?

- In the different accounts who is seen to 'be behind', or benefit from the persecution? How do these interests differ according to the accounts provided?

- How might religious difference be 'accommodated'?

In the light of the work completed, students can return to the questions posed at the beginning of the exercise and elaborate on them.

Hopefully through this exercise students will have begun a process of critical engagement and if teachers offer a number of such textual analyses, students will be challenged to move beyond basic levels of recognition and reproduction literacy and eventually acquire the skills of reflection and critical religious literacy.

Conclusion

I would argue that many world religion texts are passive and descriptive. While they might provide basic information, they do not provide opportunities for critical investigation of religious matters. In 1968 Ninian Smart said that "religious

education must transcend the informative" (p. 105). If we continue to reduce learning about religion to the process of listing, labeling and categorising then religious understanding will remain at the level of factual knowledge. I am suggesting we need to build into religious education elements of critical pedagogy so that students develop informed critical insight. To be able to critique a text presupposes that students have been engaged in some form of textual analysis as well as being exposed to alternative discourses. The challenge for religious educators is not only to provide students with a variety of contestable religious materials but also to enable them to explore alternative discourses and thereby lift their levels of religious literacy from recognition to reflective engagement and ultimately to critical literacy.

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