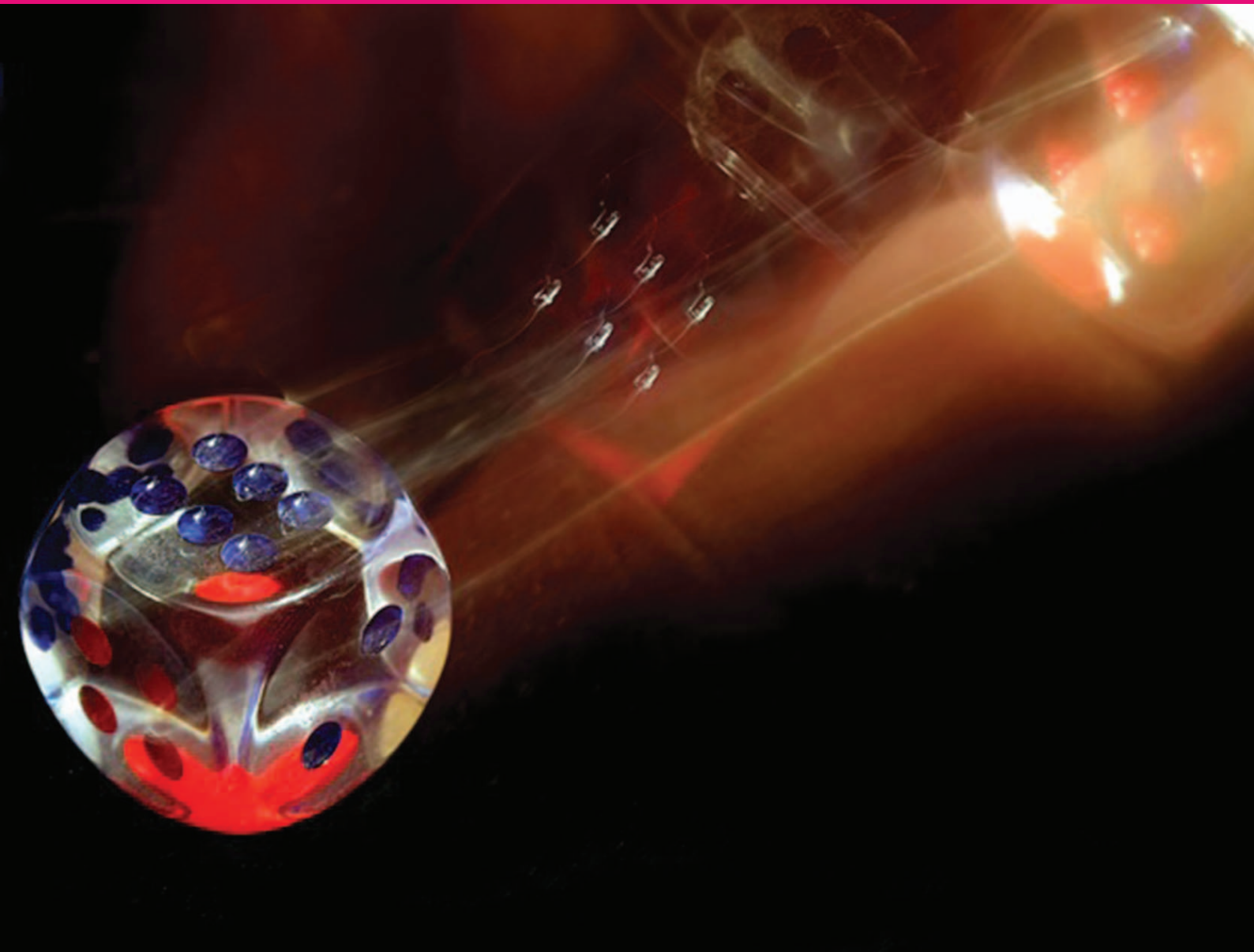


Values, Philosophy and Religious Studies.....

Dialogue *Australasia*

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Dialogue

..... *Australasia*

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From The Editors:

Under the title *The Danger of A Single Story*, novelist Chimamanda Adichie tells the amusing tale of how just hearing a 'single story' about anything can entrap you in an unreal world of caricatures, stereotypes and clichés. Finding her authentic cultural voice was not without its real challenges and difficulties - hence her warning that if we hear only a single story about another person or country (we could add 'concept' or 'idea'), we risk a critical misunderstanding.

Opinions without understanding or justification, and discussion without knowledge, can similarly undermine the integrity of the best prepared and the most relevant of lessons.

