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Multifaith Education and Social Inclusion in Australia

Abstract:

The rise of religious diversity as part of the lived experience of most people calls for the inclusion of multifaith education in school curricula. This paper provides a summary of findings and recommendations regarding religious and multifaith education from Australian studies and conference proceedings between 2004 and 2007. We review some of the demands for education about religions, some of the approaches to delivering such education and make recommendations for the implementation of programs designed to prepare students to work in and contribute to a world characterised by religious diversity and revitalisation. We argue that as religions are playing an increasingly prominent role in the public sphere, there is a growing need for education about religions for all Australian school children in order to counter ignorance and advance a greater level of interreligious awareness, respect and understanding. Finally we argue that for Australia to continue to be a harmonious culturally and religiously diverse society, it is in our national interest to invest in multifaith education as a strategy to promote social inclusion and advance common security.

Introduction

In the course of our research whenever we have conducted consultations with religious communities in Australia, and for that matter, overseas, the most frequent request we have received is for education about religions to be included in the curriculum from the first years of schooling (Cahill, Bouma, Dellal, & Leahy, 2004; Bouma, Pickering, Halafoff & Dellal, 2007; Cahill, Bouma, Dellal, & Leahy, *forthcoming*). Religious communities, particularly minority religious communities, want others to know who they are and how they are religious and spiritual. In a recent conversation with a religious leader it became clear that he and his community felt that they understood their own faith and how it worked for them, but they knew little of the workings of the faith of Muslims, the practices of Buddhists, or the spiritualities of Pagans. They felt the need to be educated, to be introduced to the ways various groups are religious.

In addition, many people have been raised without involvement in a religious community, even if they identify with one. Thus not only are they ignorant of the ways others are religious, they are not familiar with the way their own background religion works. Consequently, we argue that as religions are playing an increasingly prominent role in the public sphere, there is a growing need for education about religions for all Australian school children in order to counter ignorance and advance a greater level of interreligious awareness, respect and understanding.

Ignorance about religion in general and about the religions of our neighbours makes possible the denigration of religion in general, the despising of those who are religious by those who are not, the demonisation of those who are not religious by those who are and the vilification of those who are religiously different whether within the same group or of another group. These actions tear at the social fabric and reduce the capacity of a society to deal creatively with change, to meet the needs of all citizens and to relate meaningfully to the wider world. In short ignorance about religions leads to the kinds of disrespect that greatly undermines social cohesion and places our common security at risk.

The need for education about religions is gradually becoming accepted among education policy makers

(Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, 2008). The question that arises is how is this to be done? This paper reviews some of the demands for education about religions, some of the approaches to delivering such education and makes recommendations for the implementation of programs designed to prepare students to work in and contribute to a world characterised by religious diversity and revitalisation.

Increases in religious diversity and revitalisation

The last twenty years have not witnessed the exit of religion from social life and public policy. Migration, together with the global movement of ideas and cultures including religions and spiritualities, has changed the religious profiles of nations and cities around the world. Once largely mono-cultural, urban areas have become again thriving cosmopolitan centres of diversity where cultures, ethnicities and religions live intermingled, sharing daily contact and interaction at work, school and as they shop. Table X.1 documents the rise of this kind of diversity in Australia (Bouma and Ling 2008; *in press*).

Table X.1: The number and proportion of selected Australian religious groups in the 1947, 1971, 1996, 2001 and 2006 Censuses

Religious Identification*	1947 000s	%	1971 000s	%	1996 000s	%	2001 000s	%	2006 000s	%
CHRISTIAN										
Anglican	2957	39.0	3953	31.0	3903	22.0	3881	20.7	3,718	18.7
Baptist	114	1.5	176	1.4	295	1.7	309	1.7	317	1.6
Catholic	1570	20.7	3443	27.0	4799	27.0	5002	26.7	5,127	25.8
Lutheran	67	0.9	197	1.5	250	1.4	250	1.3	251	1.3
MPCRU**	1678	22.1	2199	17.2	2011	11.3	1887	10.1	1,732	8.7
Orthodox	17	0.2	339	2.7	497	2.8	529	2.8	544	2.7
Pentecostal	--	--	--	--	175	1.0	195	1.0	220	1.1
OCG***	270	3.8	683	5.4	653	4.4	711	3.7	777	4.0
Total Christian	**6,673**	**88.0**	**10,990**	**86.2**	**12,583**	**70.6**	**12,764**	**68.0**	**12,686**	**63.9**
BUDDHISTS	--	--	--	--	200	1.1	358	1.9	419	2.1
HINDUS	--	--	--	--	67	0.4	95	0.5	148	0.7
JEWS	32	0.4	62	0.5	80	0.5	84	0.4	89	0.4
MUSLIMS	--	--	22	0.2	201	1.1	282	1.5	340	1.7
OTHER**	4	0.1	14	0.1	69	0.4	92	0.5	109	0.5
Total	**37**	**0.5**	**99**	**0.8**	**617**	**3.5**	**911**	**4.8**	**1,105**	**5.6**
Inadequate Desc	19	0.2	29	0.2	54	0.3	352	1.9	134	0.7
	26	0.3	856	6.7	2949	16.5	2905	15.5	3707	18.7
No Religion Not Stated	825	10.9	781	6.1	1551	8.7	1836	9.8	2224	11.2
Total Population	7,579		12,756		17,753		18,769		19,855	

