THE SUPPORT TEXT AND THE PUBLIC SYLLABUS: A CASE FOR INTEGRITY

Introduction
My own religious studies texts have occasionally been criticised for being overly faith neutral, that is, for encouraging openness and literacy at the expense of providing some means by which the truth claims of various religions might be appraised or, more bluntly, be compared with those of Christianity (in its entirety or through one of its species). This criticism was made most vocal some years ago at a workshop held for Year 12 teachers of the NSW HSC Studies of Religion subject. On sharing the results of my own research into conversion patterns among the Hindu-inspired sect, Brahma Kurnaris (as an instance of the ‘new spiritualities’ section of the syllabus), I was taken to task for being too equable in my treatment of these people’s testimonies. It was alleged that this was the problem with many of my texts and that, as such, they were more likely to be the cause of confusion than education among high school students. After some discussion, it seemed the real concern related to the teachers’ dilemma about their role as Studies of Religion tutors, and especially the extent to which this entailed arbitration on their part of ‘true’ religious claims (coinciding with those espoused by their school’s ethos) and others. Their concern was not that I was failing to provide ample analytical tools, but, more bluntly, that I was not illustrating the undesirability of conversion to a marginal if not illicit faith, and especially when it was away from Christianity (which was invariably the case).

In light of such allegations, it is interesting to explore just what it is that we are dealing with in a public syllabus like Studies of Religion, and therefore in a related text. More broadly, it is interesting to ponder on what we have learned about the subtleties of education in the past century or so that might also inform the debate. I will start with the former because it is the more straightforward and obvious.

The Religious Studies Public Syllabus
The precursor to Studies of Religion came in 1985 with the Religion and Belief depth study within the new HSC subject, Society and Culture. For the first time in NSW, a public syllabus provided the opportunity for students to study the religious phenomenon in a formal and impartial way. This represented an important corrective to what had become a hopelessly skewed, misguided secularist social education which, for most of the twentieth century, had ignored the place and role of religion in social history and social functionality. It also represented an important return to the inspirational thought of the founding fathers that a good public education should include ‘general religious teaching’ (NSW, 1912, p. 6) as an integrated feature in the curriculum, quite beyond whatever more proselytising forms of religious education might be tolerated. Hence, the aims of Religion and Belief were:

... to provide students with a better understanding of the part played by religion and belief in their own lives and those of others. It aims to arouse in students an awareness of the importance of religion and belief in shaping human behaviour, both individually and collectively, and to enable them, irrespective of their own religious beliefs (or lack of them) [emphasis mine] to identify and assess sympathetically the nature and consequences of belief in others. (BSSS, 1985, p. 33)

The popularity of this depth study justified the development of a discrete HSC subject with similar though expanded intentions. In 1991, the original Studies of Religion syllabus was unveiled with the following objective:

... to promote an awareness, understanding and appreciation of the nature of religion and the influence of religious traditions, beliefs and practices on societies and on the individual, with an emphasis on the Australian context. (BOS, 1991, p.7)

Beyond the obvious emphasis on Aboriginal spirituality and Christianity on the development of Australian spirituality, the syllabus is explicit in dealing with the more recent influences of other major religious traditions, other ‘new’ spiritualities, as well as a growing trend towards non-religious beliefs (atheism, agnosticism, humanism, etc.). In each of the public examinations held since its inception, each of these facets has received attention.
It seemed to me at the time that the critics I referred to above were either not aware of the terms of the syllabus they were dealing with or, alternatively and however subtly, that the syllabus was being misused in their schools as a de facto enfaithing device rather than an inculcator of religious literacy. As is clear from the aims specified above, as well as from all assessment strategies leading up to and including the HSC examination, public syllabuses of this type are devised essentially for the purposes of good social education, a social education that recognises that religious literacy and understanding are essential features of overall social literacy about a world in which the religious factor continues to be an inextricable component of social lives and social politics. Not least of all, it is coming to be seen as a crucial element in understanding Australia’s social history, including its ancient history, and increasingly its current status as one of the most palpably multi-faith societies in the world.

The assumptions behind these syllabuses are that it is important for the personal development of individuals and for the social development of the country that opportunities for the development of such literacy be available in the public curriculum and, needless to say, that the subjects which carry this social charter function with integrity. I would add that it is equally important that any text designed to support such syllabuses also function with integrity, meaning that its content be selected for its relevance to the intentions of the syllabus and that its methodology, including assessment tasks, be designed to enhance the broad and non-aligned goals of the syllabus, rather than being designed to serve the partial interests of any particular set of individuals or groups.

None of the above is to suggest that study of a subject like Studies of Religion forbids scope for individuals to explore their own faith positions or even ‘come to faith’ in one or other tradition. Indeed, the objectives list includes one which speaks of “the ability to reflect upon the development of (their) own beliefs and values.” (1991, p. 11) A good syllabus in any area, and its associated supporting texts, will make room for the kind of personal reflection and accrual implied by this. What is vital to the integrity of such a syllabus or text, however, is that, to whatever extent they play a role in this personal growth and/or adherence, it is done in the context of freedom, freedom to explore and sift, to choose and, if chosen, to commit. Be it, therefore, from the point of view of either their social or personal good, the purposes of such syllabuses are too important for them to be compromised with the more partisan agendas of any religious group.

