



EDITORIAL

The Politics and Pedagogy of Religion Education: Policies, Syllabi and Future Prospects¹

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The articles in this special issue emerged from a conference organised at the University of Cape Town in March 2018, through the generous support of the National Research Foundation of South Africa. The initial aim of the conference was to further develop the understanding of Religion Education (RE) in South Africa since it was promulgated in a policy published in 2003. RE has been introduced into the curriculum in two ways. In a general sense, the teaching *about* religion was integrated in compulsory subjects called Life Skills and Life Orientation. Here, learners were appropriately introduced to the diversity of religions in the country and the world. Secondly, a special subject was developed at the senior level called Religion Studies. This subject was an elective and devoted to the study of religions in history and contemporary societies, using the methods and theories developed in the modern study of religions. In recent years, more and more schools were offering this subject for senior learners in the most populous provinces in the country: Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape.

The conference was designed to bring together researchers in Southern Africa to discuss on what had been achieved so far, and how to further develop the subject. As a special feature of the conference, teachers and subject advisers were also invited to present their experiences of introducing the subject into schools. The conference and the papers assembled here demonstrate a model of partnership between teachers and researchers. But RE cannot be appreciated in South Africa without a good understanding of what other countries have done with the subject and the kind of opportunities and challenges that they were facing. It was decided to specifically invite researchers from countries in the

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South to promote a South – South discussion and dialogue on RE. But this discussion would not completely ignore developments in Europe and America, so the meeting was also open to some reflection on RE taking place there as well (Jackson et al., 2007). The conference and the proceedings are a testimony to a global discussion on RE, even though it does not lose its focus on the subject and its future in South Africa.

From the second half of the 20th century, RE has become a norm in many different regions and countries. A few examples illustrate the trend. Sweden, Norway, Denmark and the United Kingdom (England in particular) witnessed early developments in RE in the 1950s. The teaching of religions beyond confessionalism was contemplated in the context of greater democratisation and secularisation. While the dominance of one religion has not completely disappeared in these countries, its teaching as exclusive dogma has progressively waned. As a result of secularisation, religion was no longer considered the main source of identity and values. Moreover, the pluralisation of Western societies from the 1970s by way of immigration further confirmed the need for RE that was not focussed on one religion. In the United States, a court decision in 1963 paved the way for teaching religions in schools and universities in a non-confessional way (Moore, 2007, p. 4). But RE was introduced in policies much later: England (1988), Ontario, Canada (1990), Sweden (1994), and Norway (1997) (Skeie, 2015; Berglund, 2014; Jackson and O’Grady, 2007; van Arragon, 2015). Since the events of 9/11, many Western countries have renewed their commitment to RE for what are perceived as present and future culture wars (Wright, 2004; Jackson, 2010). Diversity in society and school seems to be the main driver for RE. It is not surprising, therefore, to see several experiments in Africa after decolonisation. Zambia attempted to introduce such a policy in 1977, while Zimbabwe has considered introducing RE in schools in the 21st century (Ndlovu, 2014; Mwale and Chita, 2017). Nigeria and Kenya have addressed religious diversity in the classroom by introducing separate programmes for Christians and Muslims (Hackett, 1999).

Researchers were invited to present papers on RE interventions and programmes in various countries. Papers in this volume offer reflections on RE policies and syllabuses prepared for teachers, focussing on their histories, challenges and implementation. The papers and discussions covered South Africa, Zambia, India, Russia and England. Four themes appear repeatedly in the conference and in these papers: values; the politics of RE; the definition of religion; and methods through which religion may be introduced in schools. The themes are closely related, but they may be analysed separately for greater clarity and ideas for further research.

The importance of values flow through all the papers in this volume. More specifically, Ahmed Bhayat has focussed on its transformative role in schools in South Africa. Where schools and societies were segregated in the past, RE now offers lessons and insights on all religions in one classroom. I would like to identify at least three ways that values are manifested in these papers in particular, and the field of RE in general. The most elementary value that is promoted by RE as a subject *qua* subject is greater inclusivity in a school district, region or country.

