

PROMOTING INTER-SPIRITUAL EDUCATION IN THE CLASSROOM: EXPLORING A CONCEPT AT THE HEART OF THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHYⁱ AS A USEFUL STRATEGY TO ENCOURAGE FREEDOM OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND BELIEF

Abstract

The beginning of the twenty-first century has witnessed the emergence, globally, of multi-faith, multi-cultural and multi-linguistic societies which, in some ways, have 'grown' more inclusive and interactive communities with increased tolerance levels. Nonetheless, recent global events in the political, cultural and religious spheres have resulted in division, discrimination and distrust, often between different religious groups.

This paper argues that what is needed is an inter-spiritual education for all students, one that promotes dialogue and engagement and which reflects the perennial philosophy, as discussed by Huxley (1945) where two thought patterns prevail in all the main religions: the esoteric and the exoteric. The first subscribes to the metaphysic of a divine Reality at the core of being; it is the spiritual, almost secretive face of religion and is practised by only a few adherents. The second is the exoteric form which is the public form by which the religion is usually identified, that is, through its rituals, practices, architecture and so on. Arguably, it is this form in today's world that tends to exclusivity; it provides a boundary around its followers which promotes a sense of 'us' and 'them'. Thus, the exoteric form encourages divisiveness but the essence of esoteric thinking is connectedness. Education programs that address these two dimensions may lead to a change in consciousness where respect for and acceptance of the Other is paramount and, therefore, such programs may be more appropriate for the contemporary world. However, there is, first, a brief discussion of the context that seems to call for a program in interspiritual learning.

Introduction

This paper is a work in progress. It is the beginning point of an examination of a concept, that is, for me, relatively new. It is pertinent to the social and political contexts that determine so many aspects of the lives of people in today's world, aspects which are significant influential factors in shaping education systems. While it focuses primarily on the Australian context, there are implications for other societies that have also become pluralistic in a relatively short space of time.

What is proposed here is a renewed education system which would include religious education. It would be a system that is responsive and relevant to the changes brought about by technological advances which have increased access to a global world and brought the happenings from the other side of the world right into our living rooms. Another element also linked to advances in science and technology is the access we now have to how the brain functions. This has clear implications for education. Third, the movement of people across the globe has resulted in societies where widely diverse cultures, religions, histories, political sentiments and languages rub shoulders with each other. Such a situation has the potential to 'grow' wonderfully stimulating, exciting and colourful communities. Nonetheless, with mishandling and, sometimes, quite deliberately provocative attitudes and action from authorities, there can be unfortunate consequences which become evident by a growing divisiveness, disharmony and actual antagonism towards the Other who is inevitably different. Accordingly, there are two sections to this paper:

1. A brief discussion of the social and technological contexts that determine existing structures, programs and practices of an education system, including programs for learning about religions.
2. A discussion as to why an inter-spiritual approach to learning about religion may be more appropriate for current social, cultural and political conditions.

Part 1 – The changing context

Specific features that have relevance for contemporary education programs

Contemporary Western education is, for the most part, based on an education system that has been generated by and responsive to the European context and culture of the 19th century. Over the past forty-plus years, there have been ongoing educational reviews across many countries, resulting in the rewriting of curriculum documents accompanied by an enormous expenditure of public funds. The fact that most of the new curriculum programs have a relatively limited lifespan before there is yet another review and another revision surely points to the fact that something more is necessary than just patching up a system that appears to have problems in both addressing the needs of students and the expectations of parents and societies in today's world. This has also been the case with religious education programs in Australian Catholic schools where curriculum guidelines were introduced in the 1970s and renewed in the 1980s and 1990s. These were replaced with new curriculum frameworks in the early years of the first decade of the new millennium across many Catholic dioceses.

Accompanying these consistent curriculum renewals have been some educators who have called for radical changes to curriculum structures as opposed to the constant 'patching up' of existing curricula. Others have, at different times, identified inadequacies of the present systems and have outlined proposals that they believe would be more suitable to addressing the issues and requirements that characterize the new century. Generally, the problems that are noted are ones associated with a system that espouses the scientific, dualist, objective and reductionist mindset of a past era. It is one, therefore, which compartmentalizes learning, focuses on competition and assessment and gives weight to some gifts and skills over others, thus dehumanizing some students and creating divisive elements within the class community. Consequently, the call for change is usually about transforming the teaching and learning processes and environments to reflect more clearly the paradigm shifts that have been emerging over the past forty years.

