

THE FOURTH R: Religious literacy as a community good.

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My role is partly to set the ball rolling for your workshop, and I appreciate the confidence placed in me to achieve that.

As many of you will know, for almost 4 years I served as a coordinator for Spiritual Development at Forest Lake College, a position that combined both chaplain and RE coordinator roles.

My major professional focus is priest and religion scholar, with a specialization in biblical studies. I am therefore someone who cares deeply about what you do, and I am delighted to have this opportunity think out aloud with you today.

A fourth R?

The title was meant to be something of a tease. If it has irritated, intrigued or stimulated you already my job is mostly done.

There were three aspects to my choice of this title:

- it is partly a double-headed ambit claim
- partly a complaint
- and partly a proposal

ambit claim(s)

Our goal of forming well-educated graduates is incomplete unless we develop their capacity to engage well with the religious elements of our society.

and also ...

Church schools in general, and Anglican schools in particular, have a special responsibility to develop the religious literacy of our students, our staff and the families who entrust their children to us.

complaint

I am concerned that so little is done to develop the religious literacy of our students (or staff for that matter), with the religion education program being mostly undervalued by all the stakeholders: students, parents, staff, principals.

Where religious goals figure in the school program they often seem to have more to do with marketing (read “Values” or even “Discipline”) and very little to do with developing the capacity of our students to be literate in Religion.

While some schools (rarely Anglican – for which I am mostly relieved) seek to convert and proselytize through their religion programs, for most part RE remains undervalued and under resourced.

It need not be so, and systems such as the Catholic Education Office demonstrate “a more excellent way” (if I may misquote St Paul for a moment).

Whether they succeed is another matter, but at least Catholic schools seem (to me) to have done a better job of giving religion a central place in the school experience and to aspire to developing the students’ capacities to engage with the tradition, to participate in ritual, to reflect on their experience and to work for justice and peace in God’s world.

a proposal

Implicit in both the ambit claim and the mild complaint, lies a proposal that religion has a key role to play in education generally and should be a particular feature of a church school.

Sketching the problem

Having laid my cards on the table let’s note some aspects of the problem.

Cultured despisers of religions

As long ago as 1799, Friedrich Schleiermacher, a Protestant theologian, philosopher, and educator, wrote *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*.

More than 200 years later the disdain for religion that he saw in his cultured peers has become widely grounded in most Western societies (the US perhaps being a prominent exception).

At multiple levels of our society, religion is seen in negative terms:

- peripheral
- a personal preference lacking substantial basis
- a non-discipline in the academy
- a relic from the past that fails to capture the modern imagination
- a threat to civilization and intellectual progress
- a source of irrational and unpredictable terrorism
- not a career choice for oneself or one’s children
- a cover for manipulation and exploitation

In our Anglican schools, religion is often not an academic subject. Few students would choose it as one of their 6 OP subjects in Y12.

Christianity as an anti-social and regressive phenomenon

I recently heard a classic expression of a variant to the more general disdain, where Christianity itself is the issue, rather than religion more generally. Again, this is of particular concern to Anglican schools.

One day last week I happened to be listening to *The Book Show* on Radio National (30 October 2008). Romana Koval was interviewing Philip Gourevitch and they were discussing Marilyn Robinson.

Let's listen to a 3 minute excerpt from their conversation (2.55 > 5.36)

PG: "... she is really THE American writer of our time who is at one a great literary master and a very serious contemplator of theology. She is Christian, she's liberal, she is religious. She takes these things very seriously. They underlie her understanding of the world, and they engage it ... she takes a very philosophical relationship to it though, as she discusses in the Paris Review interview, she also delivers sermons at her church from time to time, and in those two books—the book about theology and the other book was a book about the environment, specifically focused on the Sellafield nuclear reactor in Great Britain—in those books she started to really engage very directly with the issues of the world that underlie the preoccupations that create her great art in her subsequent novel, and I think it is a big big mistake to think that she was lying dormant for a quarter of a century. She was working hard and visibly as a writer, and it is only in our oddly segregated world where we think that non-fiction and fiction are unrelated that people suddenly thought, 'O look, she's written a new book!'"

RK: "... as you say, she's a Christian—she's not a judgmental person though, just from my reading of this book, *Home*. She's very aware of the frailties of her characters, or course, and very subtle. And in your interview she is aware of her own frailties as well, isn't she?"

PG: "Yes, she's a deeply, deeply thoughtful and perceptive and sensitive person, and she also makes the perfectly good point that we now have this notion that to be religious is somehow or other to be narrow-minded, and she completely rejects that and she thinks that this is of course a narrow-minded idea. She discusses it at one point, she says that 'religion is a framing mechanism. It is a language of orientation that presents itself as a series of questions. It talks about the arc of life and the quality of experience in ways that I've found fruitful to think about. Religion has been profoundly effective in enlarging human imagination and expression. It's only very recently that you couldn't see how the high arts are intimately connected to religion.'"

