Christian Religious Education

Definition

Thomas Groome defines Christian Education as

a political activity with pilgrims in time that deliberately and intentionally attends with
them to the activity of God in our present, to the Story of the Christian faith
community, and to the Vision of God's Kingdom, the seeds of which are already
among us.¹

This essay will attempt to explore that definition and something of Thomas Groome's *Shared
Christian Praxis* approach to the teaching of Christian religious education, particularly in the
context of the Awakenings Religious Education Curriculum used within the Diocese of
Ballarat.

Education

Thomas Groome sees Christian religious education firmly within the larger sphere of
education more generally, which he defines as

a political activity with pilgrims in time that deliberately and intentionally attends with
people to our present, to the past heritage it embodies and to the future possibility it
holds for the total person and community.²

In other words religious education is education where the past story we are concerned with is
the story of God of the Christian [and Jewish] faith community, the future possibility for the
person and community is summed up in the vision of God's reign, and our present is seen in
terms of the seed of that already among us.

By beginning an examination of Christian religious education in the light of education much
groundwork can be reused, educational models can be explored and their strengths and
weaknesses taken into account without the necessity of starting from scratch. Thousands of
years of thinking on the nature of education and pedagogical methods can be adapted to what
is, essentially, just another curriculum area. By taking education as the starting point it should
not need to be argued that any proposed approach to Christian Religious Education should
represent sound teaching and learning methods, that teachers and classrooms of religious
education should be equally well prepared and held to similar expectations as teachers and

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classrooms of any other discipline, and that similar cross curricula expectations should prevail.\textsuperscript{3}

However, there are also dangers from seeing Christian religious education as no more than, or not substantially different from, the broader educational model if all the current educational assumptions are taken uncritically. The broader society and culture makes certain demands and puts certain expectations upon education – particularly within school systems that are partially or entirely funded by government, but even where government does no more than accredit private school systems. At times these expectations may be at tension with the particular expectations a particularly Christian education might imply. Christian schools must maintain their distinctive identity over these pressures.

**Shared Christian Praxis**

The *Awakenings* religious education curriculum in use in the Diocese of Ballarat (and elsewhere) is based upon “a critical adaptation of Shared Christian Praxis” for its approach to methodology.\textsuperscript{4} Thomas Groome describes Shared Christian Praxis as “a group of Christians sharing in dialogue their critical reflection on present action in light of the Christian Story and its Vision towards the end of lived Christian faith”.\textsuperscript{5} The strength of this approach is its close tie to (his) definition of Christian education and hence education more generally and the dialogical approach. However, this description has the assumption that the classroom is made up of Christians. The reality of the modern Catholic school is that one cannot necessarily assume that even the teacher is a committed Christian, and one can be reasonable certain that many of the students will not be. This weakness applies not only to the Shared Christian Praxis approach but also to many other approaches to the topic.\textsuperscript{6} Some adaptation of this approach for the Australian Catholic School setting is therefore necessary if the full range of students are to be included but, because Shared Praxis is essentially a pedagogical approach applicable to any content that begins from wherever the participants are at it is well suited for careful adaptation to this context. The flexibility of the Shared Praxis approach can be illustrated by noting potential elements of its use not only across the educational curriculum but even in young children's television shows such as WotWots.

Because Shared Praxis is dialogical in nature it is well suited to classrooms with diverse

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\textsuperscript{4} *Awakenings Core Document* (Ballarat: Catholic Diocese of Ballarat, 2005), 22

\textsuperscript{5} Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1980), 184

backgrounds providing the early components of the approach are well planned – particularly the focusing activity and the naming component. However if the questions posed at this stage do not connect with students' prior experiences and understanding the approach cannot work as intended and some Awakenings planned units have Naming activities listed that will (at least as listed in the curriculum planners) only connect with students with at least a degree of religious life outside of school. A dialogical approach also imposes limitations on how tightly the educator can set the direction in which student responses will go and this may present concerns for those educators or education authorities who would prefer to dictate what outcomes and final understandings are acceptable. However, religious education in any case must go beyond attempts to teach objective facts to engage and affect lives lived and build character and this requires a model of dialogue rather than transmission.7 A Christian education must invite participants to “come and see” as Philip invites Nathaniel (John 1:46) or the Samaritan Woman invites the people of her city (John 4:29), and to draw their own conclusions.