De-institutionalizing education and responding to the individual needs of the whole child

An extensive discussion of the various theories for changes in education that have been offered over the past few decades is beyond the brief of this paper. Nonetheless, some elements contained in the ideas of a few notable educators will be identified to establish a common trend that appears to be a characteristic of some of the proposals. An early advocate for a radically changed education system was Illich (1970, 1971) who argued that when an education system is focused on the 'institutionalization of values (it) leads inevitably to physical pollution, social polarization and psychological impotence' (p. 9). He called for a de-schooling of education and argued that there was a need to find a new balance in the global milieu where, in place of schools, there would be networks that would allow individuals the freedom to meet with like-minded individuals to further their learning and to focus on their needs and concerns. Similarly, Freire (1970) described the education system as an instrument that was used to keep the poor in their place and to cultivate a culture of silence. He described it as a banking model which led to domination. He argued for an education system that would lead to freedom. Both these educators identified the rigid framework that determined content and processes for classroom practice with little attention being given to the real needs and interests of each student. The alternative was a system that would nurture individual strengths and aptitudes and would offer openings to further horizons.

hooks (1994), over twenty years later, also spoke of an education system that promoted the practice of freedom. She described it as a way of teaching where anyone could learn and where care for the soul of the student was paramount. Accordingly, students are taught to 'transgress' against racial, sexual and class boundaries in order to be free. hooks, writing from the context of the 1990s, had moved the argument further by introducing another dimension, namely, the concept of educating the soul of the student with the aim of making the students free from the social, cultural and political constraints that dominated their lives. This was, surely, a far cry from earlier educational systems in industrial societies that had focused on educating for knowledge and skills as a preparation for the work force and which led, in the late twentieth century, to terms such as the 'knowledge society'.

Also writing in the 1990s and coming from a similar philosophical perspective, Noddings (1992) discussed the problems associated with the restrictive organization, structure and curriculum practices and processes in schools today and the negative impact on children. She proposed an alternative model for schooling, one where education was organized around centres of caring – 'care for self, care for intimate others, care for associates and distance others, for non-human life, for human-made environments of objects and instruments, and for ideas' (p. 47). Moffett (1994) shared this theme when he proposed a spiritual education which focused on personal growth and individualization. Echoing Freire, he claimed that when students' learning programs and processes are determined by external authorities, the students become passive learners and stop thinking for themselves:

Homogenizing a populace through a cookie-cutter curriculum at once nullifies the diversity that ensures collective survival and thwarts the individualization on which self-realization depends. Thus, it works equally against the social and the personal, the practical and the spiritual (p. 6).

According to Moffett, spiritualizing education is intended to include everyone because:

It brings to our daily efforts to improve our life in this world a sorely needed focus on being good for one another because we're not just thinking of ourselves. It energizes these efforts with a life force common to everything but working through each of us in a particular way characteristic of our individuality. It validates the inner life of thought and feeling and the sense of personal being in the face of depersonalization and a preoccupation with physical things. It calls us back from surfaces to essences, to whatever may be at the bottom of things or beyond our immediate kin and ken. It invites us to seek commonalities beneath common-places, for the sake of mind as well as morality. It's a toast to wits with spirit (p.19).

The particular problem identified by these educators and others is that education systems are top heavy. They are policy driven and responsive to factors that are more about societal and economic pressures and workplace demands. Education, however, should be a process that allows each child to draw on his/her individual assets so as to reach his/her potential as a whole person; as well, it should equip him/her to engage positively with the world as each of them experiences it; and, finally, it should develop their innate capabilities to make effective and beneficial contributions to the wellbeing of future communities which, in turn, will promote their own wellbeing.

