Teaching Religious Education in Complex Content Areas

Introduction

A number of years ago a national religious education curriculum was developed for Catholic schools. This was designed along modular lines with sixty or units produced. Schools then ordered the units that they planned to use. After a decade or so the curriculum was revisited and a new module developed. There remained, however, a fascinating record of the micro curriculum in Catholic schools in this country. The micro curriculum is concerned with what teacher do in the classroom, often in tension with what they supposed to do in terms of the formal curriculum. The empirical record that was left behind by this project was a clear tabulation of what modules were ordered, from most to least popular. Some modules went out of print. These often dealt with relatively generic themes such as relationships and could with some modifications be done in other part of the curriculum. Those modules that were massively undersubscribed were those which dealt with very significant but at the same time quite theologically complex topics. One notable example were any modules that dealt with the Trinity. A colleague who administered the program commented, “They have left all the hard stuff.”

Complex areas in religious education encompass both conceptual areas and how other themes are developed. Some conceptually difficult areas include; the interaction between science and religion, philosophical topics such as the nature of God, and
perennial theological topics like revelation. In addition, complex areas involve
development of themes that are often covered in an introductory sense but not taken
beyond a rudimentary level. The best example of this is teaching on scripture. The
seminal work of Barbara Stead (1999) is important in this regard. Stead
demonstrated, with careful studies of classroom teachers, that scripture tended to be
presented in Catholic primary schools as episodic and revolving around a few key
texts. Exegetical skills were not developed. Grace (2003) reached similar
conclusions when research the work of high school religious education teachers.

Other features of complex content areas in religious education include factors such as
requiring specialized knowledge often including an understanding of a range of cross-
disciplinary concepts and complex ideas. Complex topics are difficult to explain to
others and require excellent pedagogical skills from the RE teacher. They often do
not have a ready expression in human experience. Most people, for example, have
some ideas on human relationships. Thinking about human origins in the light of
Genesis and Darwin, by contrast, is not as immediately amendable. Complex content
areas require sequential planning and can rarely be covered adequately in one lesson.
Finally and perhaps most importantly, complex topics are often of critical importance
in defining what makes Christian thought and practice distinctive. They establish
boundaries between what Christians believe, at least in theory, and what others
believe. For this reason complex topics make demands on content knowledge of RE
teachers, especially in areas that relate to the religious tradition that they are working
within.
Leaving out complex material in religious education brings with it some consequences. It is too some extent understandable in contemporary culture. It does, however, impoverish students and is not an appropriate response to the challenge facing Catholic schools in a society that has changed even from twenty years ago. This chapter will provide some contextualization on for these changes and argue that Catholic schools are missing an opportunity if they do not address complex issues in the religious education classroom. It will then focus on a key issue in this area, namely, providing pedagogy to teach complex topics.

**The new terrain: overcoming the cult of niceness**

One of the features of youth and young adults in many Western countries is a lack of knowledge concerning religion (Flynn and Mok, 2002, Hoge et al 2001). The most eloquent statement of this, perhaps, is given by the eminent English sociologist Grace Davie (1999, 127) commenting here on the European situation, “an ignorance of even the basic understandings of Christian teachings is the norm in modern Europe, especially among young people; it is not a reassuring attribute”. Davie goes on to point out that one thing that makes this ignorance a concern is that it adds to a growing sense of alienation and rootlessness amongst the young. This is manifested in an unease about being closely connected to any particular worldview.

Smith and Snell (2009) have described many emerging adults as having “graduated” from religion in the sense that they have gained from it all that they need and have now moved on, not in a definitive sense but more in keeping with a loosing of
religious affiliation. This graduation from religion is part of a movement into adulthood. Smith et al (2012) note that emerging adulthood is a difficult time, with significant challenges. For many young adults this is a period where they receive little support from the wider culture (Wuthnow, 2007). At this vulnerable time in their lives they face key challenges which if not addressed have significant consequences. Amongst the key challenges facing younger people are a general disengagement with society, confused reasoning, especially on moral issues, habitual intoxication, materialistic and unrealizable life goals and damaging sexual experiences that are soon regretted (Bogle, 2008; Regnerus and Uecker, 2011).