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics
* Only those Christian groups larger than 1% and other groups 0.4% and larger in 2006 have been included.
** MPCRU combines the data for the Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational, Reformed and Uniting Churches. The Uniting Church was formed in 1977 in a merger of Congregational, Methodist and about half of the Presbyterians.
*** OCG – Other Christian Groups less than 1%.
****Other religious groups less than 0.4% of the population

Similar tables could be produced for most cities and countries of the world. Like Australia, the USA, the UK and many European countries have experienced the emergence of significant religious communities that

comprise over 1 per cent of their population. These are not just congeries of religious individuals, but communities with worship centres, cultural centres, social services and schools. They call for respect and acceptance as part of the societies into which many have been born and for access to government services, social security and the chance to make a contribution to the life of the larger community. The extent and composition of religious diversity from country to country varies considerably and the policies about and degrees of openness to diversity vary even more. However, the fact of religious diversity remains an undeniable, irreversible fact of twenty-first century social life.

With the rise of religious diversity has also come the revitalisation of religion, the return of religion to public policy discourse. Diversity alone makes religion and religious identity more interesting. There is little salience to religious identity if all are the same. Some religious persons wear distinctive clothing, others follow religious identity declaring dietary regimes, others need to pray at intervals unfamiliar to their friends and neighbours, and the list could go on. Religious diversity also contributes to the rising contestation of religious voices in the formation of public policy (Habermas 2006). The facts of increased diversity in the lived experience of most people, certainly of most within Western democratic societies, make education about religion necessary to provide the skills and attitudes necessary to conduct oneself .successfully as a citizen in a cosmopolitan world. Managers need to be sensitive to the religious and spiritual needs of their workers, educators need to be respectful of religion and spirituality, counsellors need to know how religion works in the healthy person and not treat religious belief as evidence of disorder or delusion. An appreciative understanding of religions is an invaluable skill set in an increasingly interconnected world where religion plays a significant role in the public sphere.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations from Australian Studies and Conferences 2004-2007

The following summary draws on the findings and recommendations of Australian studies and conference proceedings between 2004 and 2007. While not all of these publications were focussed primarily on religious education, each contained specific recommendations regarding religious and multifaith education in Australia, a summary of which is presented thematically below. Throughout this paper, we use the term multifaith education to denote the study of multiple religions, spiritualities and world views as distinct from religious or interreligious education.

Calls for Multifaith Education

While several recent Australian studies have recognised the central role that education plays in building a socially inclusive and secure multifaith society (Cahill, Bouma, Dellal, & Leahy, 2004, p. 126; Erebus International, 2006, p.109; Bouma, Pickering, Halafoff & Dellal, 2007; Halafoff and Wright-Neville, *in press*) religious education in Australia has been described as "lagging behind other nations" (Byrne, 2007, p.45 citing Rossiter, 2001). According to Byrne (2007, p.46 citing Lovat, 2002), the United Kingdom is the leader in the field of multifaith education. Since the 1988 *British Education Reform Act*, "world religions education" has been compulsory for government school students 16 years and under thereby contributing to the personal and intellectual development of students and their understanding of community cohesion (OFSTED, 2007, p.25 cited in Byrne, p.46).

Recently several reports have recommended that multifaith education be introduced in Australia. The Erebus International (2006, p.109) study concluded: "There is no doubt that all schools have an important role to play in creating a cohesive and harmonious Australian society, through developing greater inter-cultural understanding". The main challenge that Erebus International (2006, pp.112-113) cited was to ensure that *all* Australian students be provided with high-quality intercultural and interreligious education. To this end Erebus International recommended that all Australian Governments "commit to increasing interfaith and intercultural understanding as a national priority for schooling".