Unless we explore why and how *real* human beings decide what is right and wrong, and introduce our students to the ethical and conceptual tools great thinkers have employed from a range of disciplines for making informed judgments and moral choices of their own in that same *real* world, we will have fallen short of the ideal. And equally, no matter how brilliant and engaging our teaching, without the expectation and provision for students to meet certain requirements of academic discipline and rigour, our efforts to nurture religious, ethical and values literate thinkers will also have been in vain.

We present an eclectic series of articles in this 22nd issue of the *Dialogue Australasia* journal. The unifying aim is not only to provoke thought on what might constitute sound classroom practice, but also to stimulate and inspire the imagination to approach familiar themes from fresh and adventurous angles, and so assist our students to discover their own authentic ethical, spiritual and moral voice.

Adiche says that stories matter: that for every story that dispossesses, maligns and brings down people's dignity, there are others that empower, humanise and repair. And she concludes that when we reject the single story, we regain a kind of paradise.

Nikolai Blaskow Editor

Editorial Policy:

Dialogue Australasia Journal is a twice yearly publication committed to improving the academic standards of Religious, Philosophy and Values Education in Australasia. It is intended that the articles for the journal should:

- Be broadly representative of the 'Five Strands'
- Contain material that is compatible with the Purposes and Aims of DAN
- Be non-confessional and non-denominational
- Target secondary teachers
- Nourish the target audience and equip with practical teaching resources

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The Personal Search Approach to Religious Education

The Place of Religious Education in the Curriculum

The curriculum of schools tries to do four main things:

1. It tries to give young people an idea of what we know about the Universe and that part of it called the earth which we inhabit; of how we find out about it and to some extent control it.
2. It tries to develop in each child a sense of her or his own identity and of what part to play in adult life; to develop a sensitivity in, and an understanding of, individual personal relationships between groups of people and between nations.
3. It attempts to foster in children the ability to communicate what they know and what they feel, by talking and listening; by writing and reading words and mathematical symbols; by illustrating and looking; by taking part, sometimes as performers, sometimes as appreciative audience, in art, dance, drama and music.
4. And hardest of all, it attempts to deal with the fact that people in all societies have tried to search for the meaning to life by grappling with questions of ultimate concern, e.g., **Who am I? What is life for? What ought I to be doing? Where am I going?**

Religious Education can of course make unique contributions to each of the above areas. However, most modern syllabuses

The Personal Search Approach...sees the primary aim of RE as creating a relationship between the content of RE and the personal existential concerns of students.

agree that the *special* focus of RE should be the concerns of the fourth task and this article will be outlining a teaching approach that supports this view. It is called **The Personal Search Approach** because it sees the primary aim of RE as creating a relationship between the content of Religious Education and the *personal* existential concerns of students.

The Personal Search Model

Open-ended

The Confessional Model for teaching RE accepts that Ultimate Questions are important to this curriculum area and should be investigated. However, since there are objective Ultimate Answers, these questions are simply seen as a route to 'the truth.' There is therefore an agenda and teaching strategies are employed by pastor/teachers which are intended to ultimately encourage students to accept a certain set of answers. Personal Search in this model is not therefore open-ended. It is carefully scripted to encourage students to ask the right questions and accept 'truths' which are not universally accepted. This model can be described as **'educating into religion.'**

The Personal Search Model has no such agenda. It starts with the existential concerns of students and simply demonstrates a *possible* relationship between these concerns and the religious dimension. This does of course require the student to be guided from their concerns towards 'religious responses'. However, the teacher is not a pastor encouraging the acceptance of exclusive truth claims. Personal Search is open-ended and the role of the teacher is simply to encourage an exploration of existential questions and to reflect on the insights of different spiritual traditions.

The emphasis therefore is on teaching students 'how to think' and not 'what to think'. This model can therefore be described as **'educating from religion'** because it gives

The Personal Search Model accepts that 'learning about religion' is important. However, its key principle is that RE is not Multi-Cultural Studies and that its primary focus is not the communication of 'facts about religion' but the existential concerns and questions of pupils.

pupils the opportunity to consider different 'spiritual' answers to their own personal existential concerns so that they may develop their own views in a reflective way. This approach puts the experience of the students at the centre of the teaching.

Existential

The Descriptive Model for teaching Religious Education also accepts that Ultimate Questions are areas to be investigated. However, this is not the dominant idea. Instead, its emphasis is on teaching 'about' the beliefs, values and practices of different religions and understanding the way in which these may influence the behaviour of individuals within these religions. Its key concern is therefore 'information' about different religious and cultural traditions (festivals, foods, holy days) which in practice often crowds out any personal reflection on existential questions. This model can therefore be described as **'educating about religion'** because it puts the communication of 'facts' at the centre of the teaching.

