

“I speak textbook Jewish”: Authenticity in teaching Studies of Religion.

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Abstract:

Two modes of religious education have co-existed in public education for some time. In NSW, these are commonly known as General Religious Education (GRE) and Religious Instruction (RI). GRE is seen as non-sectarian in nature, but this term has been extended over the years from, in some circles, its original Christian interdenominationalism to include other faiths. Teaching of GRE is typically conducted by the classroom teacher, perhaps supported by visiting experts. Its aim is primarily to inform about the faith and its adherents – education by outsiders for outsiders. RI, by contrast, is usually carried out by an adherent of the faith, visiting the classroom. Its aim is more likely to be to convince children of the merits of the faith, or confirm their (presumed) existing convictions. Proselytising aside, these models beg the question as to who is best positioned to conduct instruction on the subject of religion/s, from a pedagogical perspective.

This paper looks particularly at GRE. It will investigate what ‘insiders’ to the faith, or outsiders bring and fail to bring to the pedagogy. Can outsiders, for example, capture any of the affective dimension of a faith, or are they limited to what they can read and cognitively absorb from a text book? To continue the textbook analogy, many learners of additional languages have discovered to their dismay that their text book learning of the language lacks authenticity, and falters in authentic, native-speaker circumstances. Questions to be addressed include: Does GRE desire, and is it capable of engendering a deeper understanding of a religion? Is it reasonable to privilege the similarities between various faiths and assert that they can each teach us something about life, or is this merely meaningless syncretism?

Introduction

Two types of religious education have been distinguished for some time. In New South Wales, these are known as General Religious Education (GRE) and Religious Instruction (RI). More broadly, they have been classified respectively as non-confessional and confessional approaches to religious education (de Velasco, 2007). To this dichotomy, King (2007) adds secularist, wherein the study of religion finds no place in the curriculum. Theoretically, the public school system in Australia is secular; in practice, it sets out to be non-sectarian. The extent to which it achieves this is open to debate.

This paper outlines some of the purposes for which GRE has been used, and puts forward some illustrations of what are called here ‘inauthentic’ or ‘heretical’ strategies, then sets out to justify why these approaches may have merit. The paper poses, and will seek answers to the following question, among others: Is it reasonable to privilege the similarities between various faiths and assert that they can each teach us something about life, or is this merely syncretistic?

If there is no intention for study of religion (or of any subject matter) to make the learner a 'better person', what is the point? The expression 'better person' should not be left unmolested here. Better in whose eyes and by which standards? Each of us would have a list of attributes that makes a good person. Our various lists might be categorised more by contention than by consensus. This paper includes a personal dimension. To discuss religion in the absence of this is problematic, I believe. It is hoped that the paper will provoke discussion.

An outsider presumably fails (or refuses) to accept the innermost tenets of the faith concerned - otherwise why do they not embrace the faith? Such a person's fitness and suitability to teach about the faith concerned is open to question. By contrast, an adherent of a faith may also bring limitations to the pedagogy thereof.

In the beginning...

Perhaps as good a starting point as any for this discussion is an investigation of presumed audience and purpose in General Religious Education (GRE) and Religious Instruction (RI). RI is typically offered to adherents of a faith, or to children whose parents are happy to have their children instructed in a particular faith. Its purpose is to convince and convict the children of the faith's merits and credibility, as well as simply to inform. In a number of educational jurisdictions, GRE is offered to, indeed imposed on, all students, regardless of their own faith traditions. In NSW, this component of the syllabus is typically delivered in the middle years of primary school, years 3 or 4. This, too, has implications for depth of study.