Culturally, religiously and linguistically diverse (CRALD) communities in Victoria and Queensland also emphasised the need to encourage tolerance, respect and understanding of cultural and religious diversity at a young age. Participants in the *Global Crisis Events Study* viewed education as "a key factor for any

sustainable change to prejudiced or ignorant attitudes". One respondent stated, "it was time for governments to take religious education more seriously". Consequently CRALD communities recommended more teaching about religions in Australian government schools and for multifaith education taught by qualified teachers to replace religious education as currently taught by volunteers. This would, thereby, ensure "balanced views and representation from Australia's diverse faith communities" (Bouma, Pickering, Halafoff & Dellal, 2007, pp. 78-79, 86).

The Problem of Exclusion: Concerns about current Religious Education and Values Education in Australian Schools

The *Religion, Cultural Diversity and Safeguarding Australia* (*RCDSA*) report documented that religion and religious leaders have played a significant role in the construction of social capital in Australia through contribution to: the formation of values; education; health care; welfare; aid; philanthropy; social justice; multiculturalism and family cohesion. It also stated that Australia's social capital and community security could be threatened by exclusion promoted by religion; religious extremism and intolerance; gender inequity and anti-Islamic views (Cahill, Bouma, Dellal, & Leahy, 2004, pp.11, 72-73).

Disturbingly, CRALD communities in Victoria and Queensland have reported rising Islamophobia, migrantophobia and attacks on multiculturalism following the events of September 11, 2001. However, religious communities have been far from passive in their responses to the impact of these events by initiating dialogue and educational activities in an attempt to dispel negative stereotypes and attitudes. These communities raised concerns that, as religious education in public schools was taught predominantly by Christian volunteers, it was not inclusive. Participants reported that, conversely private schools, particularly Catholic and Islamic schools, had successfully implemented multifaith education programs that were genuinely representative of diverse faith traditions (Bouma, Pickering, Halafoff & Dellal, 2007, pp. 4-6, 78-79, 32-33).

Byrne has recently echoed these concerns while tracing the development of Religious Education in NSW and Queensland. Byrne (2007, pp.33-34, 29, 13, 15) expresses grave concerns about what she calls "Australia's Christian privilege" in religious education. She argues that "special access rights" enable "groups to bring an exclusivist, mostly Christian emphasis" to studies of religion "provided by non teacher trained representatives of religious groups". Byrne concludes that outside of the private sector there is little pluralist religious education in Australia and that "broad based comparative religious education is yet to be widely accepted".

As most studies in the area of religion and education funded by the previous Commonwealth Government targeted immigrant communities, particularly Muslim communities, these findings indicate that perhaps more emphasis should be placed on addressing the above concerns regarding religious education in Australian government schools. It may be that host communities are actually more in need of multifaith education to promote interreligious understanding than are immigrant communities.

The findings of the Erebus International, (2006, p. vi-vii) study add further weight to these assertions. The study, which contributed to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) National Action Plan, focussed on Muslim youth identified as being at risk of alienation. It investigated "what schools, systems and sectors are currently doing to encourage the message to Islamic youth that Islam is compatible with, and can live alongside, other faiths and Australian values". Erebus International reported that while existing State curriculum frameworks recognise the importance of promoting intercultural and interfaith understanding, "the extent to which individual schools take up this challenge has not previously been systematically evaluated. Anecdotal evidence suggests that while good work has been done in some places, there is scope for further effort in others". Stakeholders mentioned that a catalyst, such as a high proportion of cultural diversity or of Muslim students within a school, was required for schools to take action to promote interfaith and intercultural understanding. Conversely, largely mono-cultural schools usually regarded such initiatives as unnecessary. Islamic schools were also noted as being more actively engaged in programs of interfaith and intercultural understanding "to develop strategies to live harmoniously in the wider

Australian society", in response to "discrimination and marginalisation" of Muslims, and "to inform others about the Islamic faith". Catholic, congregational and other schools with a "strong sense of social justice" were also listed as more likely to include multifaith education.

On issues of harmony and security, Erebus International (2006, pp. xii- xiii) raised concerns regarding the alienation of Muslim youth in Australian society. Education and employment were cited as strategies that could assist in preventing alienation and thereby potential vulnerability to radicalisation and extremism. Erebus International stated that previous immigrant communities had faced similar issues and that over time "to a large extent these things have been worked out". They also stated that assisting Muslim communities with integration and feeling "connected to the mainstream community" were "essential for ensuring extremism is rejected in Australia, and to help Australian Muslims just get on with their lives". Multifaith education, particularly programs including interschool cooperation, were described as "a sound starting point".