Smith et al (2012) argue that one key reason that many young people are so vulnerable to accepting uncritically what the wider culture imposes as normative is that they serious deficiencies in how they think about and see themselves in the world. They note that a feature of emerging adulthood is the superficial and shallow moral reasoning that many in this cohort exhibit. This is not a characteristic of young people or due to a failing on their part but is rather seen as a condition both culturally sanctioned and as a result of nurturing and formation in school and family networks. Such cultural pressure, however, leaves young people in a very vulnerable position, as they are not well equipped to deal with the problems of adult life. Smith et al., (2009, 60) observe:

Emerging adults resort to a variety of explanations about what makes anything good or bad, wrong or right – many of which reflect weak thinking and provide a fragile basis upon which to build robust moral positions of thought and living.

There is much here to ponder for religious educators working in Catholic schools.

One key question is how does religious education in Catholic schools contribute or
otherwise to this weak thinking? One challenge for those involved in religious education is to realize the moral dimension of not equipping students with the necessary cognitive tools with which to face adult responsibilities and to develop a well-rounded worldview. Smith et al., 2009, 61) point out:

We are letting them down, sending many, and probably most, of them out into the world without the basic intellectual tools and most basic formation needed to think and express even the most elementary of reasonably defensible moral thoughts and claims. And that itself, we think, is morally wrong.

In the recent past, perhaps in reaction to the monolithic preconciliar expression of Catholic culture where teaching was often passed in a passive fashion, many in Catholic educational circles sought to better integrate experience and belief. This was done by encouraging a critical, but by no means hostile, attitude to experiences of religious belief and practice. Groome (2011), which he calls the capstone of his life’s work, describes this process as a series of critically reflective movements from life to faith. In these approaches individual religious beliefs and practises, acquired largely through family and buttressed by wider society, were taken as the departure point and used as the basis for further elaboration and critique in the RE classroom. Very few today though have an equivalent initial starting point when it comes to religious experience. In addition to a lack of personal connection, for many students, their a priori position is that any type of strong religious belief is both untenable and unattractive. The prevailing culture tends to contest all truth claims so religious positions are often considered to be almost indefensible. Dulles (1995, 6) put this notion well when he wrote: “Our contemporaries, well aware that religious tenets are capable of being questioned, need to be shown how firm religious commitments may nevertheless be responsible.”
Dean (2004) lays out a very explicit challenge to the Christian Churches in terms of the message that they need to be presenting in an increasingly secular culture. Secular here does not mean hostility or overt anger about religious belief, practise and commitment. It is just that for an increasing number of people, and these are by no means just young people, religion has a relatively minor part in shaping what they believe and how they live. There is a very important distinction to be made here between overtly rejecting religion and regarding it, in practise, as having only a small impact of life. The latter position is one that is becoming normative in many cultures and is a good working definition of what secularization means *in situ*. And, to be sure, increasing secularization places clear challenges before religious communities.

Dean (2010) articulates well many of these challenges. For her, a key issue is the integrity of the Christian message in the face of attempts to domesticate it. In this view, which is very much in keeping with the call for a new evangelization, the Christian Churches need to provide a cogent alterative to the rising, and some would say relentless, advance of an *ersatz* Christian message. Here the pinnacle of the Christian life is reduced to a weak and generic morality. This is described as the triumph of the cult of niceness – where to be a Christian is to be nice, just as Jesus was nice. This is of course a parody of Christianity but the point the Dean raises, supported by much recent empirical work, is that it is becoming the default position of many young and not so young people! And, it also represents the mentality of many Christians. The antidote here is not more of the same but a rigorous, through and educational sophisticated presentation of the gospel with a recognition that some of this will be hard both cognitively and affectively challenging. This is a sentiment

encapsulated well by Dulles when he remarked that younger Catholics need to be “challenged them with the hard truths of the gospel”,

**Complex Topics in Religious Education: Some Basic Issues**

Catholic schools seem to have significant capacity in addressing some of the challenges laid out by Dean, Smith and others. Religious education is taught in Catholic school at all age levels and so the development of themes and topic can take place in a spiral and sequenced fashion. What this chapter proposes is that within this sequence due consideration should be given to seminal topics as these often establish the basis for future learning.

