Postmodernity, faith and recontextualisation: An agenda for religious educators

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During her religious education work with five year olds in her Year 1 class, a teacher in a northern New South Wales Catholic primary school said "Children, Mary is the mother of God". The response from one child was "But how do you know that?" It is not so much that the child had any idea of the profound epistemological implications of the question. But it is illustrative of the extent of questioning that extends throughout the culture from the five-year-olds to the 90-year-olds that has become a characteristic of what is known as cultural postmodernity. In its extreme, this thinking calls all metanarratives – like the Judaeo-Christian religious story – into question; it tends to imply a cultural agnosticism about religious interpretations of life; it considers that all personal and spiritual knowledge is contextual, individualistic, relative and uncertain – and by implication, unreliable.

This is the context within which teachers are trying to educate young people spiritually and religiously. And they are endeavouring to hand on a 2000-year-old religious tradition, with its scriptures, theology, liturgy prayer and spirituality. But just to attack and discredit postmodernity and assert that the church has the 'truth' is not an adequate solution to the problem. Elements in the high level of questioning in the culture need to be scrutinised and appraised. And one way of addressing the problem is to show how there are natural levels of uncertainty in spiritual knowledge; but this is normal and is not inconsistent with having a trustworthy faith, and more importantly, a fidelity to ones beliefs and values. Life lasting commitments are not incompatible with some uncertainty in spiritual knowledge.

For example, Harold Horell (2004) showed how Christian hope can help one live a committed spiritual life while accepting some of the uncertainty in cultural postmodernity. But this means, as Eckersley (2005) pointed out, that while most people today retain some form of religious belief, this is not nearly as absolute and binding as it once was. Many more people are now themselves deciding in the light of their own experience and wisdom what they will regard as authentic meanings for life. Rather than defer to God and religion, they may well become their own touchstone for what is 'truth'. Rapid social change has resulted in much more uncertainty about life and the future. Some get used to the levels of uncertainty about life, the future, and reliable meaning/purpose that has resulted from social change; others cannot cope with it, and they seek communities where meanings are more black and white, and authoritarian. Hughes' (2007) research on the spirituality of young Australians considered that for many, religion has lost its earlier relatively unquestioned authoritative role in giving a religious meaning to life. And instead it has become like an optional, spiritual resource that you can use if you are inclined; but it has now assumed an advisory rather than an authoritative role. A similar finding showed in Maroney's (2008) study of the spirituality of teenagers in Catholic senior secondary schools.

The idea that knowledge, including religious knowledge, is socially constructed is not a new idea (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Berger, 1973). But, as illustrated above, accepting this reality is much more widespread today – even for five-year-olds. While addressing this situation is a major agenda for religious education, only one aspect will be considered below – the natural levels of uncertainty in religious knowledge and faith.

In the 1960s, the Catholic film scholar in the United States William Kuhns considered the influence of new media on religious faith. He thought that a media/entertainment driven society would generate an increased, but natural level of uncertainty in faith. He noted:

The entertainment milieu has transformed the ways in which we believe and are capable of believing. An absolute kind of belief, as well as a belief in absolutes, becomes increasingly difficult as the entertainment milieu trains people to believe tentatively and with elasticity...

A total belief in God must be rooted in a total belief in something tangible, but in a world of plastic furniture and television commercials, the tangible realities are cause more for disbelief than belief...

In the future a total belief may be virtually impossible (and similarly undesirable): perhaps the only viable belief in God will be riddled with doubt, and constantly shifting with the fluctuations of the reality-fantasy ratios created by the entertainment milieu. (1969, p. 165-166).

Kuhn's ideas from the 1960s about the personal influence of film/television and how the Christian church might understand and relate to the electronic media showed both an astute diagnosis of culture in his own time as well as a prophetic insight into the developments that would unfold into the 21st century. He hoped that the church would have a helpful, critical role in educating people with respect to the influence of media.

As the [electronic media] become increasingly potent in shaping society, someone should be capable of maintaining the critical distance necessary for judging the moral and aesthetic directions which people take as a result... [the church could be] a vital force in society for creating a critical awareness of the entertainment milieu... "[The church should] be a community, but not a highly structured authoritarian organisation. Its key concerns would not be proselytising and converting others, but educating people to the languages and techniques by which their lives are being shaped... church authority would emerge from the social concern which the community exerts, the depth with which they care about the present and the future. (pp. 163 – 164).