As the Erebus study illustrates, in recent years calls for multifaith education have often been linked with values education. Many Australian scholars and practitioners have recently advocated expanding current values education programs to include more emphasis on values derived from multiple faith traditions and for new resources to be developed to facilitate this inclusion (UNESCO, 2005, pp. 242-244, 523; Pascoe, 2005; Toh & Cawagas, 2007, p. 372; Erebus International, 2006).

However, Byrne (2007, p.30) cites prominent religious education scholar Robert Jackson (2007) to argue that citizenship and values education should not be viewed as replacements for religious education but rather as "complementary areas of study". This argument is validated by the many calls, listed above, from communities and scholars for religious education to include more focus on religious diversity. Given religions' prominent role in global issues in the 21st century, a more comprehensive study of the social significance of religions in contemporary society, beyond the role they play in the formation of values, is advisable.

In addition, values education has been associated with promoting a narrow nationalism under the former Commonwealth Government (Bouma, Pickering, Halafoff & Dellal, 2007; Halafoff, 2006). According to Byrne (2007, pp.37-38), under the Howard government "[f]or school children, the ethnic food festivals and intercultural projects have been replaced with participation in ANZAC Day, a National Flag Day and singing the national anthem" alongside a push for Australian Values education. These developments affirm the need to emphasise an intercultural and interreligious approach to values education to prevent it from becoming a vehicle for exclusion and, thereby, potential alienation and radicalisation of youth. It also calls into question whether values education is, in fact, the best way to introduce multifaith education into Australian schools, and whether in time values education, strongly associated as it is with the divisive rhetoric of the former Commonwealth Government, will be replaced by a different strategy.

These concerns and recommendations are consistent with issues raised and strategies promoted by Victorian scholars and policy makers in the field of counter-terrorism and social inclusion. Exclusive and divisive discourses, promoting Christian values over and above the values of other faith traditions and over universal values of tolerance and inclusion are liable to increase alienation and thereby possible radicalisation of youth in minority groups. They are also liable to legitimise racial and religious vilification in host communities, as was disturbingly witnessed during the 2005 riots at Cronulla beach in Sydney (Halafoff, 2006). Promoting an inclusive multicultural and multifaith Australia is likely to minimise alienation and thereby contribute to more harmonious societies (Halafoff, 2006; Halafoff and Wright-Neville, in press).

Following on from these assessments, allowing a potentially narrow religious message to be taught to young Australians could sustain interreligious ignorance and heighten social tensions among Australian communities. Consequently, the promotion of a more inclusive multifaith curriculum can be seen to be in our national interest.

Efficacy of Multifaith Education: Local and International Examples

The Erebus (2006, p. vi.) report included six 'best practice' case studies from government, Catholic and Islamic schools in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. They found that programs that pervaded the entire curriculum were more likely to be successful than isolated activities. A 'whole of school approach', including parent cooperation, was also cited as important, as was the need to provide opportunities for students to be reflexive and to discuss their own and others' beliefs. Engaging in community service projects was also deemed critical in encouraging intercultural understanding. School visits, real or virtual, were also reported as highly advantageous in breaking down barriers and promoting greater awareness of religious practices. Students commented that small group discussions enabled them to counter prejudices and negative stereotypes while forming new friendships that have at times proved long lasting (Erebus International, 2006, pp.viii-iv).

As cited above, CRALD communities in the *Global Crisis Events* study also mentioned the success of Catholic and Islamic schools in implementing multifaith programs that incorporated visits of religious leaders to schools from multiple faith traditions and also visits for students to diverse places of worship (Bouma, Pickering, Halafoff & Dellal, 2007, p.79). This correlates with findings from the recent Australia Deliberates study which found that prejudice, fear and negative stereotypes, in this case towards Muslim Australians, decreased with contact and knowledge about the 'other' (Issues Deliberation Australia/America, 2007, p.8).

Calls for Future Research and Curriculum Development

Several recent studies have stressed the need for further research regarding religious education in Australia. As education was not the central focus of the *RCDSA* study, it called for more research in this area. The report stated that while much debate in the media had "focused unfairly on Muslim schools ... all schools, whether government or private, religious or non-denominational, need to be asked about their treatment of religious issues in their curricula, and in the case of religious schools, about their treatment of other world faiths" (Cahill, Bouma, Dellal, & Leahy, 2004, p.126).

The Erebus (2006, p. vii) report stated that while existing State curriculum frameworks recognise the importance of promoting intercultural and interfaith understanding, "the extent to which individual schools take up this challenge has not previously been systematically evaluated. Anecdotal evidence suggests that while good work has been done in some places, there is scope for further effort in others". Erebus International (2006, p.xi) also noted that with regard to interfaith and intercultural education, while the Australian Government had recently funded the development of the *Big Beliefs* book by the Asia Education Foundation, there was scope for "increased professional development nationally". The Erebus (2006, p.109) study concluded that while there were existing resources, opportunities for professional development and case studies of best practice models in intercultural and interfaith education, there was also "clearly scope for further work in this area". It thereby recommended "that a comprehensive project be commissioned to examine the broader issue of the role of schools nationally in promoting social cohesion through interfaith and intercultural understanding" in Australia.

