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Pondering Diversity in Contemporary Culture: Towards Establishing a Framework for a Dialogical Approach to Religious Education in Australian Catholic Schools

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Abstract: This paper seeks to deepen the understanding of religious plurality using a range of conceptual lenses and then to draw out some implications for a dialogical approach to religious education in Catholic schools. While what was, until very recent times, seen as conventional religious affiliation has certainly weakened in Australia and elsewhere, this does not necessarily lead to a multiplication of communal beliefs, practices and values. Following Smith, Inglehart and others, what has emerged is a dominant cultural hegemony which has a range of characteristics, but the most pertinent for the discussion here is the loss of the transcendent imperative and the subsequent decline in the knowledge of, and identification with, narratives associated with once-dominant religious communities. An understanding of diversity in the current cultural milieu in Australia needs to consider this hegemony as expressed in a commonality of beliefs, values and practices regardless of expressed affiliation, religious or not. Understanding diversity in this framework establishes a basis for better considering what a dialogical approach to religious education would involve. A dialogical approach to religious education is taken as a settled norm and not one that is heavily contested. A number of the implications of the proposed understanding of diversity for religious education are given. These include following a Vygotskian scaffolded approach to pedagogy and seeing an important place for the articulation of the home religious tradition.

Keywords: religious education; diversity; dialogical education



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1. Introduction

Higgins (2007, p. 7) notes that a micronarrative is a powerful way to initiate further discussion of complex topics by offering a vignette that distils some key points, which can then be elaborated on. What follows is one such micronarrative.

Some years ago, I was coordinating the school placement program for RE teachers who were in the final year of their teacher training and aspiring to work in Catholic schools. After a ‘round’, that is, a period of time when the trainee teachers, under supervision, completed a practicum in schools, they returned to the university and were given a chance to work collaboratively and come up with presentations on their dominant experiences of their time in schools. The class divided into groups and in the next session the presentations began.

Two groups presented and a common theme was the ‘incredible diversity’ amongst the students in their classes and this was contrasted with earlier times when students had much more homogeneous views. All was proceeding smoothly until one brave and recalcitrant student, let’s call her Jennifer, raised a provocative point, “Most of the kids in my classes weren’t all that different. It was very hard to get them talking, very hard, but when they did they all pretty much said the same things, had the same opinions, liked and disliked the same things. I got the impression they weren’t deeply attached to their positions, it was something that they just took in from the ambience in which they lived. It was difficult to find points of difference as so many had trouble expressing their views or arguing for them. No one had any understanding of the Catholic position on anything”. A murmur soon

reached a crescendo when others in the class agreed with Jennifer, “yes that was what I experienced too!” This final comment is significant as it points to questioning assumptions about diversity and its implications for religious education in faith-based schools.

As a prelude to discussing some practical strategies to better realize a dialogical approach to religious education in faith-based schools, a conceptual framework is proposed. This seeks to contextualize some of the salient points in Jennifer’s narrative. The sources that are drawn to support the proposal constitute some leading thinkers in contemporary social theory but have not been widely applied to Catholic education in general, and religious education in particular. Three substantial points will be made. Firstly, whatever their attributed affiliation, there is often a marked commonality in student views and behaviours. Secondly, students are not engaging with religious communities and have a poor understanding of what could be called the Christian religious narrative. Thirdly, students had difficulty coherently articulating their views, and this may leave them vulnerable to and uncritical of dominant cultural ideologies.

The second part of the paper takes on a much more practical intention. The aim is to examine three key implications of the proposed understanding of diversity for religious education in faith-based schools. While dialogue is valued, in order to be purposeful, it needs to acknowledge the context and background of the school community and especially the student body.

2. Religious Diversity in Contemporary Culture: A Proposition

Singleton et al. (2019) in their study of Australian teenagers contextualized their analysis by taking a longitudinal approach to religious diversity. They noted that diversity is best seen in the changes in patterns of traditional Australian religious affiliation. This is seen most clearly in the declining number of Australians who identify as Catholic or mainline Protestant. What has made the cultural landscape more diverse in a nominal sense is the growth of non-Christian religions and, most significantly, in the dramatic rise in the number of those who express no religious affiliation, the so-called nones. At this meta level it is accurate to describe the Australian religious and social landscape as more plural and diverse. It is necessary, however, to move beyond this analysis to examine more closely communal beliefs, practices and values. At this micro level a range of conceptual descriptors arise, which give an accurate account of large sections of the population irrespective of affiliation, notional or otherwise.

