

# Paradigm Shift in Teaching Religion

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## Introduction

Teaching religion in the new educational dispensation has to deal with new paradigms (Roux 1998). Multireligious and multicultural situations prevail at all levels of the education system (tertiary to primary). Many schools in South Africa, both private and public, accommodate children from different cultures, language and religions in the same classroom. One can therefore assume that all the provinces in South Africa have schools that are multireligious (inter-religious) and multicultural (intercultural). It is therefore obvious that in South Africa, with diverse cultural societies, these components will become increasingly contentious. The change to a new paradigm in teaching religion does not involve only the lecturers or teachers/educators, but all role-players in education. Educators, parents, school boards and learners have to rethink the purpose of religious education in education.

In this paper the following aspects will be addressed:

- the role and function of religious education within outcomes-based education (OBE), specifically in the learning area *Life orientation* (Curriculum 2005 1997);
- the role and function of religious education educators, focusing on their educational and moral position within the new educational system; and
- the results of a research project and subsequent workshops on

the topic *Redefining the role of religious education within South African multicultural and multireligious public*

The discussion document of the National Department of Education (April 1997) outlines the specific outcomes for *Life Orientation* and therefore some religious education within the school curriculum. The rationale for this learning area was stated as follows (*Curriculum 2005 1997:220*): "Life Orientation is fundamental in empowering learners to live meaningful lives in a society that demands rapid transformation." In order to empower learners to live meaningful lives in a changing and pluralistic society, the skills to enhance positive values are needed. Skills will not only promote respect for other cultural and religious communities, but also help to understand one's own belief and value system.

The ideal of religious education as a separate school subject is diminishing in the light of the new ideas and OBE (*Curriculum 2005 1997*). The role of religions or religious education was not clearly demarcated in the learning area entitled *Life Orientation*. However, the specific outcome "*respect the rights of people to hold personal beliefs and values*" presents an opportunity for the implementation of a well-balanced religious education programme in public schools. Still, many communities were dissatisfied with this outcome as they contemplated the diminishing opportunity for a monoreligious approach. If the outcome could be altered to "*respect the rights of individuals and communities to hold beliefs and values,*" problem-areas could be overcome, and individual communities may not feel threatened by the new programme.

It is understandable that there may be a fear for a dogmatic or a confessional approach, as had been the case in the apartheid educational regime. However, this problem may be overcome if the focuses in the assessment criteria and range statements are broadened to include a module on monoreligious education. A more flexible approach is suggested for introducing religious education in a way that suits a particular school community. *Life Orientation*, and spe-

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cially religious education can only be introduced when one's own religious beliefs and values are not threatened. From the results of an empirical research within the South African school environment, it was found that it is important for a child in the *foundation stage* to understand a personal belief and value system, before introducing other belief and value systems (Roux 1997; Roux/Steenkamp 1995).

Communities still eventually have to decide whether they want to opt for a fully fledged multireligious programme or for some other version of it. The new education policy as reflected in the OBE-approach in *Curriculum 2005* still has a long way to go. Most of the educators in the South African school system have very little or no knowledge of OBE. The negative perception regarding the accountability of such an approach in the South African education system is also a matter of contention. The failures of aspects of OBE, the emotional reactions and the concerns about the process of delivery in other countries have evoked severe reactions. The assessment of values in OBE can be superficial because "what the learner believes and what the learner does" may indeed differ. In order to understand religion, values, life skills and belief systems of the society in which the child lives, the outcomes can only be met if educators can redefine their roles as facilitators.

The change from a mainly monoreligious to a multireligious approach in the classroom will inevitably affect educators formerly trained within a monoreligious paradigm. They are "trapped" in the paradigm of monoreligious teaching and need to redefine their role, especially for the new educational programs. It is important to focus on their educational and moral position within the new educational system. To understand the role of religious education within a pluralistic society, a paradigm shift by educators, educators and school communities is needed to counter faulty perceptions, arguments and decision making in teaching religion in multicultural schools. Educators need to address their new role as facilitators in religious education within a new paradigm.

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Although a new education program has been introduced, the aims of religious education in most South African schools are still mainly based on Christianity which is: To gain knowledge about the Bible and to make people “better” human beings by knowing the Bible. The aim of religious education in new established “private Christian schools” is mainly to introduce Biblical values. Learners are rarely taught to understand or question any religious behaviour or customs. An implied aim is also to convert learners to Christianity, or to nurture the religious growth of Christian children. To understand Christian values within a pluralistic society is unfortunately not part the curriculum. Generally, Christian parents accept the above-mentioned situation in religious education. Their responsibilities regarding their children’s spiritual education are taken care of in secular institutions like schools.

As a result of the above-mentioned education program, many educators consider the link between culture and religion very important. The argument is that only knowledge of the Bible is necessary to appreciate a cultural heritage. The diversities of a society, different belief systems and religions are thus ignored. Many educators link moral issues only to Christianity, and in this way eliminate other belief and value systems. They focus only on differences and not on commonality. In order to re-evaluate the role and purpose of religious education in a new educational system, the focus on the educational and moral position of the religious education educator becomes very important.