In 1984, the Anglican priest Richard MacKenna talked about uncertainty as a natural part of belief in God. He proposed that growth towards maturity in meaning in life and in religious faith involved giving away false certainties and replacing these with *true uncertainties*. This meant learning how to cope with a natural level of complexity and uncertainty in life and in faith, and learning how to live and believe with the valuable partial meanings that individuals can construct in connection with community life; and it includes valuing traditional meanings even if they are reinterpreted anew from generation to generation.

Following up on MacKenna's ideas, two issues need to be addressed: Can there be trustworthy spiritual meaning for life when there is so much questioning, uncertainty and relativism? What does truth mean in a constantly changing landscape of meanings?

Many people today feel a heightened sense of uncertainty and anxiety because they are puzzled about what is happening in the world; they cannot make sense of it; they are not sure of where things are going. For many, traditional beliefs and values do not provide the security and direction they appeared to give formerly. There is a need to understand how and why culture is moving from a period of apparent security and certainty in meaning towards one where there is more uncertainty and less security.

It is not just that a lot of new uncertainties have been introduced, but that the incipient uncertainties that were always there in the past, just beneath the surface, have become more visible. This is disconcerting for a greater number of people. No longer is it a matter of finding meaning within an accepted framework; cultural postmodernity tends to call frameworks into question. Where the questioning of meaning becomes excessive, there is a danger that people will become increasingly self-centred and will channel most of their energies into satisfying present needs in an individualistic way, with disdain for both the support and the responsibilities associated with communities of meaning.

A first step in addressing the crisis of meaning is to *acknowledge* and *articulate* the naturally high levels of complexity and uncertainty in life across many domains that have resulted from cultural and technological progress – although the meaning of what constitutes 'progress' is part of the problem. Hence it may be unrealistic to expect that meanings should be absolutely certain or true, and that they should be totally secure; that is not the nature of human meanings. They always have some measure of inbuilt uncertainty, even though people may have been unwilling ever to

acknowledge this; human meaning always involves interpretation, even if an interpretation of reality outside the person (Lombaerts & Pollefeyt, 2004). In other words, there may be access to absolute truths outside the individual, but this access will always be partial as far as the individual knows and meaning is concerned.

Then there is the question of how one can live constructively, comfortably and securely with partial meanings; and how one can accept a tolerable level of uncertainty that goes naturally with both the personal meaning-making process and a culture that is very critical and questioning. It is not a matter of being unable to know absolute truth, but of acknowledging that one cannot know *all* of the absolute truth, because it is too large and complex. This is not relativism, classic agnosticism or a pragmatic functionalism. Constructive, functional meaning does not have to be perfect or absolute. Fidelity in commitments can be maintained while admitting natural uncertainties in the personal knowing and meaning-making processes as well as in personal faith.

From this point of view, growth towards maturity in faith and personal meaning involves learning how to cope with a natural level of complexity and live with valuable partial meanings. This approach to meaning-making applies to those who are religious believers as well as to those who are not. Admittedly, it is the sort of maturity that might be expected of adults. Also, it can be more suited to some personalities than others; some find it difficult to live with too many 'loose ends', especially as regards their ultimate meanings. Inevitably, some will reject this view as relativism of a sort because it admits to a level of uncertainty in personal knowledge that they are not prepared to accept.

This interpretation has implications for religious people: for example, acknowledging a degree of uncertainty in the physical or historical details related to their religious beliefs and accepting this as a normal part of faith, as well as accepting that religious doctrine is socially constructed and has usually evolved over time. Some, however, would want a stronger place for historicity and unchanging doctrine.

The differences in epistemology implied in the above discussion need to be acknowledged; this is significant in the public debate about what might be entailed in an education in meaning. It is likely that there will never be full community consensus about the issues. But it is still possible to work at clarifying what can be done about these questions in religious education.

A capacity to live with some uncertainty in the meaning system has probably always been a part of the makeup of mature people. It is just that in contemporary Westernised societies, there is a greater need for such a capacity just for psychic survival and mental health. Those who favour a more absolute and certain meaning system will be in for a harder time, even if they are supported and reassured by a strong group of the like-minded.

It is too much to expect that this sort of adult maturity in meaning can be realistically achieved by children and adolescents. Nevertheless, if it is an appropriate ideal, it should have implications for school religious education (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006).

To focus more on Christian religious faith, it is appropriate here to ask what level of uncertainty is going to be 'natural' to Christian faith? Or does it have to be 'absolutely certain'? The common sense answer for Christians has always been "If you do not have some doubt and uncertainty, you don't really know what faith is about". In other words, faith is not incompatible with some doubt and hesitancy, and even with asking challenging questions about faith.