Inclusivity is probably one of the key motivations for introducing RE in countries. In whatever form RE is introduced or hotly debated, it usually aims to replace mono-religious education as in South Africa, or to re-introduce religion in education as a fundamental aspect of social life once ignored as in Russia (this volume, Stepanova). This gesture, which is often initiated through a public or policy discussion, manifests the value of recognising diversity in every society and its schools. Sensitive and conscientious teachers find it untenable and unacceptable to teach one religion in a classroom with learners from diverse backgrounds. Confessional or dogmatic education becomes even more problematic when the laws and constitutions declare that learners have a right to religious freedom.

The persistence of religion in public life provides another opportunity for developing and manifesting values. RE plays an equally important role in promoting the values of respect and mutual dignity among adherents of different religious groups. Such respect might not necessarily need the development of a special curriculum, but RE offers a deeper foundation for such social and civic values. It exposes learners to the beliefs, practices and narratives that inspire fellow learners and future national and global co-citizens. This deep knowledge and familiarity of religious traditions that share a social space offer a firm ground for living in peace and harmony in a world of diversity and distinction.

There is a third dimension of values that pertains to RE which is often overlooked. In a world in which relations among religious groups are dominated by perceptions of conflict and mutual hostility, it is often forgotten that religions may also be studied for the resources they offer on how to live by values, and which values are important for social and individual well-being. The history of religions offers detailed accounts of how, when and where, and which values are founded, debated and embodied. The pursuit of the good life, in its many different permutations, represents one of the key dimensions of religious life. There are, then, three ways in which values are central to RE: the value of inclusivity that inspires the introduction of RE; the values that support inter-religious relations based on knowledge of the other; and the values that are embraced by religions.

I began with the theme of values because I believe that they are the prime motivation for scholars and teachers working in RE. But values and religions are located in political societies, which are inevitably messier in practice than on paper or in the hearts of learners, teachers and researchers. The histories of RE reveal the politics of introducing the subject in various countries. The papers of Manisha Sethi and Elena Stepanova in this volume show this phenomenon most clearly in India and Russia respectively. They offer valuable case studies on debates about which religions are emphasised, which included and which exclude in RE. There are currently two theoretical models that are helpful for thinking about the politics of RE. At the state level, Talal Asad has put forward a compelling thesis that the secular and religious are like Siamese twins tied at the hip. In his view, modern states engage in a process of religion making through secularisation policies (Asad, 2003). According to Asad's theory, the state would see RE as an ideal opportunity through which to regulate religion. The state does not only make it possible to believe and practice religions, but

also judiciously guides such beliefs and practices. From this perspective, then, which religions are emphasised, included or excluded stand at the centre of state interests.

Asad presents an alternative model to the one that emphasises the separation of religion and politics. Here religion and secular states occupy different spheres, and are bound to oppose each other as they compete over the same interests. Both state and religion want to control and guide populations to the good life. Religions in recent times, according to Lincoln, thrive in the face of weakening states (Lincoln, 1998). According to this model, RE guarantees freedom of religion and also from religious domination. Lincoln's model may inform the state to be wary of any religion becoming dominant, and jeopardise its political and social projects. Whichever theory one finds more appropriate, both suggest that a transformation of RE in a country would lead to competition or conflict between religions, and between states and religions.

A discussion of the politics of RE cannot ignore the role of religion in public life. RE is located in schools but prepares learners and students for public life. Lee Scharnick-Udemans' paper on the representation of religion in state media brings attention to this question. Following Asad's thesis, Scharnick-Udemans shows that the teaching of religion on public television is not innocent of the goals of the state. But one may take a different approach to religion in public life by paying attention to the work of José Casanova (Casanova, 1994). Against Asad, Casanova argues that religion may offer valuable insights and values for public and political life. His model is deeply rooted in the European history of religions, but may be an inspiration for thinking about religion in public life in general. Following Casanova, we may recognise an independent or critical role for religion in public life in general, and RE in particular. Maitumeleng Nthontho's paper in this volume calls for mediation skills for teachers and principals to negotiate this difficult terrain in schools.

