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Religious education today

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1976
Johannesburg College of Education
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/27562
Dugmore, D.P. (1975/1976). Religious education today. Symposium: A Journal of Education for Southern Africa, pp. 31-32.

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The National Education Policy Act of 1967 requires that our education shall be Christian in character. This assures religion a prominent place in the curriculum.

The provision is natural in the Western World, where our system of education developed as a function of the Christian Church. Britain and South Africa have both followed this pattern. It is therefore a mistake to think that the first principle in the Act is a concession to the philosophy of Christian National Education, although it gives full scope to that approach.

During the 19th century the British Government accepted more and more responsibility for education, because voluntary bodies like the churches were not able to provide even elementary education for all children. Tensions developed over religious education. Free Churchmen feared that the established Church would gain an unfair advantage in the State schools. Radicals advocated a wholly secular system of State education with religious education in the hands of the Churches and Sunday Schools. Anglicans were divided. Some held the Anglo-Catholic or High Church view that education is the responsibility of the Church alone. Others held that Church and State could co-operate to their mutual advantage. The Cowper-Temple clause in the Elementary Education Act of 1870 provided a compromise solution. Religious Education was to be given in the State schools but "no religious catechism or religious formulary which is distinctive of any particular denomination shall be taught."

The Transvaal Education Ordinance contains a similar clause: "No specific doctrine or dogma which is distinctive of any religious denomination or sect shall be taught."

The Butler Act of 1944 bears the marks of the War Years.. When the British people were engaged in a life and death struggle, the circumstances were favourable for a further entrenchment of Religious Education. It become, together with school worship, the only school subject made compulsory by Act of Parliament. It may therefore be said of English education as of South African, that it is by law Christian in character and that this law is in line with our traditions.

This approach does not go unchallenged. The main force acting against a religious approach to education is the world trend towards secularisation. Man has been able to achieve so much without bringing God into his plans and calculations. But even in secular society morality is essential. If education is for the whole child, morals must be taught. Humanists plead for the teaching of morals without religion, but to those who accept the Judaeo-Christian tradition of the Bible this does not make sense. The very first commandment in the Decalogue is an affirmation of God. "I am the Lord thy God that brought thee up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me." The morals follow.

Religious instruction is primarily about God Out of the teachings about God emerge the morals on which our "social cohesion" depends. Without God there will not be much effective social cohesion.

Religious instruction is primarily about God. merely as a basis for teaching morality. Its main function is to provide answers to the fundamental religious questions that all people, including children, ask about life, about its beginning and ending, about its How's and Why's and about its meaning.

The 1970 Durham Report on Education[1] (in Britain) is entitled the Fourth R. That title places religion where it belongs — among the basic things in education. It may be difficult to teach, but that is no reason for evading it. Here in the Transvaal, it may be more difficult in English Medium Schools than it is in Afrikaans Medium Schools because they are more heterogeneous in character, but this is no cause for complaint. Indeed, it may even be an advantage. Diversity in the class makes for a more realistic approach to the questions that arise out of the lessons, and pupils may get closer to the truth if they can come to grips with different points of view among themselves.

The difficulties that face the teacher of religion should not be minimised. The realities of the classroom situation are often enough to

daunt the bravest. Mr. David Hills, writing in a recent number of Christian Education,[2] points out that the two basic assumptions of the Transvaal syllabus are not accepted by a large percentage of his high school pupils. Some reject the assumption that the Bible is inspired and is the Word of God. There will always be many who do not believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, but it appears that some do not even accept that he was an historical figure. Teaching the Bible as a Christo-centric revelation of God makes no impression on such pupils.

The Transvaal Education Department does not require its RI teachers to deal with the apologetics of such questions but they cannot be ignored especially when teaching what the Bible is in Std 8, and the Articles of the Creed in Std 10. An honest question deserves an honest answer, given as objectively as possible to the best of the teacher's ability and a reference to some authoritative person or book. If RI is to meet the real needs of pupils it is necessary to follow the syllabus with a reasonable degree of flexibility.

There must be flexibility, too, in interpretation. Biblical interpretation must take account of new circumstances and new knowledge. Even in Biblical times the religion of Israel had to adjust to new circumstances, so that we have in the Bible, for our guidance, a progressive revelation. The circumstances of the Wilderness Journey were different from those of settled agricultural life in the Promised Land. The great prophets of the Exile faced a crucial challenge when God's Chosen People were taken into captivity in Babylon. Had the pagan gods proved their superiority over the God of Israel? Today Christians are adjusting to the population explosion. Dr J H van Wyk of Stellenbosch re-interprets the Genesis injunction to "be fruitful and multiply" in an article on "Etiek en Demografie" (1975),[3] relating it to the changed circumstances of today.

As far as new knowledge is concerned, the classic example was the discovery that we live in a solar system. Few modern Christians know how difficult the Church found it, to adjust to the fact that the earth is not the centre of the universe.

Darwin's discoveries on which he based his theory of evolution raised a storm among commentators on the early chapters of Genesis. Today even conservative commentaries find ways of accommodating the available evidence. The Lion Handbook of the Bible,[4] which is used at JCE, indicates how this is done. Dr Louw Alberts, an eminent South African scientist, explains that he believes in evolution but rejects evolutionism, which is the theory that all forms of life have evolved from unicellular organism.

The RI teacher, like any other teacher, needs to keep abreast of responsible scholarship in his field.

If it is children we teach and not subjects, then Religious Education has an important place in our schools. In our increasing secularised society, this may be the only opportunity many children have of being exposed to the sociological and metaphysical realities of religion and the facts of religious experience. But our syllabuses, designed more for children from conservative Christian homes, need to be revised. An editorial in **Christian Education** pleads for a syllabus which respects the professional competence and integrity of teachers and allows them to select from a variety of material, that which is most relevant "to the lives of growing and maturing young people".[5]

The RI teacher with a good understanding of both the theory and the practice of what he teaches will give his pupils much more than an academic knowledge of the contents of the Bible. He will help and encourage them to develop a positive attitude to God, our Father in heaven. He will open their minds to understand and appreciate the Great Book itself. He will give them an understanding of the principles of good living and encourage them to follow these principles. He will introduce them to the One who, more than any other, has inspired the peoples of the West to a right relationship with God and man.

Whether children accept or reject what they are taught about these aspects of the real world in which we live, it is only fair that they should be fully exposed to this, the Fourth R.

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