Facilitating Religion in Life Orientation Programmes: Challenges for a Multicultural Society

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Abstract

The relevance of Religious Education (RE) as a subject within the school environment is once again being challenged. Many studies during the 1990's indicated that RE has to adopt a new approach in order to stay relevant in the process of globalisation. The democratic change in South Africa has also influenced scholars in RE to re-evaluate the subject at both tertiary and school level. New emphasis on communal values in order to establish an understanding and knowledge of different cultures, religions and behaviours, is becoming a worldwide trend. The call for relevance thus becomes a moral issue. The Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) model in the South African education system also implies the incorporation of skills *to live meaningful lives* (Curriculum 2005, 1997). This article will argue that religion in education needs to change in order to fulfil the requirements of world trends in education, OBE in general, and the needs of learners in particular. A perspective on the integration of religion in Life Orientation or Life Skills programmes, especially in a developing multicultural society, will be presented.

Introduction

Religious Education (RE)[1] in South Africa remains a controversial issue in education. The Learning Areas Committee for *Life Orientation* was unable to reach an agreement on questions relating to RE and religious observances in the school environment (Curriculum 2005, 1997:18). An attempt to formulate acceptable guidelines by the special committee set up by the Minister of Education in September 1998 has had mixed reactions (*Report of the Ministerial Committee on RE*, 1999; henceforth referred to as *Report 1999*). Educationalists have expressed their doubts on the implementation and reliability of the proposals and

some provinces even rejected the proposals. On the other hand, religious leaders have responded positively to the possibility of the different models for RE. The aim of this article is not to discuss the different options or outcomes suggested for RE in *Report 1999*, but to argue for the relevance of a multi-religious approach in Life Orientation programmes for multicultural societies. (cf. Roux 2000).

In essence, this article argues that:

- religion in education will only meet its goal when it is integrated in Life Orientation programmes, and
- a new perspective on religious content is necessary to meet the challenges of a multicultural society.

Religion in education within an integrated multicultural society

Although South Africa is a multicultural society, many schools continue to reflect a mono-cultural ethos, as if learners of different cultural and religious backgrounds do not exist. Some teachers and parents are still not willing to accommodate the religious needs of learners from different cultures or religious backgrounds, despite the status of mono-religious education in public schools and that of any form of discrimination highlighted in the South African Schools Act [Act No.84 of 1996, Section 7].

In the outline of the new curriculum document (Curriculum 2005), the focus on life skills implies that information on all cultures and religions must be promoted in order to understand and promote respect and tolerance within a diverse South African society. Taking the failures of the past into consideration, this situation creates an opportunity for RE to be incorporated into the learning area of *Life Orientation*. More emphasis is placed on communal values in order to establish mutual understanding, respect and knowledge in a developing multicultural society. This, to a very large extent implies that the old paradigm of teaching RE has become inappropriate (cf. Roux 1998:86).

Reasons for the "failure" of RE as a subject within the secular school system

In Braaf (1993) and Roux (1997) the opinion is expressed that RE has failed as a subject in South African schools. The reasons for this failure of RE during the previous dispensation are well known. Although religious freedom and the conscience clause were options, the curriculum mainly adopted a confessional or evangelical approach. Many problems with regard to this approach occurred within the broader Christian denominations. Truth claims (cf. Küng 1995) tended to be part of the curriculum, with no room for different opinions.

Considering also the poor outcomes of RE in public schools, it appears that there were more indications of problems than successes (cf. Braaf 1993; Summers & Waddington 1996; Roux 1997). Some of the reasons for this situation seem to converge on, *inter alia*, the status of the subject within the school curriculum, the content of the curriculum, but especially the under-qualified status of educators or teachers facilitating RE. Given the directive principles for the RE policy as well as diverse proposals, it is an open question whether a new approach has any chance of success, especially regarding the training of educators (*Report 1999*:39, Stonier 1999:44). Regardless of new developments in didactics and outcomes, it appears as if the confessional approach implemented in the past will also still be part of RE for some time (cf. Roux & Steenkamp 1995). The disregard of, and failure to address religious diversity within school communities and the pressure for more sustainable subjects in the school curriculum especially at secondary school level, seem to be ongoing problems. The prevailing negative approach towards the subject by educators as well as learners may, to a large extent, be ascribed to the lack of an appropriate curriculum.[2] This simply means that learners are not provided with the necessary skills to cope with real-life situations. This problem will not be overcome by retaining RE as a separate subject or dealing with learners of different religions and cultures in separate groups when facilitating belief and value systems. This view was also expressed by *Report 1999* and as such welcomed by religious leaders.