The third related theme in RE concerns the nature and definition of religion. The study of religions finds itself between an earlier theological and confessional approach which it rejects, and a postmodernist attack that challenges its foundations. RE, like the study of religions in general, rejects a theological approach that would describe its "religion" as "truth", while others as "false", "heresies", "Satanism" or "witchcraft". From an inside theological perspective, there is nothing to compare between the true and the false. In contrast, RE uses the category of religion to distance itself from this position, arguing that religions are comparable, and that they have as many common elements and functions as they have differences. Postmodernists in the study of religions have questioned this assumption, and argued that the category of religion is not as coherent and stable as it appears. The teaching of multiple religions in a classroom makes a fundamental assumption that is often overlooked. RE assumes that one may compare and contrast the beliefs, practices and values of African Traditional Religions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements. It is said that these very different traditions with divergent histories are forced into comparative analysis (for a discussion of postmodern in RE, see Wright, 2004; Raschke, 2012). Against this postmodernist criticism, RE must take the responsibility to identify what religions are in general and how they may be studied. This has not been easy, but there is

a significant intellectual legacy in the study of religions that offers some answers. L. Philip Barnes' paper in this volume puts the issue into perspective, showing how the history of RE in England has engaged with this legacy.

RE in schools seems to work best when it adopts clear models for thinking about religions so that they can be studied together. If religion is regarded as a social value, then religions would be studied from the perspective of how communities are formed around sacred events, how some are excluded and others included, and how new challenges are mediated. This model is derived from the work of Emile Durkheim who laid the theoretical foundations for studying religions in the 19th century (Pickering, 1975). Developing Durkheim's ideas, Mircea Eliade focussed on the experience of the divine that he considered central to the meaning of religions. Like Durkheim, he also worked with the sacred and profane as the building blocks for all religions, but focussed on the special religious experience that was produced in relation to the sacred (Eliade, 1959). Another approach has been promoted by Talal Asad in arguing that religions work like languages which provide adherents the means to think, talk and debate about values and society, but also about power and ideas of the past and the future (Asad, 1993). This is only a glimpse of how the study of religions offers useful insights on how religion works with symbols, practices and narratives. A working model may offer a useful platform for teachers entering the field, caught between the variety of religions on the one hand, and the multiple theories competing for space in universities, colleges and training centres.

The fourth theme at the conference and in these papers concerns practical methods for presenting RE in the classroom and school. We heard several contributions from teachers at the conference who were working with textbooks and various media. The papers of Sibusiso Mgenge and Lee Scharnick-Udemans in this collection offer a glimpse of the opportunities available for teachers, and also the challenges that they face. Media in the form of posters, films and documentaries can bring the subject closer to learners. They can represent religions in a tangible and accessible way. One important way of thinking about media is to recognise its role in the practice of religion. Media are not merely a means to represent religions, but very much part of religions. The materials of religion, from the clothes worn every day or on special occasions, to the food consumed, occupy a central place in religions. In RE, they offer opportunities to discuss and interact with the subject at a concrete level. Where possible, learners may be encouraged to share personal materials that they have at home. A visit to a nearby religious site may open rich opportunities to get close to religions for further reflection and study. In my discussions with teachers, good textbooks and media remain a challenge for making the subject accessible and learner-friendly in South Africa. In this area, we hope that the conference and these proceedings will offer further opportunities for collaboration.

The following papers, then, offer a glimpse into the deep discussion at the conference in 2018 in Cape Town. In this introduction, I have identified four themes that emerged at the meeting and in these papers. And these themes are present in local and global debates on RE. Values occupy an important foundational role for RE, and might be further discussed and debated in specific contexts. The politics of RE

cannot be ignored, as it often occupies a large space in public and political debates that confront the implementation of RE. The politics of RE threatens to dominate, and suppress the fundamental values that may be developed through the subject. The definition or model of religion might seem like a highly theoretical subject left to specialists, but it can provide an anchor for textbooks, classrooms and projects. And finally, in our highly saturated mediascapes, RE may offer an opportunity to appreciate how media works in religions and in life in general.

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