If the purpose of GRE is not to proselytise, then its aims need to be interrogated. Primary school syllabus documents, which are likely to include studies of religion as part of a broader subject, might be less likely to be specific on the matter. In its secondary school Studies of Religion Syllabus document the NSW Board of Studies (2004, p. 6) offers the following: "Religion is an integral part of human experience and a component of every culture. An appreciation of society is limited without an adequate understanding of religion, its influence on human behaviour and its significance within culture". In this sense, then, the study of religion is a search for meaning, even though it is secular/non-sectarian in its approach. It seeks to find meaning in human expression and behaviour, as well as people's understandings of the supernatural, the symbolic expressions of this and the moral and ethical implications. It is contended here that these moral and ethical implications extend to the learner, and don't merely constitute a 'spectator sport' as learners observe the behaviour of other humans. Another purpose, distinct from but similar to this, is the fostering of tolerance and understanding of difference. All the while, students acquire content knowledge about the religions concerned.

The aim of avoiding proselytisation raises another issue in the conduct of GRE. A comparison with environmental education may be helpful here. Environmental education is intended to be pro-environmental, that is, to engender a respect for the environment and a willingness to nurture it. The line between providing a positive expression of 'another' faith and proselytisation appears thin and blurred. Intercultural education may provide a more helpful comparison. Intercultural education does well to provide a positive expression of the culture being studied, but this does not exclude scope for questioning aspects of a culture, including one's own.

Peace is commonly cited as an outcome for inter-religious studies. King (2007, p. 115) observes that “it is important to bear in mind the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of both peace and education”. It would seem reasonable to add religion to the list, to generate a trinity of complexity and multidimensionality. And yet, to study the contributions of religions to peace seems fraught. Arguably, religions have been more of a catalyst for conflict than for harmony. Admittedly, religion is at times a ‘badging issue’ with regard to conflicts over land, political power etc. Nevertheless, a religious overlay is likely to add fuel to an already volatile situation, and exacerbate, rather than mitigate, conflict. This, though, may simply strengthen the imperative for peace and religion to be yoked.

Other aims of studies of religion may include an instilling of:

Environmental care or stewardship. While the philosophical notion of the earth as God’s garden is compelling, adherents of the various traditions have not necessarily been among the forerunners of environmental care.

Values and morality, human rights and inclusivity. Again, the pilgrims’ progress is patchy here. Faith has moved some to extend human rights to others, but it could be argued that believers have not always been at the forefront of defending women’s, children’s or gay rights. Some parallels can be drawn between the GRE/RI dichotomy and Civics and Citizenship education. Civics is at times referred to as an understanding of political systems and structures (akin to GRE), whereas citizenship is the critical and active response to and initiation of social change (similar to RI). But this model arguably oversimplifies the difference between GRE and RI.

Tolerance. Believers and their institutions have not always fared well here.

Critical literacy. Jackson and Fujiwara (2007, p. 2) comment that “knowing other cases always helps in being critical of one’s own presumptions about religious education”. Whether or not this is true in the case of religious education, it arguably does not appear to extend to a questioning of one’s religion.

The above criticisms all reveal, I concede, my biased perspective. I am left wondering if some of these criticisms might be more palatable if made by a believer. I do not propose them as a criticism of religion *per se*, but I believe that the conceptual links between religion and the environment, human rights etc should be open to question. In fairness, atheists, agnostics and the disinterested are not consistent champions of these issues either (Hayward, Buchanan, Gerner & Cheek, 2007).

Until relatively recently in Australia, the term non-sectarian most likely referred to the non-privileging of any particular Christian denomination, but the exclusion in practice of other faiths. More recently, it refers to an inclusion of what the NSW HSIE (Human Society and Its Environment) Syllabus calls the five world religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. This, too, is arbitrarily sectarian, but in defence of the Syllabus document, also included is Aboriginal spirituality, and the choice of other faiths if desired, on the basis of factors such as local communities of adherents.

What then, of developing authenticity in studies of religion? Cush (2007) warns of the risk of religious education being “oversimplified, stereotyped and misleading,

especially if taught from secondary materials by non-specialist teachers” (p. 223). Her concern is with non-specialist teachers, rather than with non-adherents, but a non-adherent is arguably a ‘secondary source’.