The need for students to tackle topics in religious education that place strong demands on them and their understanding of the Catholic tradition can be supported by at least three arguments. First, the dominant educational paradigm used in religious education in Australia and elsewhere for at least the past two decades has been an “educational” approach. An important aspect of this approach is that religious education should be able to use the language and tools of general educational discourse, and apply these to religious education. An important part of this discourse is the spiral curriculum, or the idea that as students progress through the school they are presented with more and more complex presentations of key topics. A corollary of this is that difficult ideas are also tackled in as educationally sophisticated a way as possible. If religious education is educational, it must be able to demonstrate a commitment to developing students’ understanding in a sequential manner, and also not to avoid areas which require a high
level of teaching expertise. It is hard to imagine another discipline not doing a conceptually important area because it was just too hard.

Second, a more philosophical argument arises from the need to provide students in religious education with an understanding that is coherent. For a position to be coherent two conditions are essential, consistency and explanation. Coherent beliefs are consistent, and have some explanatory power. An example of a core theme in religious education in Catholic schools is teaching about Jesus (Rymarz, 2007). If difficult notions such as the Catholic belief that Jesus is both human and divine are not covered, then much of what Catholics believe about Mary, and about the passion and the resurrection of Christ do not follow. A well grounded understanding of what Catholics believe about Jesus will explain many factors of Catholic life, and provide an entry into other areas of the faith tradition. The religious education curriculum needs to be balanced with topics which have a strong cognitive, base and which are pivotal to understanding the faith tradition being investigated. Study of these topics, which many teachers often describe as hard, is likely to meet students’ needs, to extend them and help them negotiate their own identity in relation to the home tradition. They do not exclude an experiential emphasis when required. The fact that students find some topics in religious education difficult is not a reason for excluding them from the curriculum. Students find many disciplines difficult, but this is an indication that the study has serious academic and intellectual claims. An important part of the role of religious education should be to broaden and deepen the understanding of students in topics that are a critical part of the Christian tradition. The key question is how to teach hard topics better. This remainder of this chapter is an attempt to address this issue at a micro level of classroom practice.
Finally, the importance of teaching complex topics in religious education can also be supported from a Vygotskian perspective. The social learning model of Vygotsky offers insights that can assist in the pedagogical role of the theology, religious studies or religious education teacher. The sense of challenging learners but also extending them with tasks which they may not be able to perform one their own is one of the key insights in a Vygotskian learning paradigm (Bodrova and Leong 2007). Being introduced to cognitively complex material plays an important role in assisting students to develop their full cognitive potential. It is something that the teacher does to use Vygotsky’s term (1987, 212) to “waken a whole series of functions that are in a stage of maturation”.

In the Vygotskian paradigm there is a strong assumption that the learning potential of the students is far greater than if a more age appropriate developmental model is followed (Brown and Ferrara 1985). With good interaction between teacher, student and the community of learners, students’ knowledge can be greatly enhanced. In religious education the key to utilizing the learning potential of students is provide them with enough support, or scaffolding, so that can integrate complex material and be able to use this to assist them with further learning. In Vygotskian language students learn best when they are in the so-called zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Chaiklin 2003). This can be defined broadly as the distance between the most difficult independent problem-solving task a child can do alone and the most difficult problem-solving task a child can do with adult guidance. In terms of complex content areas in religious education the teacher is required to assist and challenge students to expand their understanding by providing strong scaffolding for learning so that they can enter this zone.
In a Vygotskian perspective much is expected of the teacher. One of these expectations is that teachers are comfortable and familiar with the content areas that they are covering. In terms of religious education the teacher must have a good command of the topic areas that she is covering. Learning can be understood as an ultimately transformative process, one that alters the way learners sees themselves and the world around them. Within this framework the teacher’s role is to provide direction, support and structure to assist students in reaching their potential. The teacher here works in collaboration with the learner in a mentor type relationship. A good teacher mentor is one who is able to dialogue and to answer students questions well. If students ask difficult and demanding questions this is an indication that the students trust the teacher and also that the teacher is challenging the student in a fashion that that extends but does not overwhelm. Implicit here is an assumption that teachers can also really engage with student questions by addressing them directly from their own cognitive base.

Part 2: Teaching complex content areas

The first step in developing pedagogy for hard topics in religious education is a commitment to tackling these issues in the curriculum. Without this it is unlikely that any satisfactory program can be developed, due to the inherent difficulties that many
of these topics present to RE teachers. What is outlined below gives an idea of how to approach hard topics in a classroom situation.