The Personal Search Model accepts that 'learning about religion' is important. However, its key principle is that Religious Education is not Multi-Cultural Studies and that its primary focus is not the communication of **'facts about religion'**

but the existential concerns and questions of pupils. This is the selecting principle for the facts which should be introduced to students of RE and if adopted would no doubt lead to much of the traditional material (artefacts, food, ceremonies, etc) being abandoned. An analogy may help.

Imagine for example a music teacher spending all of her curriculum time simply describing to children the different sorts of instruments played by people throughout the world. This teacher focuses on the material each instrument is made from, demonstrates with mime how each instrument should be held and the sort of hand or mouth movements that would need to be made if a sound were to be produced. Now most people would no doubt recognise this as one possible educational aim of a music curriculum. However, if this were its chief aim you could no doubt feel that this teacher was not 'wired up' properly and had failed to introduce children to the most important and exciting dimension of the subject, i.e. the experience of music itself.

In the same sort of way teachers of Religious Education who spend all of their time simply describing to children the different sorts of religious traditions practised by different ethnic groups throughout the world will also be failing to introduce children to the most important, exciting and relevant dimension of this subject, i.e., that at the centre of all the major world religions there are philosophies which claim to have something relevant to say about the personal concerns of our lives. The Personal Search Model is based on the idea that this is where the 'music' of this subject takes place.

An Extended Canon

The Confessional and Descriptive models of Religious Education encourage an exploration of spirituality within the limited theological canon of the Major World Religions and this limited enquiry appears to be based on a Cartesian view that Religious thinking is distinct from Secular approaches to 'beliefs and values' and that the primary focus of RE should therefore concern itself with the former and not the latter. However, this Cartesian distinction no longer receives wide support in Philosophies of Education.

The Personal Search Model is not limited by this discredited approach to knowledge and recognises that our spiritual inheritance

extends beyond the sacred texts, traditions and practices of the Major World Religions and that the great works of literature, music, art and philosophy are important sources of spiritual insight and wisdom. For example, *Macbeth*, the music of Beethoven, the paintings of Bacon and the life and death of Socrates all make important spiritual responses to the ultimate questions concerning the nature and destiny of our existence. The Personal Search Approach accepts this and integrates World Religions with the insights of these different disciplines. This integration furthermore reflects the broader approach to spirituality that is now occurring throughout the world.

Summarising the Personal Search Model

- (a) It puts the experiences of students at the centre of teaching by moving away from either a confessional or descriptive model to one that is open-ended and which focuses more precisely on the existential concerns of pupils.
- (b) It gives pupils the opportunity to consider different answers to their own personal existential concerns so that they may develop their own views in a reflective way.
- (c) It takes a broader view of our spiritual canon and sees the great works of our literary and artistic inheritance as indispensable sources of spiritual wisdom and insight.
- (d) It seeks to integrate the insights of the Major World Religions with the insights of this extended canon in a new holistic approach to RE
- (e) It seeks to create more common ground and interest in this curriculum area by reflecting more accurately, in



...at the centre of all the major world religions there are philosophies which claim to have something relevant to say about the personal concerns of our lives. The Personal Search Model is based on the idea that this is where the 'music' of this subject takes place.

its structure and content, the broader approach to spirituality that is occurring in many countries throughout the world.

Can any RE Teacher, whatever their views, teach from a personal search perspective?

The parable below is called *The Stranger* and was written by the philosopher Basil Mitchell. It is a parable which attempts to explain what unites and divides us in our search for meaning, value and purpose in life.



The Stranger

In time of war in an occupied country, a member of the resistance meets one night a stranger who deeply impresses him. They spend that night together in conversation. The Stranger tells the partisan that he is himself on the side of the resistance - indeed that he is in command of it, and urges the partisan to have faith in him no matter what happens. The partisan is utterly convinced at that meeting of the Stranger's sincerity and constancy and undertakes to trust him.

They never meet in conditions of intimacy again. But sometimes the Stranger is seen helping members of the resistance, and the partisan is grateful and says to his friends, 'He is on our side.'

Sometimes he is seen in the uniform of the police handing over patriots to the occupying power. On these occasions his friends murmur against him: but the partisan still says, 'He is on our side'. He still believes that, in spite of appearances, the Stranger did not deceive him. Sometimes he asks the Stranger for help and receives it. He is then thankful. Sometimes he asks and does not receive it. Then he says, 'The Stranger knows best.' Sometimes his friends, in exasperation, say, 'Well, what would he have to do for you to admit that you were wrong and that he is not on our side?' But the partisan refuses to answer.