This paper also has a personal beginning. It was borne of a discussion, itself emanating from an observation of a lesson of mine by a colleague. The teaching session was on Judaism, Christianity and Islam. My visiting colleague is Jewish; apart from the fact that we share a close professional relationship that permits frank and honest communication, I was aware that Ruth (a pseudonym) was in a position to give me ‘insider feedback’ on Judaism that no other staff member (to my knowledge) could offer. Perhaps understandably, I approached and conducted the lesson with some trepidation, but confident that I had made a decision that would add value to my teaching of the subject – or at the very least build character. Ruth was highly positive in her comments on virtually all aspects of the lesson – except one, on which she offered quite forthright criticism. Ruth’s criticism came from a table that was distributed to the students, outlining some of the annual holy days of Judaism (see Appendix). Ruth had two objections to this approach: she felt that this was a highly reductionist approach, robbing Judaism of so much of its cultural, historic and interpersonal richness; she also felt that the content of the table was very Christian-centric.

I will deal with each of these concerns in turn. I conceded Ruth’s points of criticism, but was left in somewhat of a quandary as to how to modify my teaching. I must accept that on the second point – Christian-centrism, I was not even aware of what made the approach identifiable as such, and therefore what I need to do to rectify it. I was/am unconsciously unskilled when it comes to improving this approach. This standpoint is so well camouflaged in my experience, so comfortably inhabiting what I call my ‘sphere of normal’, that it did not occur to me to approach the topic otherwise, let alone how I might do this. A subsequent discussion with Ruth revealed that my description of Pesach/Passover dwelt too much on the sacrifice of the firstborn. For Jews, Pesach is a celebration of freedom from oppression.

On the second point – reductionism, I agree, but am left with a problem of depth versus breadth – and even this dichotomy may itself be reductionist. More time could be devoted to one or two celebrations, but at the expense of a broader overview of the festivals. More to the point, at best I could only ever provide information on what I can read in a text book, just as any of my (non-Jewish) students could do. I am not really in a position to put the flesh of personal experience on these dry bones – with apologies to Ezekiel.

It is also perhaps relevant to share some more of my personal stance. As intimated above, I consider myself to be a practising non-believer. I have an existential fear of becoming a parrot, a mouthpiece for someone else’s words and views. I accept that this, virtually by definition, excludes me from religious faith. I trust that my mind is not closed to the matter, though. I am reminded of a scene from the movie “A Beautiful Mind”, in which mathematician John Nash is advised that he cannot use his mind to escape his problems, because his mind is the problem. I am prepared to accept that there may be things that I cannot grasp intellectually, not just because of my limited intellect, but because these matters are of a different nature, and that intellect alone is not a pathway that will lead to their unlocking.

Creation: in whose image?

There are arguably advantages and disadvantages of a non-believer teaching about a faith. Purists (fundamentalists?) might cringe at the notion of the faith in the hands of a non-believer, but for pragmatic reasons such a situation is virtually unavoidable. Even if this were not so, we might still not choose adherents to teach the material. In teaching and learning, we make sense of the unknown or soon-to-be-known by reference to and comparison with the known. Simile and metaphor are tools commonly used to assist a learner in understanding the new in terms of the already known. It is unrealistic to expect a beginner to grasp profound concepts of theology and ethics. Purism may need to be willing to accept compromises.

What skills and personal attributes are the most valuable for the teaching of religions? The analogy of second language learning may be helpful here. Debate has persisted for some time as to the merits of a native speaker of the target language as opposed to a native speaker of the students' first language. A teacher is a bridge to link the learner and the material to be learnt, and potentially a barrier between the two. What bridges and barriers do teachers with different expertise and experiences bring to their teaching and their children? Similarly, what bridges and barriers might an adherent of the faith under study bring to the teaching and the learners? For the purposes of this discussion, we might presume that most or all of the children are not adherents of the religious tradition being studied. If the students are relatively homogenous in terms of their own spiritual heritage – which can by no means be assumed – is it preferable for the teacher to be of a similar background to the students?

What might a study of religion learning experience look like in a typical classroom? Just as various faiths look at orthodoxy or heterodoxy, what implications does this have for the secular or non-sectarian classroom, particularly for younger students?