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<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td>Make a clear commitment to teach hard topic in the curriculum. This does not mean that every lesson should involve such themes but teachers should have a firm realisation that these will arise and should be planned for.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Examine the existing curriculum to see how the topic has been covered in the past. Also recognize that it may be covered again in the future. Hard topics often require a number of treatments in a four or six year program. Ask yourself what aspect of the topic will be covered here and what will be done later. Be aware of the age and prior learnings of students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Identify a number of key resources in the area. These can be divided into two types. Firstly, teaching resources used by others to teach this topic. There are generally a range of good resources that can assist teachers in this area. Be aware that a good deal can be achieved here by some guided selective reading. Secondly, sources that help teachers understand the topic themselves. One of the most significant challenges facing the teacher who wants to engage with complex themes is a lack of pedagogically focused resources. This is an indication of the lack of focus on complex themes in classroom religious education. And there are little generic approaches to teaching complex topics and this makes the search for comprehensive resources difficult.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Working with others if you can try to encapsulate as briefly as possible the heart of the issue. What is it that makes this topic hard and why do students have trouble understanding it? What is their thinking about the issues involved and especially what common misconceptions exist?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Repeat the focus step but now try to encapsulate the Christian teaching on the topic or another authoritative source that you want to convey to the students.</td>
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<td>Educational goals</td>
<td>Using outcome language or similar write down what you expect of students who have completed this unit of work. Some teachers may prefer to do this step after completing the teaching strategies step which follows.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching strategies</td>
<td>This is the critical step. You are now at a stage where you ready to start developing a series of teaching and learning activities that will engage students. Rely here on your knowledge as a skilled teacher. Give some thought to how many lessons that you are going to devote</td>
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to the topic. Also plan assessment strategies that will enhance the learning of the students.

| Review and consolidation | Try to make some judgement as to the success of your lesson sequence and record what was successful. Also start to develop a pool of resources that have been helpful so that when this topic is tackled again you have a starting point. |

A worked example: Teaching about God in secondary school

Smith and Denton (2005) argued that many religious communities are failing rather badly in religiously engaging and educating their youth. Where engagement and education of youth by their religious communities is weak, the faith of teenagers tends to degenerate into “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (MTD) (Smith and Denton, 2005, 162). This belief, in essence, sees religion as a moral system which, at best, generates behaviours that benefit the individual. It is highly personal and positivistic and the notion of God is relegated, not unlike in the thought of some eighteenth-century philosophers, to a kind of impersonal, distant force that is part of the universe but not in an involved or decisive way. This type of belief is a not unique to Christians, but forms the background of much current discussion of the cultural forces that shape society in countries such as Australia (Bouma, 2007). In many ways, MTD is a type of default position to which most without strong counter views can easily subscribe. Dean (2010) develops a theological argument where the current overriding deism is seen not as a passive agent but as a virulent parasite that is displacing what she describes as the Triune God of the Christian tradition. She notes, “American young people are unwittingly being formed into an imposter faith that poses as Christianity, but that in fact lacks the hot desire and missional clarity necessary for Christian

discipleship”, (Dean, 2010, 6). In popular parlance she describes this ersatz Christianity as being one of the principal manifestation of her central thesis, namely, the triumph of the cult of Nice as a dominant mentality amongst younger Christians. And as such Christianity loses its impact on daily life and becomes largely inconsequential.

The deistic God found in MTD is in stark contrast to the personal God of the Christian tradition. Teaching about God, an aspect of teaching about the Trinity, fits well into the category of complex topic. It also address some of the issues raised earlier about the current understanding of young people as being superficial and uncritical. By addressing the issue of God very directly in the curriculum religious education in Catholic schools could empower students to critically engage with other views of the transcendent, especially those in popular culture.

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<tr>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td>Obviously teaching about God is an important aspect of religious education in Catholic schools. Teaching about God should involve an obvious development and lead students to an appreciation of the importance and profundity of the personal God of the Christian tradition.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>In many curricula documents God is mostly dealt with as part of the study of scripture. Images of God in the Old Testament, for instance, are used as a way of introducing the concept of a monotheistic God but a God who also calls us into relationship. In this unit some of the key philosophical teaching about God from the Christian tradition will be presented. These include basic principles such as: There is one God, God is not part of the created universe, God created the universe out of love, God continues to dwell in and sustains creation, human beings are invited into a relationship with God. The unit lays the foundation for future work on the Trinity. This appear later in the curriculum.</td>
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Focus | As identified by a number of researchers the idea of God that many young people hold is very deistic. God is out there somewhere and a bit like the force from Star Wars is always with us. This is quite a benign view but it is not the God of the Christian tradition. Many students find talk about God confusing. They can’t see God, so how are you supposed to understand something you can’t see or touch? In addition many have images of God that reveal some Christian sensibility but these have never been consolidated. Seeing God, for example, as old guy with a beard?