Another important factor responsible for the failure of RE as a subject is the hermeneutic problem. Wrong interpretations lead to the moralisation of religious content (especially in Christian RE), which is certainly not an effective means of teaching religion and values. RE can no longer be a subject which teaches learners stories from old scriptures and related content, or which urges them to adopt certain behaviours. From a hermeneutic point of view, religion, and therefore RE, has to make more sense to learners. Rouhani (1997) argues that the application of a spiritual or moral principle can cultivate a universal culture of understanding and peace. Religion in education can be the best way to facilitate an understanding of the diversity, morality and spirituality of human nature because religion is the indispensable foundation of spirituality. The survival of humankind, also on a religious and spiritual level, will increasingly become a global issue (Küng 1995). A new approach towards religion in a curriculum is vital. Learners should be equipped with skills to understand religion, values and morals embedded in belief systems. As this was not regarded as an important issue in the past, RE became a more content-orientated, moralised subject that offered very few skills in ethics or religiosity to its learners. The question is whether religion in *Life Orientation* programmes can offer a different option in order to equip learners with the necessary skills. The rationale in the *Life Orientation Learning Area* (Curriculum 2005) is "to empower learners to live meaningful lives in a society that demands rapid transformation." This rationale

can only be accomplished if religion in education becomes what it demands – critical and reflective thinking, and not nurture. This also has a direct influence on the proposed assessments of RE as outlined in *Report 1999* (51).

Religion, values and education

The understanding of religiosity, spirituality, religious content and values follows only if presented in an understandable paradigm that make sense to learners (cf. Du Toit 1998; Rhodes 1997; Roux 1994; 1998). The question, however, is whether RE should be the only subject to address the religious and moral needs of a learner. Baatjes (1997) conducted a research project in primary schools in the Western Cape and found that almost all educators moralised religious content in order to establish good behaviour. There was next to no implementation of skills to establish values in everyday life. Learners reaffirmed their understanding of morals or values or good behaviour by explaining their educators' so-called moral of the story. Baatjes proposed two initiatives (1997:65) to counter moralisation in religious education. In *Model A*, values constitute the point of departure. Universal values in different religions are studied and content is given in a search for similarities in different religions, belief systems and cultures. In *Model B*, religious content is taken as a point of departure where universal values are identified and used to imply a mutual value system. Values thus become a common denominator. Baatjes did not test these models within a multicultural school environment. In an analysis of Baatjes' models the following scenarios come to the fore:

A positive indicator is that religious content could be used to promote values and set examples of correct behaviour. Religious content and values can be incorporated and specific religious values in communities may be identified. This may give a frame of reference on the behaviour of religious people and their values. The negative indicator is the possibility that educators will still moralise religious content. The learners' lack of knowledge of their own value systems is also a matter of concern (Roux 1995). Learners with no religious skills may be confused because they need to reflect their own behaviour and values towards new content (Roux 1995).

Rhodes' case studies (1997) involved secondary school learners in diverse economic and religious communities. Three thousand learners and five schools in the Western Cape were involved in areas where poverty, crime and gangsterism are part of daily community life. Morals or good behaviour were taught in RE classes in a curriculum with an exclusively mono-religious perspective, although in a multi-religious school environment. The finding was that learners in the community simply did not adopt the morals being taught (Rhodes 1997:62). The religious leaders and religious communities had very little impact on learners' attitudes although they were sincere *churchgoers*. In analysing Rhodes' re-

sults, it is clear that skills which make it possible to behave according to the values taught in schools are not in evidence in their daily life. The main problem seems to be the fact that the development of practicable skills does not form part of the curriculum. Assessing long-term behaviour and values seems to be almost impossible.