The following section uses a selection of class teaching and learning activities to illustrate ways in which audience and purpose might shape GRE activities. It raises the following questions: Can 'parallel experiences' of religious celebrations be offered to children? For example, once an explanation of a traditional celebration is provided to children, is it acceptable for the children to experience a deviation or derivation of this in class?

Hinduism: *Rakhi*

Among Hindu adherents, to celebrate rakhi, a girl or woman will make a rakhi, or wristband for her brother. In return, the brother commits himself to take care of his sister. This is discussed with the children in class. Then, as an adaptation of this festival, each child in the class makes a rakhi, and places it into a box. The rakhis are more or less identical, with no distinguishing features. The rakhis are then taken from the box by the children. Nobody knows who has made their rakhi. The children are therefore asked to commit themselves to being kind to everyone in the class for the rest of the day. There is also a 'nice note of mystery' in terms of not knowing who one's rakhi benefactor or beneficiary might be.

Judaism/Christianity: The Ten Commandments

The study of these is arguably problematic for younger children in any case given the seventh commandment against committing adultery. Having looked at the Commandments, is it reasonable to ask students what the ten (or say, top four or five) commandments might be for: your parents, your teacher, your younger brother or sister, your cat or dog etc?

Islam the Five Pillars

This activity is similar to the Ten Commandments one, with perhaps a more personal focus. Having looked at the Five Pillars of Islam, students could be asked: what are my Five Pillars?

Some arguments in favour of the ‘inauthentic approach’ illustrated above

Recommending an inauthentic approach seems at best cheeky, even doomed to failure, especially in light of the subject matter. ‘Heretical’ might be a more accurate, though hardly less provocative term for these strategies. The following section sets out to justify such an approach.

Which traditions, whose traditions?

The teaching/learning activities outlined above raise several questions: Is it acceptable to deviate from the traditional or customary ways of commemorating the festival concerned? In favour of a ‘yes response’ would be the argument that ways of celebrating religious festivals are often open to change, particularly if the celebration is adopted by a wider, non-believing public. Examples with regard to Christmas could include; decorating trees, Santa Claus and more recently in Australia, Christmas in July. Interestingly in Australia, the ‘native’ traditions still appear to be seen as more ‘foreign’ than the traditional ones. This is interesting in that a seafood lunch might be seen as more incongruous than artificial snow in shop windows, even if the temperature is in the mid thirties. Easter provides another example, with the Easter Bunny (and more recently in Australia, the Easter Bilby) and chocolate eggs. Here, though, it is arguably these modes of celebration – or at least what they symbolise – fertility – that predates organised Christian religion in Europe. In this case it is the religion that has colonised a pre-existing celebration. It is difficult and perhaps unproductive to assume a purist stance in such matters.

One reason for the different approaches to the Ten Commandments and the Five Pillars also highlights difference in the texts themselves. A number of the Commandments are couched in terms that commit an adherent to *avoiding* certain behaviour. By contrast, the Pillars commit the believer to *observing* a certain action: confession of faith, praying, charity, fasting and pilgrimage. Of course, these may simply be matters of linguistics. ‘Fasting’ could be rendered ‘abstaining from food’ (etc), and not bearing false witness could be rendered as ‘telling the truth’. In both cases, the Five Pillars and the Ten Commandments, we are dealing with translations from the original languages, even though the Ten Commandments might seem less foreign in some Australian contexts.

Building the team, building peace

What, we might infer, are the purposes of the celebration in question? If one of these is to instil a bond of commitment between siblings, it would seem that the rakhi exercise described above has the capacity to do this, and to extend it more broadly. The exercise also imbues the class with a sense of camaraderie and commitment, and serves as an ‘equaliser’ in a context where some students may have siblings and others don’t.

What will be remembered?

Of rakhi, what are students likely to retain in the long term? It is perhaps unrealistic to remember the name of the festival, or even which religion it belongs to. More likely is that students will recall that they made and exchanged ‘wristbands’, and were asked to be nice to each other. This is perhaps more valuable information to retain than the factual details of the ceremony.