It is here that recent comments from Pope Francis I are relevant. It is also interesting to see where he published these ideas – not in an encyclical, formal letter or in *L'Osservatore Romano,* but in an interview for the Italian Catholic journal *La Civiltà Cattolica.* (Also published in the English speaking Catholic journal *America*).

The Pope suggested that trying to go back towards a more traditional, more absolute, authoritative spirituality and faith is not a useful answer to the contemporary situation. He advised people to avoid getting,

> locked up in small things, in small minded rules… If the Christian is a restorationist, a legalist, if he wants everything clear and safe, then he will find nothing. Tradition and memory of the past must help us to have the courage to open up new areas to God. Those who today always look for disciplinarian solutions, those who long for an

exaggerated doctrinal 'security,' those who stubbornly try to recover a past that no longer exists — they have a static and inward-directed view of things. In this way, faith becomes an ideology among other ideologies. (Pope Francis I, 2013, pp. 8, 11)

He went on to note that there is a natural level of uncertainty in any authentic faith:

In this quest to seek and find God in all things there is still an area of uncertainty. There must be. If a person says that he met God with total certainty and is not touched by a margin of uncertainty, then this is not good. For me, this is an important key. If one has the answers to all the questions — that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself. The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt. You must leave room for the Lord, not for our certainties; we must be humble. Uncertainty is in every true discernment. Our life is not given to us like an opera libretto, in which all is written down; but it means going, walking, doing, searching, seeing.... We must enter into the adventure of the quest for meeting God. (Pope Francis I, 2013, p. 11).

There is a strong link between the ideas discussed above and the work of Australian (and other) religious educators since the Second Vatican Council to try to make the religious tradition more meaningful and relevant to contemporary Catholics and others. A new dimension to this quest for relevance has been presented in the theology of interruption and re-contextualisation proposed by Lieven Bove – the theology that underpins the Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project in Victoria (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010).

Boeve (2007, 2011) considered that there is interplay between the cultural processes *de-traditionalisation* (overlapping considerably with secularisation), *individualisation* (where there is now a widely accepted view that individuals should have the principal say in constructing their own personal identity), and *pluralisation* (which is reflected not only in the plurality of religious views in multi-faith society, but in the multiple meanings about life that are advertised in the culture, seeking adherents). He proposed the need for a re-contextualised Catholic theology. It calls for an, at times radical, critical dialogue with contemporary culture that challenges Christianity to positively engage in enhancing human life and community. Boeve regarded the extensive breakdown in the traditional ways through which communities hand on their beliefs and values – the primary interruption – as a challenge for Christians to construct a new and deeper relationship with God with the hope that the interruption to the relationship will eventually result in many positive gains. There was also the challenge to re-contextualise the language of theology both within the church and in its dialogue with the world outside.

The thinking reviewed above has many complex implications for religious education. A significant one to note here in conclusion is the need to help young people learn how to 'theologise' about their faith. Hyde (2011) in his case study of the use of Godly play with a pre-school child, showed how the "I wonder" questions in the pedagogy help encourage children to think about the meaning of religious stories and symbols in terms of their own experience and sense of the world. This complements the learning of traditional Christian religious meanings – developing a basic religious and theological literacy appropriate to children is a key part of the Godly Play pedagogy.

This sort of theologising takes a more sophisticated form with adolescents and adults. A part of this will be allowing them to engage in some theologising about the symbolic, theological and faith meanings of their religious tradition, including doctrines like the immaculate conception, the virgin birth, the ascension, the assumption etc. If this is not allowed, they will tend to dismiss literal, physiological interpretations as of no consequence.

So with all of this thinking in mind, and with further speculation about a range of implications across the school religion curriculum from K-12, you can now imagine and rehearse what you would say if you were in the shoes of the kindergarten religion teacher referred to in the opening paragraph when she commences her answer to the class: "Now children, listen carefully and I will explain the way the Catholic church community answers that important and interesting question that has just been asked: 'How do we know that Mary is the Mother of God?'" Answering this question – especially to a five year old – requires a larger frame of reference than the problem with levels of uncertainty in the epistemology of belief. It needs to start with the *faith memory* of the historical, believing Christian community

and its revelatory beliefs about Mary as a primordial model of the Christian, also evident in the many religious titles given to Mary across Christian history (as in the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary), with a special focus on Mary's role in the Incarnation. The questioning child needs a satisfying child's explanation (and understanding) of where and why this belief came from within the Christian community. There is also the added challenge to the teacher's answer in knowing that most of the children in their class will not have had their first familiarisation with such beliefs in their own homes.

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