In both initiatives the problem of diversity is once again a factor. Because of the lack of knowledge, learners were not able to identify mutual values. Their attitudes also showed the lack of skills to implement the values or morals being taught. Relevant knowledge may help to acquire the necessary skills when handling differences in values and/or religious beliefs. This means that although the value of *not stealing* or *not possessing other people's property* is a basic tenet and important in different religions, the interpretation of these values and the related skills differ. According to Du Toit (1998:61), values are historically linked, contingent and contextual. It is therefore difficult to find in any culture fixed and integrated values systems that need not accommodate value differences. People who are unemployed live in poverty, are hungry and lack basic human needs. They may even view themselves as being worthless. In such a case, *stealing* is the only means of survival. Is it possible to give a fixed answer? It seems impossible to teach religion and values in a multicultural society without taking into account the context in which it has to function.

Religion and Values in Life Orientation

In recent years many public debates in South Africa have emphasised the need for the development of mutual respect for different cultures, religions, beliefs and value orientations. The *Report of the Working Group on Values in Education* (May 2000) has been presented as a starting point for a national debate on values in education. Such debates also take place internationally, as has been pointed out by Carr and Landon (1998:165) when referring to criticism directed towards British teachers and schools regarding the alleged moral decline in contemporary youth. In Germany, special in-service training programmes for educators are also being developed and implemented in some of the provinces (*Bundesstaaten*) in the field of ethics and Religious Education (including belief and value orientations) to enhance skills in *Lebensgestaltung, Etik und Religion* (LER) (cf. *Die Welt*, 13 August 1999). The question is thus – what will the scenario on in-service training be in South Africa with its urgent need for respecting basic values?

The rationale and goals of *Life Orientation* in Curriculum 2005 can be summarised as endeavours to enhance the practice of positive values, attitudes, behaviour and skills in the individual and the community. It opts to work towards a transformation of society and to promote a culture of human rights with the aim of promoting an individual's potential. The specific outcome "to respect

the rights of people to hold personal beliefs and values" (Curriculum 2005, 1997:222) is applicable to values and religion which should display attitudes, skills and values that can improve relationships in families and communities. From the above, it is clear that values, attitudes and skills are very important. Religion and religious content also play an important and supportive role in the understanding of diversity. If there is a selection of the content, it can enhance the possibility of providing learners with the skills to understand values and to change their attitudes and behaviour within their own belief system. This role of religion in Life Orientation programmes further diminishes the possibility of a separate subject and the facilitation of religious skills becomes determined.

In order to test the attitudes and feelings of educators and learners towards the integration of religion in a Life Orientation programme a pilot study[3] was conducted in September 1998 which included five (5) educators and ten (10) learners from two secondary schools in the Western Cape. The educators and learners indicated that they were all *religious* and *believers* in a particular faith. A qualitative questionnaire was used.

Questions reflecting on the following issues were put to educators:

- the position of RE in the school curriculum;
- reasons for the exclusion of the subject from the time-table;
- observances of the attitudes of educators and learners towards the content of the RE curriculum;
- knowledge of life-skills;
- feelings about the inclusion of religion in a *Life Orientation* programme and suggestions on the content, didactics and skills needed.

Questions put to the learners focused on:

- the need of learners regarding religious matters;
- needs of learners to develop life-skills;
- reasons for positive or negative feelings towards RE and the need (if any) for religion or *Life Orientation* programmes.
- A last question on their perceptions towards the new millennium was also posed.

The analysis revealed what had been suspected. Educators felt that as a result of retrenchments and the new workload, RE, as a formative subject, was no longer regarded as important. Timetables were set around important and marking-related subjects. Educators were not motivated nor did they have the time to teach an extra subject. Therefore, the inclusion of religion in a *Life Orientation* programme seemed to be more acceptable. Educators further indicated their dire need for training. They felt unable to facilitate the skills needed to help

learners to cope with different belief and value systems in a developing multicultural society. They were also aware of the needs of learners to cope with issues that are not even discussed in the *Life Orientation* programmes. Although provision was made for educators to offer some ideas on the content or didactics of religion and *Life Orientation* programmes, only one person made use of the opportunity. There was also very little awareness of the real needs of their learners, especially of those from other cultures and religions.