Recognizing the obvious and subtle impact of technology

Another factor that is pertinent to this discussion about proposed changes in education practices may be linked to the impact of the accelerated technological developments which took place in the latter half of the twentieth century and which helped to shrink the world by making distant and remote areas accessible. As well, natural disasters, political crises and other catastrophes have been beamed into living rooms of people giving them an urgency and immediacy that was not possible with news coverage and reporting in the past. One effect is the recognition that we cannot live in isolation from the rest of the world, that we are part of the whole and therefore have some responsibility to care and act for the Other in the world. This is an important consideration for Australians today who, because of their physical location, were once

able to maintain a certain distance and naivety from events and influences that stemmed from other parts of the world to which they felt little connection. This is no longer the case.

The explosion of information which is now available because of technology may cause some concern and anxiety amongst older generations who knew a time without it. It is however an indisputable fact that young people are 'savvy' and comfortable with technological environments, programs and processes and show confidence and competence in their handling of the latest gadgets. With reference to these circumstances, Prensky (2008) asserts that many teachers are wary of technology and are prone to teaching what he calls 'backup' education of old methods – ones that are only useful in emergencies when technology breaks down. He argues that when teachers fill their learning programs with 'backup' stuff, they are not teaching for the future.

Within the working lives of our students, technology will become a billion times more powerful, likely more powerful than the human brain. What will serve our kids better in 20 years – memorized multiplication tables or fundamental knowledge of programming concepts? Long division algorithms or the ability to think logically... The ability to write cursive handwriting or the ability to create meaningfully in multimedia? (pp. 2-3).

In other words, future classrooms need to examine more spaces and environments, learning and teaching strategies and a variety of resources that will be more appropriate for children whose perceptions and understandings, indeed their very ability to learn, have been shaped and determined by a world powered by technology.

Focusing on the process of learning

Finally, there is the improved understanding of the learning process as a result of new findings from brain research. For instance, another aspect of the information garnered from different media outlets is that it is a result of a passive learning process. The problems associated with passive learning that educators like Moffett (1994) had identified in the 1990s have been compounded by the use of new technology where different sized screens have become an increased source of education and entertainment for young people. As a result, there is a generation of children who have accumulated hours of television viewing and internet surfing and have amassed a huge amount of information which they may be able to recall but on which they are unable to act. This is, precisely, because the part of the brain that receives and memorizes information may have become well developed but connections have not been made to the part of the brain that leads a person to act on the information. Zull (2002) argues that this is the result of an imbalance in the learning process. He suggests that there are three components to the process that leads to transformative learning:

1. The first is the transformation from the past to the future. Thus, perceptions and experiences become memories which then generate ideas for future ideas and action. This means that individuals will be changed in how and what they do, that is, their world view has been changed and will impact on future actions and attitudes.
2. Second, the information processed through the perceptions and sensations comes from an external source but becomes transformed within the individual as it merges with previous learning so it becomes new knowledge and understanding. Thus the learner has been transformed from receiver to producer.
3. Third, there is the transformation of power where the control of the learning passes from others to the individual. The individual is now knowledgeable about what s/he needs for further learning and can make appropriate decisions about how s/he will attain this. Thus the previous position of weakness and dependence on the part of the learner has been transformed through the learning process to one of strength and independence. (see pp 33-34 for a more detailed explanation).

Zull asserts that these changes happen at the same point in time, 'a juncture defined by the structure of the brain itself... this juncture is the fulcrum on which information is leveraged into understanding' (p. 34). He describes the structure of the brain as having two parts, one for receiving, remembering and integrating information from external sources and the other for acting, modifying, creating and controlling. With passive learning, it is only the first part of this structure that is activated so the learning becomes imbalanced.

A further matter for deliberation is the knowledge of how the parallel information processes of the brain leads to conscious and non-conscious learning (de Souza, 2009, 2010). Most education systems have paid scanty attention to the latter and yet it has a role to play in encouraging the development of stereotypes which can lead to hidden prejudices and biases (Myers, 2002; Wilson, 2002). Needless to say, this is a significant factor in pluralist societies where 'them-and-us' scenarios often arise. There is also the issue wherein the collective non-conscious learning of a community can be manipulated by authorities and community leaders to promote the superiority of one race over another, one religious culture over another, and so on. Hence, the ability to identify the negative impulses that may be generated by one's own non-conscious learning becomes an important consideration for educators and others in the field. Furthermore, it is the combination of both conscious and non-conscious learning that leads to intuitive, imaginative and creative ideas which, once again, becomes important in the planning of learning programs and environments. These elements are particularly important when learning about different religions since the positive aspects of conscious and non-conscious learning can lead the individual to be open to and inclusive of the Other and develop empathy with and compassion for the Other. Such sentiments are more likely to create in the individual an interest in learning about the religious and spiritual culture of the Other.