He will not consent to put the Stranger to the test. And sometimes his friends complain: 'Well, if that's what you mean by his being on our side, the sooner he goes over to the other side the better.'

The partisan of the parable does not allow anything to count decisively against the proposition 'The Stranger is on our side.' This is because he has committed himself to trust the Stranger. But he of course recognises that the Stranger's **ambiguous** behaviour does count against what he believes about him. It is precisely this situation which constitutes the trial of his faith.

Basil Mitchell

From *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*,
Eds Flew and MacIntyre (SCM Press, 1955)

The writer of this parable is saying that all human beings are in the same sort of situation as the partisans. When we are born, whether we like it or not, we all come face to face with a '**Universe**' that is both **strange** and **mysterious**. This strange 'Universe' also acts just as ambiguously as the Stranger in the parable. There are times for example when it appears to be under the control of a power (or personality) known by some as God. On these occasions the 'Universe' appears to care and value us, **to give meaning to our lives** and so to be most certainly 'on our side.' There are other times, however, when the universe appears to be empty of any power that is concerned about us, when life seems to be totally **meaningless** and the universe very much against us.

The writer is of course implying that the decision we make about the 'Universe' represents a very important difference that exists between us. Those who act like the main partisan in the parable are people who have decided to trust that the universe is on the side of humanity, i.e., that there is within the universe a power or reality (sometimes referred to as God) that values us and gives some **ultimate meaning** to our lives. Those however who act like the other partisans are people who have decided that the universe is very much against us, i.e., that the universe is empty of a caring power and that there is **no ultimate meaning** to our existence.

However the writer also seems to be saying that even though we make different decisions about the universe, we can nevertheless continue to stand on common ground, for

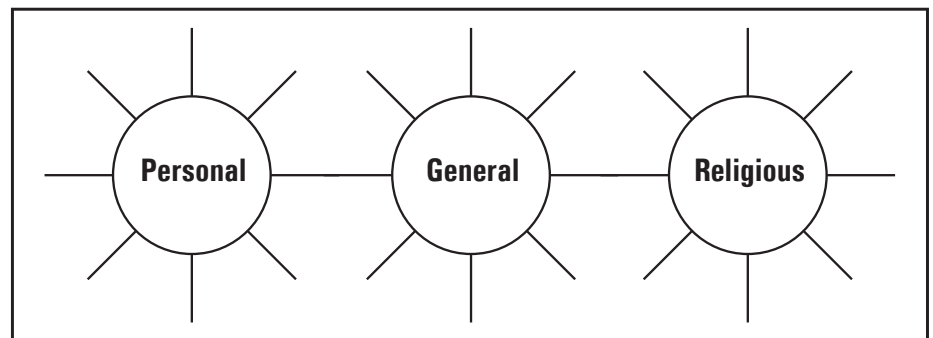
whatever we have decided about **ultimate meaning**, the universe continues to be strange to us all and so can still generate within us questions about its ambiguous behaviour.

It is my view that if you are the sort of person who is still asking questions about this universe then you should be capable of teaching RE as a **Personal Search**, for the role of the teacher in this dimension of the curriculum is not to provide children with 'the answers' to their questions but rather to act like a sign post, pointing children in directions where further thinking and reflection can take place.

Pointing Children Towards Philosophies of Hope

Religious Education as a **Personal Search** is a unique opportunity to *ultimately* point children towards philosophies which tell them **that they matter, what they do matters** and **what happens to them matters**, i.e. towards philosophies which maintain that their lives have some sort of **ultimate meaning**. There is of course no obligation for the teacher or the student to believe in these philosophies (just as there is no obligation on a history teacher or a student covering the topic of Marxism to be a committed Marxist). **Children nevertheless have a right to know that these philosophies exist and a right to make up their own minds about the 'hope' that these philosophies offer them as individuals.**

This **Personal Search Approach** can be represented diagrammatically in the following way, and in the following article by Dylan Bartlett, this model will be 'unpacked' by applying it to a specific topic.



Robert Kirkwood Edinburgh

Robert Kirkwood lectured in Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies at the University of Edinburgh and is one of the best known Religious Educators in the UK. His books such as *Looking for God*, *Looking for Proof of God*, *If I Were God I'd Say Sorry* and more recently *Ethical Theory and Philosophy of Religion* are used extensively in schools in a variety of different countries. Robert presented *Sparks in the Classroom* seminars in Sydney and Perth in 2009, with repeat seminars planned for 2010.

www.sparksintheclassroom.com



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