The educator’s role as nurturer and Bible educator should therefore change to that of a facilitator for the attainment of knowledge of religions, religious customs and values. In the new educational role educators should be encouraged to explore religion as a phenomenon. As *religious educator* the educator becomes a link between the learner and the religion being studied. The educator is no longer an authoritative figure, but rather the facilitator that takes the subject beyond the belief of the educator. However, this may inflict a feeling of disillusion. The study and understanding of history, other

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cultures and religions, emphasising descriptive historical facts rather than spiritual growth and the exploration of a faith by which to live may be part of this disillusionment (Cole 1988:97).

Fear for teaching the content of other religions, questions about one's own religion and religiosity forces a new paradigm in religious education on the educator. Some are just not willing to accept the new paradigm due to lack of knowledge, fear of the unknown and/or religious conviction. In the dissemination of new content it is more important to listen rather than to persuade. To study religions constructively, to understand the meaning of their own value and belief systems, the educator must feel and be in command of the new content. In a new religious education program, the educator's attitudes should reflect tolerance, respect and love for every child, irrespective of his or her religious and cultural background. Religious education is still regarded as important for personal development. The emotional need of learners can also be met by moral issues outlined in *Curriculum 2005*. In doing so, guidelines should be provided for social and religious life in a pluralistic society and focus on basic values.

### **Research project on redefining the role of religious education within South African multicultural and multireligious public schools**

Positive motivation and encouragement are imperative to assist educators in making a paradigm shift to overcome fears and negative perceptions towards the study of religions. The new Curriculum 2005 program also puts pressure on educators who function in understaffed schools where rationalisation has had a negative influence on their morale. It is against this background, that changes in religious education must be implemented to accommodate all cultures and religions in a school community.

It is necessary to train professional educators in multireligious education. The long held perception that any educator (whether he

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or she is aptly qualified in the subject or not), can teach religious education, clearly does not contribute to this goal (Braaf 1994). The many problems prevailing in monoreligious education programmes or curricula will not be solved with a new curriculum or a multireligious approach alone. More problems will arise if a professional approach towards a new programme in religious education does not prevail. For many educators it may be a new experience realising that a religion is precious for the believer.

### **Redefining the role of religious education in a multicultural school environment.**

Funded by the HSRC, a special project was undertaken by the Department of Didactics at the University of Stellenbosch. Although the proposal of the project was to establish an in-service training program for schools to redefine religious education in their school environment, funding was only submitted for the first part of the project. This was to work with a target group of educators in selected school environments and to develop a training package through workshops. The second phase could not be implemented due to lack of funds. It would have included the implementation of the training package in more schools, feedback from educators (trainees) and reworking into a well-designed program for all schools with books and videos. The aim of this project was therefore to redefine the role of religious education in a multicultural and multireligious school environment.

The *target group* for phase 1 of the project was:

- Selected schools in the Western Cape, Gauteng and the North West Province.
  - Educators in public schools in metropolitan and rural areas as well as educators in public and private religious schools and from economically advantaged and disadvantaged school communities.
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### Method

A critical analysis was made of current international trends as well as of the *de facto* situation in certain areas of South Africa with respect to religious education. This was supported by qualitative and quantitative research in which the following steps were taken:

- 372 questionnaires were sent to educators in the respective provinces; 73 % of the questionnaires were returned and analysed.
- Perceptions of educators and their approaches to religious education in multicultural schools were assessed.
- An experimental in-service training package for educators was compiled to address problems-areas indicated by the respondents.
- Three one-day workshops were held in each of the provinces involving a total of 34 educators. These workshops were both theoretical and practical in nature, and educators had ample opportunity to practice their newly developed skills and to comment on the proposed new role of the religious education educator.

### Summary of the results of the empirical research

- 90 % of the educators involved in religious education in the selected schools were from the Christian faith
  - 95 % of the educators had no knowledge of the different religions in SA
  - Only 30 % of the educators had specific training in religious education at tertiary level
  - Most of the educators ( $\pm$  80 %) used the confessional approach in their classes. There was very little indication of professional didactic approaches in the learning process. Educators indicated a frustration with the subject as a whole.
  - All the educators felt that some form of nurturing in the child's own religion should take place. Some reasons were given as
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- *The school and the church and the community are a single body;*
- *From a religious point of view the commands in the “Bible”, “Qur’an” must be respected—thus nurturing is part of religious education.*
- *In some rural areas there were no central resources, like libraries, that could provide extra information on religious education. In many cases the only source of information is the religious leaders.*

From the above-mentioned indicators it seems that the redefinition of the role of religious education in a multireligious and multicultural school is not only an administrative matter. It is impossible to implement a new curriculum or paradigm taking the following into consideration:

- the perceptions of the educators on different religions;
- the lack of facilitating multireligious content and
- the absence of skills of educators to handle a new curriculum in religious education.