One of the most acknowledged of these descriptors is contained in the work of Smith and his colleagues. This research followed waves of American participants in successive national surveys. In the initial work, the term used to describe the dominant worldview of US teens and emerging adults was Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). MTD is a system that places value on general categories, with a special preference for those which are linked to self-actualization; this is the sense in which therapeutic is used. In place of traditional metaphysical views that align closely with the Christian belief in a transcendent personal God, MTD stresses a deistic conception where God is not absent from creation but is content to leave the created universe to its own devices. The criteria used to establish the categories that make up MTD could be elaborated on; however, this is not the crucial factor here. What is more important is the notion that by using these terms we can classify the beliefs, values and practices of a very large section of the American community. In the final part of the study, completed in 2022, it is noteworthy that the authors argue that MTD, rather than abating, is an even more dominant expression of the lived experience of US teens and emerging adults, and that it applies across conventional religious categories. On a meta level, there can be a growth in religious diversity in that new groups are emerging or previously dominant groups lose strength, but at a micro level, a critical question is whether, across a culture or society, beliefs, values and practices continue to converge irrespective of religious or non-religious categorization. Indicators of religious affiliation are less descriptors of beliefs, values and practices than a consideration of how closely a group or individuals align with the overarching MTD categorization. With the decline in traditional

religious affiliation, what is also imperilled is the immersion of individuals into the great narratives surrounding these traditions. These are the stories, teachings, ritual practices and cultural expressions of these traditions. These narratives are not passively acquired but need constant reiteration to remain known and comprehensible. This disconnection from religious narrative has been widely noted as a significant, longstanding phenomenon and is alluded to by Jennifer in the opening narrative. Appleby, writing in 2001, puts the problem in these terms, “no previous generation of American Catholics, it could be argued, inherited so little of the content and sensibility of the faith from their parents, as have today’s youth”. Davie (1999, p. 83), speaking from a European perspective and not confining herself to Catholics, is even starker, “an ignorance of even the basic understandings of Christian teachings is the norm in modern Europe, especially among young people; it is not a reassuring attribute”.

Similar conclusions about the emergence of new hegemonic cultural patterns can be drawn from studies of globalization. Casanova (2001) discusses the globalization of religion in terms of a process of detraditionalization. In place of the traditional expression of the transcendent, which is tied to historical religious communities, there has arisen a general sacralization of culture best expressed in emerging diffuse cultural norms. Inglehart (2021) examined a series of large international representative surveys and identified a dominant category as individual norms, as opposed to an emphasis on community or family. Markers of these norms include personal beliefs and values, but these norms do not indicate a diversity of views. Rather the transnational movement away from communal family norms leads to a convergence of beliefs, values and practices around a common theme of individualization. The individualization pattern places emphasis on the material world and has little or no reference point with traditional religious categories, which were reliant on strong communal reinforcement, such as the belief in a personal, transcendent God. A pattern noted by Smith and his colleagues is repeated here, namely, a decline in the strength of religious affiliation to historical communities does not necessarily result in a diversification of beliefs, values and practices. What is critical is not to which category people are ascribed, but a more anthropologically grounded sense of culture. This is manifested in how people actually live their lives, and reflected, simply and bluntly put, in what they do and what they believe (Eagleton 2000). In addition, once the strength of traditional cultural norms, reflective of strong communal beliefs, declines, then the association and familiarity of people with these norms also declines. This is a point reinforced by Hervieu-Leger (2000) in her conception of the weakening of the chains of religious memory in countries which in the past have had strong religious associations at both a personal and institutional level.

A key factor to consider is the utility of new dominant norms. They apply to large numbers of people across national boundaries, and offer an alternative way of understanding beliefs, values and practices that is not dependent on self-described religious categories. Once religious affiliation declines both in terms of nominal affiliation and the strength of that affiliation, then what emerges are dominant cultural patterns which can be hegemonic in their expression. A similar argument is proposed by Archer (2012). She argues that we need to see young people, especially, as more likely to express communitive class norms rather than communal ones. These norms are, in essence, reflective of personal autonomy and not reliance on strong traditional socialization processes at least those initiated by family or local community. What is dominant and determinative is the wider culture, as this now becomes the primary socializing agent, and a study of culture reveals that these new patterns have common characteristics, so people from geographically and historically different regions can be shaped by common cultural forces.

An important consideration about the impact of these new cultural forces is given in the work of Bauman. Bauman (2003) noted the loss of common understanding and adherence to traditional cultural patterns, a process that gained pace from the 1960s onward. He postulated that late modernity can also be described as a liquid modernity, a world where new allegiances and affiliations emerge, but which have no strong attachments and

can be easily overturned or replaced. Bauman (2003) drew attention to the fact that this condition was not, overall, a favourable one, especially for younger people, as they lacked enduring connections to communities held together by shared beliefs and practices. In a series of powerful metaphors, he describes this new disposition as one of alienation and isolation, where younger people are like strangers and can easily succumb to prevailing social pressures, the most important of which is pervasive consumerism. This condition is not derived from abiding, discerned principles, but is expressed inchoately and is difficult to explain or justify.