Putting parents’ minds at rest

At the time of the rakhi exercise, a note to parents also informs them of the activity, to explain why their child will be arriving home wearing a rakhi. Part of this explanatory note also advises parents that their child is also encouraged to be kind to any brothers or sisters they might have, or perhaps more broadly, to the family.

One reason for the note to parents is that they are likely to be supportive of a gesture that commits their sons and daughters to be kind to one another. Study of religion is one area of the curriculum that can make some parents uneasy. This note hopefully puts parents’ minds at ease in terms of the activity being fairly secular. Indeed, it could be argued that one aim of the study of religion is to dispel fear, then this advice to parents is an important component. At the outset of the unit of work on religions, parents are advised that we will be looking at teachings from various faiths, such as “Honour your father and mother” from the Ten Commandments. It is to be hoped that few parents will have objections to this.

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I confessed earlier to being a practising non-believer. I feel that this provides me with a certain even-handedness and freedom from a desire to proselytise when it comes to matters of religion. During the writing of this paper, I came to realise, however, that if my freedom to practise my non-belief were compromised, I suspect that I could become highly devout and zealous in response. Devout and zealous are not adjectives that I apply to myself with ease or comfort. In this, though, I share much with other non-believers and believers alike. An adherent of any particular faith is likely at best to tolerate – in the most grudging sense of the word, any other faith under study. Most non-believers are similarly likely to be grudgingly tolerant of any and every faith. This would suggest at first blush, that most people will accept either one or no faiths. It is more complex than this, however. Many believers may find themselves being less tolerant of other denominations or divisions in their own faith, as in the case of Sunni and Shia Muslims, Catholic and Protestant Christians etc. For most people, when it comes to the number of faiths one is comfortable with, it will be a case of $n < 1$.

Moreover, just as I was unaware of my Christian-centric bias, many of us will find ourselves similarly unaware of how our biases make themselves heard. This might further undermine the argument for using adherents exclusively to teach a faith.

Tolerance was cited earlier as a reason for teaching religion. Perhaps a better term is acceptance. Acceptance that there exist other people, many of them, with beliefs that are different to mine. Whatever my beliefs, on a global scale I belong to a minority. If religion teaches me nothing about itself, it does teach me about *myself*, and about people.

My knowledge, understandings, experiences and perspectives are so woefully incomplete. But this does not necessarily preclude me from teaching those whose knowledge is even more incomplete than my own. I almost certainly risk leading my students into ‘misunderstanding’, on a daily basis, in this as in any field of knowledge/ignorance. The aim of the teacher is to build bridges. A possible analogy here is that of building a bridge from the same side as the students are on, rather than from ‘the other side’. Building from the same side may help learners to advance. To extend the analogy, the students are limited in their capacity to examine and make sense of, let alone use, the bridge as it approaches from the other side.

Speaking in the context of mathematical understanding, Gough (2007) asserts that “at successive stages through the curriculum, we need to keep the curriculum as rich and honest as our students can stand” (p. 15). The terms ‘rich’ and ‘honest’ are open to interpretation. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to adopt a similar stance in studies of religion, perhaps particularly with younger children.

My encounters with my colleague Ruth provide an interesting parallel for the learning of my students. According to King (2007, p. 116), “the insider and outsider perspective on religion are not considered as mutually opposed to each other but as interrelated and mutually helpful”. While this is reassuring, it does demand interface on the part of the teacher. In the topic of religion, this is bound to be confronting at times for teachers, just as it will be for students. King goes on to say that, “believers can often seem blind as to the evil arising from their own practices” (p. 123). In fairness, I should include non-believers in this risk- or fault-zone. What all believers and non-believers appear to have in common is their belief that they have found something others haven’t. They have found out – or had revealed to them – that God is like this, or that there is no God. It would seem reasonable to assert that study of religions only ‘works’ when one is willing to ‘suspend belief’ – or in my case suspend disbelief - to accept that my version of reality may not be correct.

