

Religious Education and the Problem of Faith Commitment in Zambia

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Abstract

The problem of faith or religious commitment versus neutrality in the theory and practice of modern RE is still far from being resolved, at least in as far as it affects societies that are still becoming plural, multi-faith and multi-cultural. This article discusses the problems of the RE teacher's faith commitment and neutrality with reference to one such society, Zambia. The article first attempts to briefly define the concept of commitment and briefly states the problem of commitment in liberal education. It then argues that both dogmatic religious commitment and strict professional neutrality by the teacher are untenable. It proposes a middle path approach, 'professional religious commitment' as one possible way forward.

Introduction

Being a former British colony Zambia has developed its school RE in a more or less similar pattern to that in Britain. Just as RE in Britain has over the years developed and changed from being confessional, neo-confessional, phenomenological and now spiritual (*Wright, 1993: 15-18*), RE in Zambia has also developed and changed from being denominational (and mission church-controlled), interdenominational (with ecumenically agreed syllabuses) to being educational and government-controlled in approach. This is because just as Britain is a plural, multi-cultural and multi-faith society, Zambia has increasingly become a plural, multi-cultural and multi-faith society since the second half of the nineteenth century when Europeans and Asians arrived with new religions and cultures. This therefore means that the debate on the problems of the teacher's religious commitment in British RE is equally relevant to Zambian RE, especially that the modern liberal approach to the subject is still developing in the country. However, modern teacher

education programmes at both the University of Zambia and colleges of education already rely heavily on British RE literature.

What is Commitment?

Commitment is such a complex concept that any one definition cannot do justice to its full meaning. However, for the purposes of this paper the following should suffice. The term commitment indicates a long-term, self-imposed obligation to pursue a chosen rational goal or activity (*Doble, 1995: 16*). Similarly, commitment may be seen as referring to the pattern of convictions, assumptions or prejudices from which a person operates, and which informs the way in which he or she lives (*Watson, 1987: 46*).

In other words, commitment involves holding certain religious or secular beliefs, ideas and actions to be true, right or good, and others to be false, wrong or bad. The beliefs and ideas held to be true and right are allowed to inform and direct the way the holder sees the world, behaves and acts at the expense of those beliefs and ideas held to be false and wrong. And since this kind of (committed) approach to life is self-imposed and largely a matter of personal choice, it is usually rigidly and protectively adhered to by the person involved. As such, commitment can be associated with a conservative or subjective outlook and is in one sense the opposite of openness or neutrality which involves treating all beliefs and ideas objectively and liberally. A neutral person bears in mind the fact that his/her own beliefs or ideas might be false or wrong and others might be true or right and so is open minded.

The Problem of Commitment in Education

The problem of commitment in education generally arises from two facts: first, 'the plurality of beliefs and value systems in modern society ... [and] an emergent literature on the rights of children in the context of compulsory schooling' (*Hill, 1994: 360*), and second, the inevitability of commitments, whether religious or secular, among teachers. As Brezinka (*1994: 39*) rightly argues: 'Not everyone has religious convictions, and not everyone needs religion. But everyone [including teachers] has some world-view convictions.' Similarly, Bolton (*1997: 198*) observes that all

humans have some kind of world-view which may be religious or secular. So if the teacher has to help pupils acquire certain important skills and learning experiences, how is he or she supposed to do so without allowing his/her own commitment(s) to exercise undue influence on the young people and thus indoctrinate them?

In RE in particular, the problem is even more serious because the subject is partly 'a study of how men and women have accepted deep commitments to what they conceive to be the truth about experience' (Cox, 1983: 49). Teachers who are themselves religiously committed also usually teach the subject. So philosophers of education are worried that the RE teacher's religious commitment will lead to indoctrination. They argue that since the nature of religion is to demand acceptance rather than rejection and commitment rather than neutrality from both teacher and pupil, indoctrination is logically unavoidable if religion or RE is taught. Thus it is difficult to see how one could teach religion per se without indoctrinating (White, 1967; Sealey, 1985).

Dogmatic Religious Commitment and its Problems

The problem of the teacher's religious commitment as explained above is even more problematic in a country like Zambia which is officially a 'Christian Nation' (since 1991), but practically a multi-faith and multi-cultural society, with more than one religious tradition being taught in school RE. These include Christianity itself, Islam, Hinduism and Zambian Traditional Religion (MOE, 1983; ECZ/CDC, 1984). Given this multi-faith approach to the subject in Zambia, dogmatic religious commitment to Christian beliefs and values on the part of the teacher would plunge RE as a curriculum subject into serious problems.