Summary

These factors all herald the urgency for new educational systems to be put in place, ones which will be more fitting and meaningful for the times. We need to appreciate that learning environments should no longer be restricted to traditional classroom spaces, or even traditional school spaces. We need to recognize that there may be alternative spaces that could be designed and used more effectively to promote learning through the use of technology. This is particularly relevant for the learning space of the religious education classroom which is, often, space, time and content bound thus disabling the development of an empathetic knowledge and understanding of religion and what it can mean in the lives of its adherents. Without such empathy the emotional, devotional, passionate and deeply spiritual aspects of religion can remain unrealized.

While the current system of education is an area that requires investigation for the broader curriculum, there are also elements that need to be examined that could lead to changes in the approaches to learning in religious education. In particular, how can technology be used to improve access to people and practices of other faiths and cultural traditions or to create more inviting and inclusive learning spaces? This should be an important consideration in most pluralist countries where the large movement of people across the globe over the past few decades have brought individuals, often for the first time, into close contact with the Other who is often culturally, religiously and racially different. It is particularly significant in subjects like religion for the learning to be holistic since religion has the potential to engage the individual at the intellectual, emotional and spiritual dimensions of their lives. If learning about religious difference remains merely at a cognitive level, it may not have a lasting impact, one that touches the deepest levels of a person. Potentially, it leaves the learner detached from the object of learning, being restricted to a cerebral exercise and so offering little opportunity for the individual to truly engage or develop empathy with the Other.

These are just some of the factors that point to the need for new learning structures and spaces for programs that aim to promote a study of religion. Moreover, they highlight the need for such programs to be embedded in whole new frameworks which are more meaningful and relevant to the lives of young

people and which may help them develop into active, thoughtful and empathetic citizens in their future communities.

Part 2 - An inter-spiritual approach as a possible way forward to learning about religions

Over the past few decades, curriculum planners in Australia have attempted to respond to the multicultural nature of contemporary society by introducing various elements across the curriculum that reflect diversity. Nonetheless, they have failed to recognize the importance of religion in the lives of many new Australians and the subsequent influence this has on their cultural beliefs and practices. Accordingly, learning about religion has not been included in the core curriculum for all children in public education systems in Australia. Without such learning, young Australians do not always develop appropriate knowledge and empathetic understanding about the different religions and cultures that have become part of society. Not surprisingly, when children meet others who are religiously and culturally different, they perceive them as 'them' rather than someone who may be one of 'us'.

While faith based schools in Australia do have religious education as part of their core curriculum, the main intention is to promote knowledge of their own faith tradition. In some programs, there may be a unit of study that looks at world religions but this is not consistently the case across primary and secondary levels. Furthermore, many RE teachers have limited engagement or encounters with people from different faith traditions so that they teach not only from an outsider's viewpoint but also an outsider who has been raised in another faith tradition, often a Western Christian faith tradition. This may compromise their ability to impart accurate knowledge and understanding about a different faith tradition (see Buchanan, 2010) and, despite their best efforts, the notion of 'them-and-us' may be maintained.

In the 1980s, the final school certificate in most Australian states introduced a study of religion as an optional subject that senior students could choose to study, usually in their final year of schooling or sometimes spread over the final two years. For the most part, these programs were based on the Typological and Critical approach of Moore & Habel (1982) and Lovat (1989) respectively, which in turn, was influenced by Smart's phenomenological approach (1968, 1973). While the phenomenological approach did articulate cognitive and experiential aspects, the restrictions of the classroom environment meant that, in practice, the focus was largely on cognitive learning and there were few components that attempted to incorporate affective/experiential learning.