Response | The challenge for teachers is to introduce the idea of a personal; loving God who calls people into a ongoing relationship. At the same time teachers need to convey the idea that the God of Christianity is a “big” God. This means that God can never be fully described by human categories. This concept is not illogical but rests on a good presentation of the concepts of mystery. A mystery in theological terms is commuting that we can never fully comprehend but this does not mean that we can never know anything about it.

Educational goals | (This list is not exhaustive but indicative of what can be done)

By the end of this unit students will have:
- Participated in a role play that depicts the character of St Augustine and some of his teachings about God.
- Viewed and made notes from a video on Augustine’s teachings.
- Produced a concept overview chart which links some key Christian teachings about God
- Described the Catholic teaching on the relationship between God and creation
- Contrasted the Catholic view of God with the deistic view
- Explored some of their questions about God
- Discussed some of the difficulties and objections associated with teaching about God
- Listed and defined some of the key terms used in philosophical discussions about God

Teaching strategies | (This list is not exhaustive but indicative of what can be done)

- Give some historical background; introduce the key Christian thinkers like St Augustine.
- Show a DVD or other electronic resources
- Brainstorm the question, who do you think God is like?
- Use artwork to convey key teachings about God such as
monotheism. Introduce some Trinitarian icons and lay the foundation for future units.

- Provide students with a simple statement of what the Catholic understanding of God. Textbooks can be quite useful here.
- Design a worksheet that helps students define some key terms
- Use selected scripture that reveal something of the nature of God
- Invite students to record how they react to the idea of a personal God in the diaries
- Imagine that you were speaking to the greatest expert on God, what questions would you ask?
- Research one aspect St. Augustine’s life

**Review and consolidation**

What went well was the stuff that emphasized some of the tensions in the Christian view of God. God, for instance, is initially concerned with us but at the same time is not part of the created order. Indeed God created the world out of nothing – ex nihilo. Students found some of it tough going, especially how to understand how God, who can seem so distant can know them personally. This is helpful to know because it can be used as a springboard for later units on the Trinity, especially in relation to the Holy Spirit. The main assessment tool was the cumulative work diary at the end of the lesson the students had to submit: 2 completed worksheets, a narrative dialogue between Augustine and a Desist, an analysis of two scripture passages, a concept map about God and a statement of the Catholic teaching about God

**Conclusion**

Our knowledge of what teaching actually occurs in the religious education classroom is inadequate. I suspect that hard topics are being avoided. In light of this I have outlined here a pedagogical process for teaching difficult topics. These are an important part of a religious education curriculum that takes the educative aspect of the discipline seriously. They are not, however, the only topics that should be
covered. As Rossiter (1997) reminds us the key to a good RE program in the school setting is balance. One could easily construct a curriculum that was too heavily weighted to hard topics. I do not see much danger of this at the moment. A greater concern is an avoidance of these topics in the name of making the curriculum comprehensible and amenable to student interest. It is a matter of contention what, if anything, could make religious education popular with students. I would argue that a religious education curriculum that approached hard topics with confidence and expertise is as likely to meet students needs, to extend them and help then negotiate their own identity in relation to the home tradition as one which is self consciously based on an experiential appeal to relevance. The fact that students find some issues in religious education difficult is not germane to the argument here. Students find many disciplines difficult but this is an indication that the study has serious academic and intellectual claims. An important part of the role of religious education should be to try and broaden and deepen the understanding of students in topics that are a critical part of the Christian tradition. The key question is how to teach hard topics better? An important aspect of this is the need to develop high quality, wide ranging resources that can assist teachers in their classroom practise. Along with this there needs to be a much greater emphasis on investigating pedagogical techniques that can assist teachers with complex content areas in religious education. I believe a research focus on these issues is long overdue.

References


