CHAPTER 12

Religion, the Elephant in the Asia-Focused Australian School Room

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Introduction

Some diverse Western democracies are examining how education about religions might contribute to the development of intercultural competence and to aspects of national and global citizenship. These aims are articulated in the curriculum documents of nations such as Sweden, Denmark, England, Norway and the province of Quebec in Canada, which deliver the desegregated, academic ‘Studies of Religions’ programs, for all ages. Commonly these programs include studies of non-religious worldviews and ethical systems such as humanism. Sweden’s programs have been running since the 1960s.

England and several European nations have been researching the implications of these comparative programs on children’s attitudes to religious diversity and multicultural citizenship, most notably in the REDCo project (Religion in Education: A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries). This mixed methods study of teenagers, was undertaken in eight nations from 2006 to 2009. The study found that students desire peaceful coexistence, and that, for them, this depends on knowledge about each other’s religions and worldviews (Jackson 2012a, 7–8). The study also found students want this broad-based learning to take place in a safe classroom environment, facilitated by a professional teacher. According to the study, students see state-funded schools as places for learning about different religions/worldviews rather than for instruction into a particular religion/worldview.

The difference between these pedagogical approaches has been articulated by Grimmitt (1987, 8) and Hull (1978, 124) who noted that an enfaithing style of teaching into a single religion can be referred to as ‘instruction’; while learning about a variety of religious traditions is generally regarded as ‘education’. Religious Instruction (RI) is usually segregated and faith-forming, and generally excludes non-religious perspectives. This approach has a normative theological basis which asks: ‘What should I believe?’ Distinctly more plural is the approach sometimes referred to as Religion Education (RE). This approach usually takes a comparative, ‘Studies of Religions’ (SOR) form and often includes non-religious perspectives. RE generally has a non-normative social
science basis and asks: ‘What is religion?’ More recently, learning from religions adds further reflection on life’s purpose. This approach, sometimes combined with learning about religions, relates to ethics and social justice. This has a philosophical basis, asking: ‘What does religion mean? And how can it be applied?’ Studies of Religion scholar Tim Jensen warns that this approach (and language) might lead dangerously back to theological catechism (Jensen 2008, 137) and it is important to heed that warning.

These different approaches to religion in education have distinctly different outcomes. One REDCo researcher noted that “teaching which provides students with encounters with a plurality of interpretations...in dialogue with reflections on their own pre-suppositions, is likely to promote the development of both their critical thinking and their capacity for impartiality” (Jackson 2012a, 7–8). The REDCo findings suggest that the study of diverse religions, as an intercultural education exercise, is both possible and beneficial.

Quebec: A Secular, Democratic Approach

Providing policy direction for this notion, of religion education supporting multicultural and democratic objectives, Canada’s Supreme Court, in 2012, defended the mandatory nature of Quebec’s Ethics and Religious Cultures (ERC) program. The Court upheld the program’s no opt-out provision with the argument that a critical approach to religion in schools serves the interests of the state to facilitate social harmony (see Lefebvre, this volume). ERC curriculum documents recognise a variety of religions and worldviews including: Christianity, Judaism, Native spirituality, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Orthodoxy, “other religions” and “other forms of expression...that inspire different ways of thinking, being and acting” (Education, Loisir et Sport Québec, 2008). The ERC program rationale notes that grouping students together, rather than segregating based on faith, “promotes attitudes of tolerance, respect and openness, and prepares students to live in a pluralist and democratic society” (Ibid. 2008, 292–296). The program’s intention (even if not achieved in practice) aims for inclusion and equity, which the Court linked to a guiding secularism. A decade earlier, the Canadian Court defended secularism in the school context as being “aimed at fostering tolerance and diversity of views” (Chamberlain v. Surrey School District [2002]). Maintaining that position in 2012, the Court ruled that state education regarding religion must be ‘neutral’ and ‘secular’ (S. L. v. Commission scolaire des Chênes [2012]).