While British educators have spent years examining different ways to approach a study of religion in their schools in response to their multicultural and multi-religious context, neither the phenomenological approach nor the ones that have followed, such as the interpretive approach (Jackson & McKenna, 2005; Jackson 1997) or the conceptual and interdisciplinary approach (Ericker 2010), are always appropriate for the Australian context. Apart from the highly charged secular nature of Australian society, which is a distinct characteristic and which, inevitably, provokes a level of hostility towards any perceived links between education and religion from a significant percentage of the public, schools across Australia can range from ones which show little evidence of a multicultural society to ones that can have upward of fifty different cultures, including new arrivals, represented in their school community. Hence, some approaches that depend on children's experiences, both religious and cultural, may never get beyond the point of learning about the dominant religious culture. There needs to be a distinct approach to learning about different religious and spiritual cultures in Australia that will work for all students regardless of their background and regardless of the region where their school is situated. To this end, I am proposing an inter-spiritual approach.

Why inter-spirituality?

I would like to begin this section of the paper by reflecting on a question that was asked of me by a colleague at a conference for religious education academics. I had been discussing why religious educators

Drawing on the above incident, I would like to highlight a few issues that support the notion of an inter-spiritual approach to learning about religions.

An interspiritual approach that is inspired by Huxley's (1945) concept of the perennial philosophy

To begin with, an interreligious/faith or multi-religious/faith approach is usually a cognitive study and begins with the external features of religion. A study of religion which is engendered by these approaches is based on recognizing religious difference by identifying the various phenomena that make them different. In other words, it starts at the surface of the religion and focuses on knowledge about the tradition and it aims to develop skills to analyse, categorize, evaluate, and so on. Any experiential learning, that is, the notion that one should try and understand and appreciate the religion from the perspective and experience of a believer within the tradition, is unlikely to reach any level of depth, given the constraints and reality of the classroom environment. These latter would include the time allowed for the lesson, the interest of the students, the knowledge and enthusiasm of the teacher, the resources available and so on. In other words, while the knowledge base of the students may be improved, it can remain a clinical and diluted learning experience, with little evidence of the emotion, passion and spirit that religions can inspire. Therefore, the approach to learning about religions that I am proposing works in reverse, namely, from the inside out. It is about inter-spirituality which focuses on the connectedness between all individuals which may, potentially, promote a deeper understanding amongst students and which may lead to transformative knowledge and changed attitudes.

Such an approach would draw on the thinking contained in Huxley's (1945) description of the perennial philosophy when he suggested that two thought patterns prevail in all the main religions as well as in many Indigenous systems of belief: these are the exoteric and the esoteric. The first is the outer appearance of the religion, the public face that allows it to be identified as a particular faith tradition. It is composed of the doctrines, the rules, the rituals and practices, as well as the buildings that signify the places of worship. It is the exoteric form of religion that provides the content which is foundational to the current approaches to religious education that were referred to earlier.

The second face of religion is the more secretive side and often has fewer members than the exoteric version. It is the metaphysic that recognizes:

a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being (Huxley, 1945, p. 9).

Furthermore, Huxley contends:

Direct knowledge of the Ground cannot be had except by union, and union can be achieved only by the annihilation of the self-regarding ego, which is the barrier separating the 'thou' from the 'That' (p. 57).

In his preface to the second edition of his book *Forgotten Truths*, Huston Smith (1992) supports Huxley's thesis when he identifies a pattern common to human belief systems, 'a remarkable unity underlying the surface differences' (p. v).

Arguably, it is the exoteric form of religion that tends to exclusivity since it provides a boundary around its followers which promotes a sense of 'us' and 'them'. Newberg & Waldman (2006), writing from a neuroscientific perspective, further highlight how brain research has shown that a belief system can encourage individuals to maintain a boundary to protect them from others who are different. They argue that:

emotions not only help us to maintain our beliefs but also defend us against other beliefs that threaten our worldview. When someone comes along with a different belief, what do we usually do? First, we

dismiss him or her. After all, our brain has already done a lot of work establishing what we should and should not believe in, and the neural circuits have been set (neurons that fire together wire together, or so we currently believe) (p. 34).