**Whole School Attitude**

It has long been accepted that literacy is not the preserve and sole responsibility of the English faculty but that literacy affects the whole of life and that teachers of all disciplines are teachers of literacy and have a duty to teach literacy within the context of their discipline. More recently a similar attitude has been taken to numeracy (or mathematical literacy) though this has not permeated the sub-conscious assumptions of all teachers to the same degree yet. If religion in general and Christianity in particular affects the whole way of life then this must be even more true of Religious Education in a Christian school. The Christian practice and attitude that is taught in the Religious Education classroom must also be reflected in the way the day is lived out, the way teachers model treatment of others, the prayer that begins the day, school masses, etc. This is something that will mark out a difference between the Christian school setting and other settings such as the British state school system where Religious Education is taught as an academic discipline in a context that is not explicitly religious. The Catholic school must work, then, at equipping and developing all staff as teachers of “religious literacy” in the same way that it would expect and equip all staff as teachers of literacy or numeracy – particularly so in that not all staff are explicitly Christian or are as religiously aware as they would be aware of the numeracy and literacy demands of their domains.8

Scripture and Religious Education

The Awakenings Core Document guiding principles state that “its reference point for content is knowledge of Christian revelation through the sources of Scripture and Tradition, and expressed in the faith of the Church” and talks about the nature of Scripture and Scripture as a resource for teaching.\(^9\) However, the most interesting comment in Awakenings on Scripture is expressed in the Content Strands section:

>The heart and organising principle of Religious Education is the person of Jesus Christ. The Gospel narrative of his ministry, death and resurrection provides the most fundamental 'catechetical structure'.\(^10\)

Unfortunately this is unpacked in terms of content, resource and guiding philosophy but not methodology. The extent to which Scripture can inform the pedagogy of Christian Religious Education is not explored.

Catherine McCahill suggests seven tools for “making God known” based on Jesus' dialogs found in the fourth gospel.\(^11\) The first of these tools, accepting God as the initiator, is not a tool in the sense of something that can be used, but is simultaneously cautionary and empowering, especially if combined with the sense of vocation expressed by Paul in Colossians (1:29): “For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.” The second, third tools and seventh (attention to the current desires and questions, dialogical engagement and invitation to response) sit very comfortably with the principles of Shared Christian Praxis and its opening and closing movements. The tools that provide significant additional challenge are perhaps the fourth, fifth and sixth tools. The fourth tool – the centrality of the biblical narrative with an emphasis on the transformative power of Scripture read, studied and reflected on is emphasized in Church documents such as Dei Verbum.\(^12\) However, this has not always been, and is not always, reflected in classroom practice in Catholic schools. The significance of symbol, place and season is in the other way around – these are powerfully represented in the curriculum content in the classroom but find less emphasis in the guiding principles of Awakenings. Symbols are liable to become something to be learned about rather than part of the way that the whole religious tradition is encountered and absorbed. Holistic thinking is well reflected in theory behind much educational practice, including the Shared Christian Praxis approach and Church

\(^9\) Awakenings, 22, 94-95, 110
\(^10\) Awakenings, 110
\(^12\) Catherine McCahill, 19
documents. The implications of hospitality are, perhaps, less well explored in educational thinking generally and even with Catholic education and not always made explicit in the way they are in a Mercy School such as St Joseph's College, Mildura.

**Conclusions**

Any approach to Christian religious education faces many challenges: the pressure to conform to the expectations of the wider culture, the varied prior experience and current faith position of staff and students and the need to fit another discipline into a packed curriculum. Shared Christian Praxis and the Awakenings program do not solve these problems but they do offer a way forward that can be inclusive of all the students involved and can offer a mode of providing the values education that is increasingly seen as important providing the case can continue to be made to the wider world that a Christian values education is an acceptable option in a multi-cultural society.

Difficulties remain – not least the necessity of practice. One cannot teach *about* Mathematics or *about* English – participation and doing is essential. A religious education that just teaches about the Christian faith without any element of practice falls short of the aims of Catholic education as expressed in Church documents and becomes unlike other disciplines yet providing opportunities to participate effectively in the Christian faith to students of diverse faith positions is even more challenging than engaging unmotivated students in Mathematics or literature.

Of course any approach is only as good as the teachers who will implement it and Awakenings curriculum documents can be followed without any real commitment to the approach they attempt to embody – committed and well trained teachers enthusiastic about their discipline are essential in any domain of education, not least in Religious Education.

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13 Thomas Groome, “Total Catechesis/ Religious Education”, 6-12
Bibliography

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