In the classroom, to which of the four religious traditions will the teacher recommend commitment? He or she cannot recommend commitment to Christianity on the basis of the controversial 'Christian Nation' status of the country because Article 19 of the 1996 Constitution guarantees freedom of worship, and a good number of his or her own pupils may be non-Christians. The teacher cannot recommend commitment to his or her own religion (Christianity) or secular stance because the pupils will be denied the chance to freely choose their own religion and whether to

be religiously committed or not- which would of course be unacceptable indoctrination. Neither can the teacher recommend commitment to each pupil's own religion because the subject does not teach the scriptures, Christianity or any other religion [per se], [but] uses examples from the scriptures ... traditional beliefs ... Christianity... Islam ... Hinduism to educate pupils to be aware, prayerful, honest, forgiving, tolerant, etc (Henze, 1994: 23).

In other words, it is not the main aim of RE in Zambia to confirm pupils in their own faith but 'to enable [them] to appreciate the spiritual, moral and religious values and the behaviour based on them. As mentioned earlier, this appreciation is drawn from the four main religious traditions in Zambia, namely Christianity, Hinduism, Indigenous Zambian Beliefs and Islam. So whether pupils become committed to their own faiths or not is no major concern of the subject syllabus.

Moreover, any self-disclosure of religious commitment by the teacher will tip the scales of the lesson towards indoctrination (Hill, 1994: 367). In other words, the teacher's psychological influence on the young and adolescent pupil is so strong that any disclosure of his or her religious beliefs and values will lead to indoctrination. This is more so because the teacher in Zambia is, to a large extent, still regarded as 'light bringer' and is highly respected and influential, especially in the rural areas. In African (and Zambian) tradition young people are also supposed to respect and accept as true whatever comes from elders like teachers who are more experienced in life than them. So the teacher's religious views will most likely be taken as unquestionably true or right by the pupil.

Further more, because of the ideological nature of religion, a committed Christian teacher will have an in-built urge to proselytise or evangelise. Thus about 60% of Zambian teachers either start RE lessons with a Christian prayer or see nothing wrong with such a prayer. The reasons given for this position range from seeking God's guidance in the lessons, putting into practice what the teachers themselves believe to Christianity being the majority religious tradition in the country. Additionally, about 80% of the teachers believe that the Bible should be treated as the infallible Holy Word of God during RE lessons. The reasons given for this stand are that there should be no difference in the way the Bible

is treated (by Christians) in church and in school; the Bible cannot be treated like any other ordinary textbook because whatever it contains is true (*Simuchimba, 1998; 2001: 114*). This attitude is of-course similar to the well known Muslim attitude of treating the Koran as sacred, holy and special at all times.

However, the problems with this dogmatically committed approach are obvious. There can be no better example of evangelising in modern (Zambian) RE than starting a class or lesson with a prayer. The use of a Christian prayer in a class where some pupils-no matter how few- are non- Christians is an unacceptable violation of their religious rights which are, as earlier mentioned, enshrined in the Zambian Constitution (*Simuchimba, 2001: 114*). Moreover, praying during a lesson and treating the Bible exactly as it is treated and used in a Christian church is tantamount to turning the classroom into a Christian church, chapel or cathedral. This becomes a serious alienation and humiliation of non-Christian pupils who, cannot easily withdraw from such a classroom or lesson (*Ibid*). But perhaps a more serious problem is that such an approach also violates the very aim of Zambian RE in that it becomes a teaching of Christian prayer and scripture rather than the use of examples from Christianity and the other three religious traditions to help the pupils 'appreciate' moral religious and spiritual values and behaviour based on them (*see MOE 1983, CDC, 1984*).

A further problem with the religiously committed teacher not only in Zambia but other multi-faith societies too is that because of the largely conservative nature of religion, he or she may be too dogmatically committed to their faith to be able to present other religious beliefs and values fairly and objectively. In-fact for some teachers in Zambia religion still means only Christianity. Such teachers will be unable to sympathetically understand our increasingly pluralistic, culture and the attitudes, experiences and needs of the pupils within this culture. They will see little, if any value or merit in other religions and may actually be indifferent to their world-views or truth-claims. As Henze (1994:105) points out:

Where this [religious commitment] does happen, it causes a whole syndrome of troubles. The content becomes narrow, being coextensive

with the teacher's particular appropriation of Christianity. Only one point of view is presented. The teacher tends to omit areas about which he/she is uncertain, while overloading the content with material in which he/she is personally interested.