The theme of freedom above brings me to the broader of the explorations identified at the beginning, namely that to do with the lessons learned about good education in the past century or so which might inform the debate about the propriety of syllabus support texts. I have written elsewhere (Lovat, 1995) that the most important lesson of 100 years or so of research into education may well be about the indispensability of learners being free to learn. In this same work, I have made the important connection between the freedom implied in general learning and the freedom implied in healthy and effective enfaithment. I will briefly reiterate this argument in order to make the same case about the supporting text.

**Freedom: an essential artefact of learning**

It is now close to a century since key works like those of Dewey (1902) provided some of the early clues about the importance of freedom and autonomy as essential artefacts of effective learning. Similarly, the highest stages of learning designated by the various schemes of the developmental theorists could be summarised as implying freedom and autonomy. For Piaget (1959), the high point of intellectual maturity was marked by the capacity for original thought. For Kohlberg (1963), the zenith of moral maturity was marked by the capacity to make up one’s own mind about ethical matters in order to have the courage to stand by one’s convictions. For Fowler (1981), the ultimate in faith development (indeed, the only reality deserving of the title ‘faith’) was, similarly, marked by freedom. So important is this to the thesis of this paper that I might repeat just one short paragraph:

> Faith, according to Fowler, was clearly a mature reality, something which grew as a person grew. In order to be real, it required a maximum of free choice. The religious educator who attempted to ‘paint on’ faith, or to force it in any way, could well be the greatest enemy of all to the development of true faith. For Fowler, therefore, religious education required more than goodwill and enthusiasm: it required a keen sensitivity to the nature of growth and, above all, it required an inviolable respect for human freedom. (Lovat, 1995, p. 180)

In movements in curriculum theory of the past 30 years or so, much of which was informed by the research of the developmentalists, the theme of freedom and learning being inseparable has been equally apparent. For Stenhouse (1975), for instance, only lower forms of learning, such as training and instruction, could be completed...
without the commitment to ‘know’ which implied free choice. In his elaboration of the notions of initiation and induction (the latter being, for him, the only kind of learning worthy of the title ‘education’), it is clear that learning can only occur where there is a minimum of biased content or pedagogy and the maximum space provided for choices to be made.

No doubt, this thinking reached its high water mark with the epistemological work of Habermas (1972; 1974) and its curriculum application by the likes of Van Manen (1977), where the notion of freedom (or ‘emancipation’) takes on a more formidable status than ever. For Habermas, one can only truly know when one is free to know and knows that one is free to know. Unlike technical and interpretive forms of knowing, where one can still be informed by a limited perspective or biased interpretation, ‘critical’ knowing is impelled by the supreme and ultimately uncompromising ‘cognitive interest’ that each of us possesses to be free in all things, including in what we claim to ‘know’. Consistent with the thoughts of the developmentalists, knowing in a constrained, borrowed or fearful way is symptomatic of something less than the fullness of human development potential.

Thoughts such as these have pertinence for the entire curriculum and all of its learning areas. Clearly, there is a particular pertinence for learning in the area of religion, where the element of freedom is possibly more essential than anywhere, but where it would invariably be most lacking. Too often has religion functioned as part of the political infrastructure of schools, rather than as a subject with the integrity of the kinds of curriculum design, implementation and evaluation parameters to be found in other subjects. Because of this, its true learning potential has too often been hijacked in favour of the cosmetics and impressions of learning that are geared more to the conservative approval of parental and governing bodies. Yet, as suggested, religion may not only be conceived as requiring at least as much freedom to negotiate and choose as any other learning area, it may require an even more explicit regime of freedom than any other, so sensitive and profound is its potential effect on its learners. It goes without saying that any text designed to support a study of religion that is in any way attempting to deal with the ‘truth’ of religion, rather than the canons of a political instance of it, must be constructed in a way that guarantees a maximum of space to negotiate with the broadest and least aligned content, to sift, compare and analyse, and finally to make the choice to deal with it all at a purely academic or more personal level.

Conclusion
Returning once again to the much vexed critics above, one is inclined to say that the views expressed were not only inconsistent with the aims and intentions of the public syllabus which had been entrusted to them, but that the views might be worrying even to those who would wish most earnestly that students have the best possible opportunities to develop a personal faith position. Especially in dealing with senior secondary students, as was the case here, even the most rigid and pronounced religious system might well ponder on the subtleties of effective learning and its inextricable link with personal freedom. Once the political shackles of religious education are loosened, and educators are left free to effect the best kinds of learning, it is inevitable that the issue of student freedom will become paramount.

To deny the overwhelming importance of freedom in learning or, worse, to deny its reality to senior secondary students, is most likely to have the simple effect of delaying their personal negotiation with the world of religion to a time when they will possibly have a less supportive environment for engaging in such negotiation. One might also say that the negotiation will likely be rendered more difficult for them if their school based study has not given them either a sense of freedom to so negotiate, nor the tools to do it impartially. I am of the view that the religious school which does not prepare its students to deal well with the religious dimension of our increasingly multi-faith society is failing to do the one thing which most clearly justifies its existence as separate from the public system. It would be the supreme irony if the public system were to do this better. With the advent of syllabuses of the sort mentioned in this paper (together with their supporting texts), this becomes increasingly a possibility.

References


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*New Studies in Religion* is intended to promote awareness, understanding and appreciation of the nature of religion as a social reality, and specifically as part of Australia’s heritage and culture. It examines the influence of religious traditions, beliefs and practices on societies and individuals with specific reference to Australia.

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