This brings me to my own aims in teaching studies of religion. A compelling reason for me is that as a lodger in the global boarding house, I accept that I and my fellow tenants need to get along. This is especially the case now that, to extend the analogy, we have the technology to destroy the boarding house, ourselves and all the tenants in it.

These things are hot to handle. As stated above, I will bring a certain knowledge as well as knowledge deficit to every topic I teach/learn. But for my encounters with Ruth I would have even more limited knowledge. When Ruths (and Ahmeds etc) are

available to address our classes, this has wonderful potential. At the risk of sounding arrogant, though, if I am having trouble digesting what Ruth has to share with me, my students might find this more difficult still. It feels at times as though Ruth has only helped me to understand how incomplete my understanding of Judaism is. But this, too, is progress – consciously unskilled is better than unconsciously unskilled. Insider information such as can be gained by conversing with adherents is a vital component in gaining a better understanding of the faith. Who knows, it might even serve as a model for promoting some of the other good things like peace and harmony, and whatever you call the opposite of fear.

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Some Jewish Celebrations and Commemorations

Name	Approximate time of year (Jewish and western)	What does it commemorate?	Information in the Hebrew Scriptures	How is it commemorated or celebrated?
Pesach/Passover	15 Nisan (1 st month). Full moon in April, for 7 or 8 days (near Easter). The first month of the Jewish calendar. Autumn in Australia.	When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, God sent plagues in order to force the Egyptians to set them free. In the final plague, the first born in each family. The Israelites put the blood of a lamb around the front door, and God 'passed over' that house, not killing the first-born.	Exodus 11, 12 (and previous chapters of Exodus) Numbers 28: 16-25	Families have a <i>seder</i> meal. Unleavened bread is eaten in memory of the fact that the Israelites had to leave Egypt in a hurry, without enough time for their bread to rise.
Rosh Hashanah/New Year	1 and 2 Tishrei (7 th month) September Spring in Australia 1-10 Tishrei are known as the High Holy Days			Worship at the synagogue. New Year's resolutions. Throwing bread or stones into water, as a sign of casting away sins. It is also a lead-up to Yom Kippur.
Yom Kippur/Day of Atonement	10 Tishrei (7 th month) September/October. Tenth day of the first month. Spring in Australia		Leviticus 23: 26-32 Numbers 29: 7-11	Worship at the synagogue. People repent of (apologise for) things they've done to offend god. Fasting. Begins with the evening meal the previous day (before sunset).
Hanukkah or Chanukkah/Festival of Lights	25 Kislev November/December. Often near Christmas. Summer in Australia.	Rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem. One day's supply of lamp oil lasted 8 days.	1 and 2 Maccabees (part of the apocryphal Jewish Scriptures)	Lighting a hanukkah (or Hanukkah menorah, a 'ninefold candlestick'). One more candle is lit each night.

Purim/'Lots'	14 Adar March		Book of Esther, especially 9: 18 ff.	A palace official of King Xerxes, called Haman, wanted to kill all the Jews. One of the Jews, Mordechai, saved the king from possible assassination. Queen Esther (a Jew) interceded for the other Jews. Eventually, the King had Haman hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordechai.
Sukkot/Tabernacles/ Booths	15-21 Tishrei September/October. Starts 5 days after Yom Kippur.		Numbers 29: 12ff	Building a shelter in the back yard (a <i>sukkah</i>), eating and perhaps sleeping in it.
Shavu'ot	6 Sivan	Handing down of the 10 Commandments (by tradition)	Exodus 20: 1-17	Reading the 10 Commandments in the Synagogue.

The Jewish calendar is both solar and lunar, so dates of Jewish holidays 'oscillate' between certain dates in the Gregorian (Western) Calendar. The 'Jewish day' stretches from sunset one day to sunset the next day. Genesis 1:5 "and there was evening and there was morning – the first day". Different traditions have different forms of commemoration.

Main source: Judaism 101. <http://jewfaq.org/>