There are some great ideas compressed into that exchange, but note especially:

- the assumption that a Christian is assumed to be judgmental and narrow-minded
- the response that affirms religion as a way to engage with the broadest possible array of new knowledge and data from life experience later in the interview Gourevitch makes the point that Robinson devours the latest research in quantum physics and cosmology. (6:43–7:16)

We have to ask ourselves how much we contribute to sustaining and validating that negative stereotype, and what we can do to develop positive ways of being people of faith who engage with the whole of life with compassion and courage.

I want to suggest that religious literacy has a major contribution to make here.

Extreme religion, fundamentalism and terrorism

There is another more sinister problem with religion in our world. Karen Armstrong traced it deftly in her massive study, *The Battle for God*.

In the face of modernity and the cultural/economic supremacy of the West we have seen a reaction in non-Western societies as well as in anti-modern (conservative) elements of Western societies.

There are many faces to religious extremism engaging in violent terror, and they are not exclusively Islamic faces:

- violence against abortion clinics
- sectarian violence in Iraq (or Ireland or Palestine or Bosnia or ...)
- 9/11 attacks on the US

We do not need to agree entirely with Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* theory, but we can see the kernel of truth embedded in that thesis.

Defining "religious literacy"

Like other forms of "literacy," religious literacy is a life skill essential for success.

Religious literacy is not about being correct—or even religious. It does not ensure that we will always draw the right conclusions. But it is about being well informed: including a capacity to locate relevant information and employ it appropriately.

In one sense, religious literacy is a shorthand way to describe our aspirations to be well informed in matters of religion. However, it goes beyond "information" to include "competence" in forming our religious values and acting upon them.

In addition to content and skills, religious literacy has an affective dimension. It is about attitudes as much as anything else.

This gets us close to the heart of the matter. Many members of our society - including many active church members - are functionally illiterate in religion.

Such people may lack the **information** element (being unaware of a great body of scholarship that is relevant to their faith) and/or they may lack the **skills** to evaluate and manipulate—in the best sense of the term—the religious knowledge they do possess and/or they may have an **attitude** problem when it comes to religious matters.

And those who consider themselves non-religious - the fastest growing religious option in many western societies - are often unaware that many popular stereotypes are not well grounded in the religious traditions they no longer find persuasive.

Imagining religiously-literate school graduates

It is worth asking ourselves what our Year 12 graduates would be like, so far as their religious education is concerned, if we succeeded in developing their religious literacy to a reasonable level of competency?

Many schools have tried to describe the outcomes of their RE programs. Here is an example that I helped to draft a few years ago at Forest Lake College, together with my ecumenical clergy colleagues there in the “Spiritual Development” team. Our debt to both Peter Vardy and the P-10 RE framework document from the Catholic Education Office in Brisbane will be obvious!

GRADUATE OUTCOMES: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Bible & Christian tradition

- Our graduates will have the knowledge and critical skills to appreciate and draw upon the rich spiritual traditions of the Christian faith found in the Bible, in the beliefs and the practices of our sponsoring churches, and in the beliefs and practices of other Christian communities.
- Our graduates will appreciate the contribution that Christianity has made to Australian society and culture, and have the skills to draw on that knowledge to contribute to the enrichment of our future in this land.
- Our graduates will be adept using contemporary intellectual disciplines in their study of the Christian faith and be confident in applying that study to their own lives and to the needs of our communities.

Celebration, prayer & worship

- Our graduates will be confident young adults with a positive attitude to life as a gift to be affirmed, protected and shared with others in a spirit of gratitude and service.
- Our graduates will be able to participate appropriately in a wide variety of community ceremonies, with a respect for tradition, an appreciation of symbol and a flair for creative ritual.
- Our graduates will appreciate worship as a means to enrich and express their spirituality. They will have developed personal devotional practices and a commitment to corporate worship appropriate to their own faith traditions.

Ecumenical & interfaith

- Graduates will draw on the intentional ecumenical character of our schools to develop an appreciation of the particular expressions of Christian faith found in our sponsoring churches, as well as developing strong commitments to ecumenical relationships.
- The international and multicultural character of our schools will shape graduates who practise an informed tolerance towards people of all faiths, including people without any religious commitment.
- Our graduates will know from their own experiences what it means to fashion and sustain a community that has strong Christian values while affirming the dignity and value of those with different beliefs.

Personal values & beliefs

- Graduates of our schools will have considered the Christian faith seriously, as understood by our sponsoring churches and be able to make an informed decision on their own personal religious identity.
- Whatever their individual faith, our graduates will integrate their personal values into the moral and social choices they face in everyday life.
- Our graduates will appreciate the ethical dimensions of community life and protect the value of each person and community within our society.

Justice and Peace

- Graduates of our schools will be active in the promotion of social justice and have some direct experience of working with and for those in need.
- Our graduates will promote reconciliation between individuals and communities in this land and overseas.
- Our graduates will draw on their own personal values and those of the great religious and philosophical traditions of humanity to protect the integrity of all creation.