In order to help educators to understand a new defining role, the following guidelines were proposed from the above mentioned results:

### **The empowerment of educators by providing knowledge**

From the analysis of the questionnaires it was clear that religious education educators could only be assigned a redefined new role if they were empowered with the necessary information. Knowledge of other religions and value systems will counter negative perceptions and will also help educators to understand problem areas and the negative perceptions of students, colleagues and parents. Information of *Life Orientation* and all its facets, the specific outcomes and assessment criteria must be included in any in-service training

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programme. The inclusion of other religions belief and value systems is of the utmost importance in attempting to achieve the specific outcomes set in *Life Orientation*.

### **The empowerment of educators by means of new didactic approaches**

From the analysis it seems that religious education educators did not use new, creative didactic approaches in the subject. Singing, worshipping and praying still seem to be the main activities in religious education. Creative approaches such as co-operative learning and thinking skills were not even considered. This confirms the idea that religious education should rather be treated within an educational and not a confessional context. The awareness of different beliefs and values may enhance the specific outcomes and range statements set in *Curriculum 2005* (1997:227).

### **To address fears of a new paradigm in religious education**

Fears about presenting other religious content can only be overcome if a paradigm shift is made (Roux 1998). From the analyses of the workshops it seems that fears were overcome by countering negative perceptions, providing information on different religions, imparting knowledge on learner's behaviour in multireligious classes and by applying appropriate didactic (methodologies). This is an essential part of the proposal for any introduction of a new curriculum to succeed.

There are different points of departure in facilitating a paradigm shift:

- It is vital for the educator to understand his or her own religiosity and frame of reference. If the presenters or facilitators cannot establish sound religiosity within their own religion, they will
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present multireligious content without the professional approach it needs.

- Facilitators/educators in any religious education setting need to be academically informed with the meaning and purpose of multireligious education and research. This gives them the opportunity to develop sensitivity for the needs and fears of the learners in implementing multireligious content. It is important to take note of analysis of research projects in this field to prepare viable curricula. It seems that awareness of problems made the educators more aware of the learner's frame of reference.
- In facilitating an in-service training program it is important to be aware of diversity within the perceptions of educators attending the workshop. There are many educators (especially many Christians in South Africa) who regard teaching as a divine calling. This perception influences their attitude and frame of reference and their understanding of religious education in schools. It will have a direct impact on their implementation of the specific outcomes in the learning area of *Life Orientation*.
- One should have enough knowledge to understand the aims of any multireligious education program. Any insecure feelings to the approach towards multireligious content, where cultural and religious value systems are threatened, cumulated in a negative perception of presenting or teaching. In a research project where student-educators were involved, a lack of knowledge in presenting multireligious content in a lesson left them insecure and had a direct influence on their ability to employ good didactics (Roux/Steenkamp 1995; 1997). The same situation can happen with the introduction of *Curriculum 2005* in schools.

### **In-service training programmes**

Well-organised and planned in-service training programs will be the only successful instruments in redefining the role of religious education. The following components should be considered in devising a

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workshop.

— *Knowledge of the approaches and different religious content*

Knowledge on different religions is an important tool, because questions on customs and values can be answered. People from different religions can participate and help one another to clarify concepts and values. As new didactic approaches are introduced, it is necessary that the educators should feel at ease with new content and methodologies.

- *Training material for educators to use in their religious education classes*

One of the important issues in the workshops was whether the educators had enough material to use in their classroom. As educators have to explore new horizons, they must feel comfortable with their new approach in front of their classes. Enthusiastic and informed educators are very important in redefining new roles. One of the problem areas facing *Curriculum 2005* will be the lack of sufficient material when introducing the programme, specially in the rural areas of South Africa.

- *Practical sessions where new didactic approaches can be discussed and experimented with*

The success in cultivating positive attitudes and confidence of the educators was due to the introduction of practical sessions on their new role in religious education. They needed the skills to enhance their new role. Didactic approaches like co-operative learning will enhance the process of learning specially needed in OBE. The educators who attended the workshops became more confident when practising the new approaches with peer groups in the same position.

- *Compiling programmes for their colleagues and their own school environment for introducing the new religious education programme*

This was a very important exercise for the educators. Different

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scenarios and reactions of communities could be anticipated and problem-solving skills could be introduced. Educators tend to feel more confident when addressing their colleagues after they had compiled their own programme at the workshop. The correct information could be discussed and problem issues on new programmes and outcomes in Life Orientation could be solved. This was very successful especially for communities in rural areas where the school serves an important role in the community.

### Conclusion

Although religious education can be regarded as a natural way to attain the rationale in *Life Orientation* in Outcomes-based education, the result of the new programme can only succeed if educators are adequately equipped to facilitate the content of the learning area. The above mentioned research and experimentally designed programmes are of special interest at a national level. The programme not only explores alternative methodological approaches, but also establishes a core programme for the retraining and empowerment of religious education educators, enhancing grassroots educational capacity. It enhances the status of religious education as a crucial part of the school curriculum. The research and development of packages at least present some scientific form of reference in terms of which decisions may be taken. This is very important for a learning terrain influenced by emotion and belief rather than by hard facts.

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