The Erebus (2006, p.109) report recommended interschool cooperation and the need for more funding for curriculum development, including trialling of existing material such as the Asia Education Foundation's *Developing Intercultural Understanding: An Introduction for Teachers* and revising it to incorporate an equal emphasis on interfaith understanding. Erebus International also highlighted the need to provide modules on interfaith understanding in pre-service teacher education and to provide opportunities for further professional development for educators in this field.

Byrne's (2007, p.21) summary of international debates regarding interreligious education also concluded with stressing the need for further research in this area, stating that "the role of a broad-based study of religion in schools is yet to be effectively evaluated in Australia" (Byrne, 2007, p.74).

Future Recommendations

While Byrne's (2007) study contains an impressive bibliography and review of literature that could well form the basis for future inquiry, a comprehensive and concise review of literature investigating multifaith education as a social inclusion strategy, in and beyond Australia, is yet to be completed. In addition, research into the efficacy of multifaith education, in Australia and internationally, is currently slim and there is an urgent need for further research in this area. The difficulty with much evaluative work in this field is that it often includes comparisons of programs that vary significantly in content, pedagogy, and context, making any conclusive assessments regarding the efficacy of such programs extremely difficult. Existing evaluations also concentrate on immediate effects of programs, and not their long term efficacy.

Given the success of the Deliberative Polling method, as demonstrated by the 2007 *Australia Deliberates: Muslims and Non-Muslims in Australia, Final Report Summary* referred to above, there is a need for more evaluation of the kind that measures levels of interreligious understanding in surveys conducted before and after participating in multifaith education activities. There is also a need for more longitudinal studies in this area including follow up interviews with participants six, twelve, thirty-six and seventy-two months after training, measuring not only levels of interreligious understanding but also levels of engagement in community activities that encourage interfaith understanding. Participants' experiences could be measured against a control group who did not take part in multifaith education.

In addition, as with the previous Commonwealth Government programs such as *Living in Harmony* and the *National Action Plan* which targeted immigrant communities, particularly Muslim communities, it is important to assess whether it is indeed immigrant communities that are most in need of multifaith education. As yet, no comprehensive study has been conducted into existing levels of interreligious understanding among Australian students in primary and secondary schools. Evidence of this kind would enable more equitable and effective targeting of communities thereby avoiding the prejudice inherent in the previous Commonwealth Governments' funding priorities. There is no doubt that Muslim communities were in need of particular assistance in combating negative stereotyping following the events of September 11, the Bali and London bombings. However, the lack of corresponding emphasis on education directed at those communities that generate the bulk of the acts of discrimination and violence towards Australian Muslims also needs to be addressed. As prejudice against newly arriving communities has been recorded amongst not only Anglo-Australian communities but also among older immigrant communities including, European and Asian Australians, evidence suggests that all Australian communities could benefit from multifaith education. A comprehensive study of Australian children and youth investigating levels of prejudice and interreligious understanding however, is yet to be conducted.

While there is no doubt that further research is necessary, we believe there are sufficient concerns expressed in existing research to recommend a re-evaluation of the way religious instruction and education are currently being taught in Australian schools, particularly regarding their largely exclusively Christian orientation. Indeed, as described above, CRALD communities have called for a more inclusive model of religious education. Given that the UK has developed and implemented multifaith education for several decades, it is well worth examining the UK model in conjunction with best practice models of multifaith education in Australian schools, as documented in the Erebus study, in order to develop a more inclusive model of religious education in Australia.

In addition, we hold the view that values education should not replace religious education in Australian schools, rather values education should include more reference to diverse religions and spiritualities as sources of values. Values education and multifaith education should be seen as complementary areas of inquiry. Given the prominent role religion plays in contemporary societies, for Australian students to be genuinely prepared to be global citizens, an understanding of religion is critical to address many of the challenges of the modern world. This cannot be achieved by values education alone.

Furthermore, as discussed throughout this paper, for Australia to continue to be a harmonious culturally and religiously diverse society, investing in multifaith education as a strategy to promote social inclusion is

in our national interest. With a new Commonwealth Government and the release of the *Melbourn Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (2008), which prioritises the need for appreciatic and respect for religious diversity, we believe that the time to act is now.

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