Essential elements of religious literacy

I already suggested three domains that constitute religious literacy:

- knowledge (content, information)
- skills (competencies in interpreting and manipulating religious content)
- attitudes

Let's take them (briefly) in reverse order

Attitude (affective domain)

What kind of attitude sets do our students need in order to function effectively as *literati* in the sphere of religion:

- openness
- respect
- humility
- wonder
- celebration
- compassion
- courage
- communitarian values
- ethical

This list is far from exhaustive, but it is indicative of the qualities I have in mind. All of them, I would suggest, are core elements of RE programs that reflect best practice.

Skills

When we consider the competencies required for high functioning levels of religious literacy, the following come to mind:

- hermeneutics
- sensitivity to genre
- critical thinking
- symbol and ritual
- religious practices (prayer, meditation, pilgrimage, journalling, spiritual reading, etc)

These competencies overlap significantly with skills developed and practised more generally in the Humanities, and that should not surprise us. While we may require some additional RE input to the curriculum, it would be very strange if the skill set needed for religious literacy did not overlap significantly with other aspects of the curriculum.

Knowledge (content, information)

In addition to the affective dimension and the question of key skills, there is also some specific content that needs to be mastered for religious literacy.

Six general categories come to mind:

- **comparative religion**—appreciate the distinctiveness of each religion and spiritual tradition as well as their common elements
- **history**—of major cultural traditions as well as different religions
- **Bible**—reasonable grasp of the basic understanding of the Bible in the public academy (critical biblical scholarship, not confessional or doctrinal views of the Bible)
- **beliefs**—extend comparative religion studies to include a reasonable grasp of the key beliefs of Christianity, including significant variations between contemporary/local expressions of Christianity
- **practices**— extend comparative religion studies to include a reasonable grasp of the major practices of Christianity, including significant variations between contemporary/local expressions of Christianity: worship, holy days, sacraments, morality, social justice, etc
- **Anglicanism**—focus on issues relating to Anglican identity, history and mission (including the traditional Anglican affirmation of the arts, intellectual enquiry and “high culture”). This could include opportunities for students (and staff and parents) to explore their own faith choices and, where they wish, to pursue their own participation in the life of a local Anglican faith community.

Biblical literacy

The question of how to teach biblical knowledge seems to be an especially difficult area. People with little formal training in this area feel able to prescribe/proscribe, and we begin from a position where the dominant assumptions mostly fail to reflect the methodology or the outcomes of mainstream critical scholarship.

The issue of “biblical authority” is especially controversial in the churches. It lies at heart of several of the controversies facing Anglicans around the world

Not long ago a clergy friend asked me to suggest a “six pack” of key things that people need to know about the Bible. He was preparing to speak to a men’s group, and he wanted to use the metaphor of the “six pack” in his presentation.

(If we had time, we could break into buzz groups and quickly throw together such a list of 6 “must know” items about the Bible. I am sure you would find that an easy task, and have no trouble finding consensus on the content of the list!)

For what it's worth, here is the list I prepared. It is not a final or perfect list, but each item is carefully crafted to address a different aspect of the Bible.

1. The Bible was mostly written by ancient Jews, a few of whom were followers of Jesus although none of them had probably ever seen or heard Jesus during his lifetime. [Bible as ancient Jewish literature]
2. Most of the Bible was prepared for oral performance during Jewish and Christian worship (and not for close study by literate and highly educated individuals). [Issues of genre and primary context of reception]
3. The Bible has very little to do with history even though some historical elements are embedded in it. [What kind of truth is in the Bible?]
4. Decisions on which texts to include in the Bible were mostly determined by the political needs of Jewish communities in the third and fourth centuries BCE and of emerging Catholic Christianity in the third and fourth centuries CE. [Questions of canonical definition and reception history]
5. While the Bible has been used to validate prejudice and oppression of various kinds, it can also be used in ways that enhance humanity and encourage respect for the Earth. [Human rights and liberationist readings of Scripture]
6. The Bible is best read in the company of other people, so that we benefit from the wisdom of others as we seek to hear what the Spirit is saying to us through these sacred texts. [Communal dimensions of Scripture as sacred text and of the active presence of Spirit in the reading/listening process]

CONCLUSION

You will have noted that I have not been talking about conversion and faith formation. In my view, neither are appropriate in a school, not even a church school where the power dynamics tend to advantage the catechist and limit the capacity of the student to explore other possibilities.

As we move through a period of profound transition in our society, religion can be a focus for negativity as well as a catalyst for meaning and hope. Indeed, religion can be toxic.

That is why it matters that so many people remain functionally illiterate in matters of religion. We all need some basic capacity to weigh the claims of those who invoke religion in support of their social and political agendas.

At a time when the polarities of the Cold War are being replaced by tensions along ancient religious boundaries, it is all the more important that the knowledge developed by scholars in religion be accessible to as many people as possible.

The churches (and their schools) could (should?) be a voice for religious literacy in public life. We all have much to learn - and much to gain - as we pursue the goal of a society whose citizens have the capacity to access and critique the religious traditions that we have inherited. It begins in our homes, our parish communities and—especially—in our church schools.