By way of summation, let us return to the micronarrative at the beginning of this paper and attempt to, more directly, match key points in the proposal offered here with the observations of Jennifer. The decline in the size of, and importance of, traditional religious association, does not necessarily lead to an increase in the diversity of beliefs, values and practices. Jennifer observed the same phenomenon when she remarked that most of the students in her class had the same opinions, values, and liked and disliked the same things. Declining strong and formative religious affiliation and socialization is being replaced by new patterns of beliefs, values and practices. These new cultural norms are not restricted to geographical areas and have some dominant features, such as highlighting the rise of individualization, a decline in a sense of transcendence and a lack of knowledge of religious narratives, especially those associated with previously dominant religious communities. In the particular instance of students in Catholic schools, this would equate to a lack of knowledge of Catholic beliefs and practices. In addition, students do not have a strong attachment to emerging cultural paradigms, but rather a transitory and incoherent attachment that makes purposeful dialogue challenging. This is an observation germane to Jennifer's narrative. She noted that the students in her class were not able to easily articulate their position and often lacked a clear reference to underlying principles or to the Catholic tradition.

3. Part Two: Some Implications for Religious Education in Faith-Based Schools

A dialogical approach in education can be described as a purposeful activity that is directed toward increasing critical understanding and insight as a platform for self-directed learning (Bright 2013). If this view is uncontested, then a key question becomes how is purposeful dialogue best achieved, and, in the context of this paper, how is it achieved in a cultural context where students lack connection with religious communities? To return to Bauman's analogy, students may be described as strangers vulnerable to prevailing social pressures, such as individualization and consumerism. Several key principles suggest themselves:

1. Foundational learning is critical to encourage students to engage in purposeful dialogue. This is premised on the Vygotskian idea of scaffolded learning and involves using a wide range of sound pedagogical principles.
2. In faith-based schools, the teaching and practices of the home tradition would be offered as a departure point for purposeful dialogue. This is consistent with the stated aim of the school and is a powerful way to focus learning by reducing cognitive load.
3. In changed cultural circumstances, the role of the teacher remains critical and ongoing support for them is essential.

Each of these principles will be examined in more detail. Firstly, the notion of building on foundational learning sits well within a Vygotskian paradigm of scaffolded learning (Rymarz 2013). Implicit in Jennifer's narrative is the frustration that arises from an unrealized expectation about what students are able to accomplish once learning complexity increases. This notion of staged learning, moving from simple to more complex tasks, is well described in the Vygotskian paradigm (Wertsch 1985). Vygotsky made a distinction between what he called spontaneous and scientific concepts in learning (Karpov 2003). Spontaneous concepts are the result of generalizations based on typical human experience. Many of these, however, may be incorrect. There is a resonance here with the discussion in the first part of this paper. One of the conclusions drawn was that students' articulation

and understanding of a range of religious or philosophical issues is not necessarily diverse. A more accurate description would describe students' views as uncritically clustering around dominant cultural positions. In Vygotskian terminology, what is needed is an initial emphasis on acquiring foundational or scientific knowledge (Vygotsky 1987a). Scientific concepts are those that may be verified and arise from the generalized experience of humanity. Scientific concepts allow the student to "see the world in a new way or to restructure and raise spontaneous concepts to a new level" (Vygotsky 1987b, p. 220). The role of the teacher is to extend the student by providing enough structure, in the form of instruction, to allow students to use their new knowledge to reappraise their experience and prior learning. Vygotsky (1986, p. 159) expressed this idea in the following terms, "scientific concepts. . . just start their development, rather than finish it, at a moment when the child learns the term or word-meaning denoting the new concept".

If we can see some overlap between scientific concepts and the acquisition of more complex theological and philosophical concepts, then we have a basis for engaging in purposeful dialogue once students are familiar with foundational ideas. Without this prior knowledge, dialogue is not impossible, but it is greatly enhanced when those involved in the dialogue have a level of understanding and vocabulary which will allow them to purposefully engage.

Secondly, the preeminence of the home tradition in faith-based schools is significant, aside from the explicit and long held understanding that religious education will be based on the home tradition (Ryan 2002). In Catholic schools it cannot, however, be assumed that students, even those who express Catholic affiliation, have an appropriate understanding or articulation of the beliefs, values and practices of Catholicism. Given this lack of background, pedagogical strategies need to be identified that reduce the cognitive load on students. (Gredler 2009). The notion of cognitive load is important in contemporary approaches to learning (Hattie 2009). Student learning is better facilitated when the amount of information to be processed is limited (Harris 1999; Darling Hammond 2008). The role of the teacher is to set these limits and to direct learning toward key so-called threshold concepts (Mudge 2014). Over time the cognitive range is expanded, as students are able to access information that has already been integrated into long term memory.