Learners, on the other hand, felt that there was no reason to teach RE as a subject in the secondary school. They argued that they needed skills to handle multicultural situations, especially with regard to other peoples' beliefs and value systems. They indicated a need to understand and adapt to their new multi-religious school environment. However, they were unable to identify any new or special skills that they needed. This could also be interpreted as a need for skills to understand *Life Orientation* programmes.

An Alternative Perspective on Religion in Education

The above analysis suggest some arguments for a new perspective on religion in education (RE) in the South African context. It is clear that in order to facilitate the development of skills in learners in primary and secondary schools, values and religion need to be viewed from a different perspective and dealt with in a whole new way. This is also applicable to religion in education at tertiary institutions. The rise of a network society via the Internet or satellite appears to be challenging values and questioning, and/or marginalising, religions and customs. There is an awareness of inequity in different spheres of life, be they economic, moral, or political. On the other hand, there is also an awareness of the power of an identity with strong cultural roots. Modern youth requires a new way of finding meaning in everyday life, where spirituality, values, religion and economics have to be in harmony. It will therefore be difficult to develop a curriculum for RE (*Report 1999*). The given special outcomes, range statements and assessment criteria in learning area *Life Orientation* (Curriculum 2005) provide enough space for religion in education to become relevant.

Two new approaches towards handling religion in a curriculum may be outlined. The one point of departure is *religion as a phenomenon*, with its influence on different spheres of life like the environment, health, gender issues and arts. Society thus becomes part of the discussion. General issues in the world or in a particular country would be studied. The intention is to present knowledge and information on different viewpoints in order to promote understanding of people's behaviour. This curriculum will deal with, for example, communal or environmental issues from different religious or ideological perspectives.

Another approach will be to promote the aim that skills need to be devel-

oped to handle values and other related issues (such as environment, health and gender) in such a manner that the conscience (way of thinking) of religious beliefs and values is related to practice. This approach means that skills are developed from practicable experiences. Learners constantly reflect on their own frame of reference. All role-players must be involved in the design of the curriculum, which must take account of the experiential as well as the practicable. In order to assess the learners, the following examples may be useful:

- Action research with learners, educators and communities. Although a core belief and value system will prevail, the community at large will decide on the outcome of the skills needed to handle beliefs and values. This enables developing communities to integrate their traditional values within the broader society. Different values and beliefs on specific issues can then be incorporated rather than serving to exclude.
- Developing a social responsibility towards the whole community. As Rhodes (1997: 98) indicates, the diversity of the community and the lack of responsibility on the part of role-players seem to be a major problem. There should be a correlation between the values taught in school and the skills needed in the community.
- Involvement in the broader community through which educators can assess learners and determine the outcomes of the curriculum. However, the assessment of values developing through belief systems should be done responsibly because of the diverse interpretation of cultural and religious values.

Conclusion

RE in a developing multicultural society can no longer occupy its so-called unassailable position suggested in some of the remarks in *Report 1999* (23, 25). The needs of learners in a developing multicultural society must be addressed more realistically. Many studies have shown in the past that RE in schools did not result in a well-balanced knowledgeable, value-orientated, multicultural society. Religious Education should move beyond its exclusive position in the school curriculum and embark on its new integrated role in Outcomes-Based education. Learners are in dire need of skills to handle religion and values within an integrated multicultural society. The proper facilitation and implementation of religion in education and specifically in *Life Orientation* programmes should be able to provide such experiences and knowledge, as well as essential, well-balanced skills.

Notes

[1] During the previous education dispensation in SA schools, RE was known as Bible Education, Religious Instruction or Right Living (cf. Summers & Waddington 1996). The author of this article defines RE as *religion in education* and as *a non-confessional approach of the studying of different religions where learners can reflect on their own beliefs and values* (cf. Roux 1998; Roux & Steenkamp 1995; 1997). For a full and interesting discussion on the relationship between RE, Religious Studies and Theology see Cush (1999).

[2] One of the main issues in RE is the lack of relevant teaching material and new curriculum development. Many countries, like Britain and Germany, have changed their curriculum material and approaches in RE to keep up with the needs of learners and the multicultural society in which they live.

[3] For the introduction of a *pilot study* any number of participants or objects are valid. It does not imply that the data is applicable to everybody and/or circumstances, however guidelines can be given (cf. Terre Blance & Durheim 1999:243).

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