Furthermore, they cite Spinoza's rejection of the Cartesian notion of dualism and his offer of an alternative theory that the human person could intuitively move beyond personal beliefs and draw closer to an ultimate reality and truth. In such a state, the individual could experience 'the essence of an infinite, indivisible "substance", a term that Spinoza used to simultaneously embrace God, nature and the sum total of reality itself' (p. 41). Newberg and Waldman point out that, while Spinoza's thinking was not well received in the 17th century, it is more appropriate to the understanding of spirituality in the contemporary world, particularly where people have moved away from religious influences and begun to embrace different expressions of spirituality which they appear to find more relevant and authentic (O'Murchu, 1997; Tacey, 2003). As well, Newberg & Waldman confirm that Spinoza's thinking correlates with the understanding, today, of the processes used by the brain to create a holistic image of the world by assembling disparate pieces to compose a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts.

In tracing the historical evidence of the human person's search for a transcendent reality, Armstrong (2009) asserts that 'religion was not something tacked on to the human condition, an optional extra imposed on people by unscrupulous priests. The desire to cultivate a sense of the transcendent may be *the* defining human characteristic.' (p. 19). Through ritualistic action they learnt to transcend their ordinary lives, what the Greeks call *ekstasis*, a "stepping outside" the norm (p. 4). She further argues that the ultimate reality was not a personalized god. Rather, it was a transcendent mystery, the depths of which could never be comprehended. Armstrong also identifies the fact that, while different faith traditions have their own 'unique genius and distinctive vision: each its peculiar flaws' there are some fundamental principles common to most faith traditions: 'when one loses all sense of duality and is "oblivious to everything within or without"' (p. 31).

There are other writers and theorists who will further inform the thesis contained in this paper but the general thrust that has been identified here provides the initial foundation on which an argument for an inter-spiritual approach to learning about religions is offered, an inside out process. If the exoteric form of religion encourages divisiveness but the essence of esoteric thinking is connectedness and unity, an approach to learning about religions should start with the esoteric face of religion and move on to the exoteric dimension. In other words, the spirituality and religiosity of faith traditions will be identified as distinct entities and an aim of the study will be to understand and appreciate the distinct roles and expressions of each in the lives of adherents. This is necessary in pluralist communities if there is a desire or intention to promote understanding and appreciation of diversity as the first step towards acceptance and inclusion of a different 'Other'.

As well, there should be recognition of the complementarity of different world views from East and West that will enhance an understanding of the human condition that led to the construction of religious frameworks. Again, this is an important consideration in the contemporary world where Eastern and Western cultural traditions may find themselves living as neighbours. As well, such recognition would reflect the shifting mind set from the twentieth century to the twenty-first. Harman (1998) summed this up well when he argued that humans have created their knowledge systems to reflect and shape their societies which accounts for the differences between East and Western world views. Certainly, in the past few hundred years, the West has assumed a certain confidence and superiority that its scientific view of reality is essentially correct and all other views are wrong. However, Harman argues that there is a need to consider that other views may perceive reality through different cultural windows which emphasize other aspects of the total human experience. This would make them complementary rather than wrong. As Hull (2009) states:

In spite of the difficulties in encountering them, we should take heart from the fact that the many human worlds remain human. After all what we have in common as human beings should enable us to enter every human world for nothing that is human is foreign to us (p. 32).

Conclusion

To sum up, a study of the concept that underlies different traditions, which Huxley (1945) identifies, may make a good starting point, followed by the way and the reasons why religious frameworks developed and changed, depending on the cultural context within which they were born. Such a study will not reduce the differences inherent in the exoteric form of religions but will emphasize them since they are what make the religion distinctive, the public face that is recognizable. However, by providing students with the opportunity to discover the underlying unity of thought that is at the core of the human person's search for a transcendent reality, there is less chance that 'us and them' attitudes will develop. The other possible outcome is that students may be more open to and accepting of the religious beliefs and practices of the Other. Education programs that address these two faces of religion may lead to a change in consciousness where knowledge of the underlying unity that links self with the Other may promote respect for and inclusion of the Other and, therefore, be more appropriate for a 21st century education system.

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ⁱ This is in particular reference to Huxley's (1945) concept of the perennial philosophy and this is discussed further in this paper.

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