To illustrate let us return to Jennifer's narrative and add a feature. Jennifer found it difficult to stimulate and engage the class. The point about cognitive load can be made if we consider what the topic and the unit of work was that the discussion was embedded in. Let us suppose that it was a complex topic in a middle or senior secondary class like understanding the notion of God acting in the world. The goal here is to engage students, get them to think more deeply about the topic, work with others and develop critical understanding—the hallmarks of dialogical approaches. To achieve these goals it is necessary, however, to provide adequate cognitive scaffolding, and a critical part of this is to introduce the topic in a fashion that does not overwhelm students. The most obvious way this can occur is if too much or too little information is given. Too little would encompass a lack of instruction. The difficulty here is that, given the proposal in the first part of this paper, many students are likely not to have well-formed metaphysical views. Too much information from a wide variety of sources would overwhelm the learner's working memory and make meaningful integration of new information difficult.

A cognitive advantage of staying close to the home tradition is that it offers a pathway for future learning by providing a quantum of information that is processable. Providing this scaffolding is not the end point of this topic but rather a departure point. To continue the analogy, before any group discussion, Jennifer could provide instruction on the nature of God as envisaged by St Augustine. This situates the learning well within the home tradition, allowing students to expand their thinking on God and appropriate the Christian notion from an authoritative source. This can form the basis for future learning and encounters with other perspectives.

Thirdly, a perennial issue for faith-based schools is how best to support RE teachers. In changed cultural circumstances this support is even more imperative. Assumptions about

prior learning and lived experiences, which in the past predisposed students more fully to participate in religious education, can no longer be easily made. Jennifer has correctly identified some of the challenges inherent in teaching RE. An open question is how best to support her. What is not in dispute is the need for that support. A return to Vygotskian theory can assist in providing a template for better supporting teachers in Catholic schools.

A basic premise of Vygotskian learning theory is that students have enormous learning potential, but this needs to be harnessed, largely through social interaction (Vygotsky 1987b).

One of the key formators of the learning environment for students is the teacher. Learning here is understood as an ultimately transformative process, one that alters the way learners see themselves and the world around them. Within this framework, the teacher's role is to provide direction, support and structure to assist students in reaching their potential (Vygotsky 1994). The teacher here works in collaboration with the learner, and the best analogy to describe this relationship is one of a partnership, where the teacher acts as a mentor or guide. The epitome of a good teacher is one who is able to enter into a dialogue with students and scaffold their learning well using a range of pedagogical strategies aligned to the students in her class. If students engage well and are able to process new information and integrate present and past learning, this is an indication that the teacher is challenging students at a level that extends but does not overwhelm them. The teacher's role as an instructor is not at odds with the teacher creating space for reflective practice in the classroom. The efficacy of the teacher as a guide or mentor is dependent on how this is carried out.

4. Conclusions: A Second Narrative

To conclude this paper, let us return to an updated narrative of Jennifer. In this one, she has been teaching with a disposition that is directed more to the commonality amongst her students rather than their diversity.

We taught the unit on symbols and rituals and it was, as always, a challenge. A lot of effort was put into giving students some background as they do not have strong content knowledge in these areas. A powerful pedagogical practice was to use a contrast paradigm, that is, look at a ritual in other religious traditions. We focused on Judaism, as there is no way we can cover all religions. Just too much information. The section we discussed as a class was ritual practice. We looked at some of the Jewish rituals such as those associated with shabbat. Students were in small groups and we did some fish bowling as well. Where we are headed is to try to distil some essential features of religious rituals, and if they could be applied to ritual practices in Catholicism. We have completed a lot of work on ritual and symbols in Catholicism. It was covered in earlier years as well. In this unit it is time to expand the cognitive range of the students.

Some key differences are evident when compared to the opening narrative and these direct attention to the key implications of this paper for future scholarly discourse. There is a much tighter learning focus. Here, the intent of the discussion is tied to a unit, and one aspect of the unit—ritual practices—is identified. There is a clear idea of where this unit is headed and the overarching cognitive aim. There is an obvious link to the home tradition and the acknowledgement that students' prior knowledge is limited, but this can be addressed by providing well-targeted teaching. What is also very important is the range of pedagogical practices, such as fish bowling, that Jennifer refers to. In a paper of this size, it is not possible to go into a detailed discussion of pedagogy, sufficed to say the dialogical learning and its progression to a more self-directed critical understanding is dependent on the implementation of a range of strong pedagogical strategies. These are, in turn, dependent on the teacher's capacity to engage with and identify, like Jennifer, the learning dynamic in the classroom.

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