This situation is perhaps made worse by the Zambian society which, by and large, still associates RE with Cambridge Bible Knowledge and sees the task of school RE as instructing children in the Christian faith like during the denominational and inter-denominational periods of Zambian RE. Actually my fear is that the 1991 declaration of the country as a Christian Nation by the government will continue to encourage this exclusivist thinking in such teachers and indeed many other members of society.

Strict Professional Neutrality and its Problems

To overcome problems of the teacher's religious commitment such as the foregoing, a strictly professional approach which emphasises neutrality, openness, rationality and fairness in the RE teacher's work is recommended by many education experts and RE scholars. The pupil's religious or secular background and the beliefs, teaching or truth-claims of the religious traditions being covered are, as far as possible, not to be violated in the process of rationally examining them in class. In other words, the teacher should exercise what has been referred to as 'neutral impartiality' (Hill, 1994). He or she should act as an impartial arbitrator whose own life stance or religious beliefs and values are undisclosed to avoid any psychological influence and pressure on the pupil and his or her choice between religious and secular commitments, or indeed between the teacher's religious or faith tradition and other religious/faith traditions.

Some commentators have even argued that since a religiously committed teacher of RE cannot be fully trusted to be neutral and impartial (as explained under the section above), a teacher with a secular world-view commitment is likely to do better as a professional teacher of RE than the former. Phillips, for example, argues that 'the ability to teach (RE) ... is not synonymous with the ability to believe, it is synonymous, however, with the ability to respect or see something in religion' (1970: 451). In an article exploring professionalism and confessionality in

RE from the British context, Cooling also emphasises professional commitment more than religious commitment. He argues: 'The prior commitment of religious education teachers working in the secular [public school] context should be to educational principles rather than to their personal religious beliefs.' (1993: 157). These two views by Phillips and Cooling arise because while professional behaviour goes with objectivity, confessional behaviour seems to go with subjectivity. The former is rational while the latter seems to be irrational.

Although educationally more acceptable than dogmatic religious commitment, strict professional neutrality by the RE teacher has its own problems. To begin with, it is not humanly possible to be neutral all the time. As one commentator puts it: 'The question may be asked: can any person (the teacher) in daily contact with other persons (pupils) avoid ideological self-disclosure?' (Hill, 1981: 368) His answer is that the person cannot and my personal experience of secondary school teaching suggests that he is right. One of the first questions a teacher of RE will face in a Zambian class is what his/her church or denomination is and what he/she believes about this or that. It is not very easy to avoid answering such questions and in the process betraying one's neutrality because of pupils curiosity and insistence. Actually as we have already seen, every person has either a religious or secular commitment and commitments consciously or unconsciously dictate the way we live, see things, act and behave. So the RE teacher cannot completely avoid giving away some clues regarding his/her commitment and therefore 'tip the scales towards indoctrination.'

Secondly, since all teachers are supposed to be some kind of models for their pupils, attempts by the RE teacher to hide his/her religious commitment for the sake of neutrality will actually undermine such a role. Such subsidiary aims and objectives of RE as promotion of honesty, integrity and truthfulness will also be undermined by this kind of pretended or false self-presentation by the teacher. Actually in Zambia, society and school authorities tend to expect more from the RE teacher than others. Thus on the first day at my new school after leaving college, the headmaster, warned me that I would be under more scrutiny than my fellow new teachers and that my work and behaviour in and out of school were expected to be exemplary. It is therefore not surprising that

RE teachers are often regarded to be next to church leaders and elders as moral and spiritual models for society. So strict neutrality cannot be very helpful for the Zambian RE teacher. He/she will be seen as giving pupils a bad example of uncommittedness in a nation which should be producing committed young Christians.

Thirdly, if neutrality, impartiality and critical rationality are not properly handled, especially by the teacher with a secular world-view commitment, they can easily lead to secular indoctrination or indoctrination into secularism. For if the religiously committed teacher cannot fully avoid confessionality and indoctrination as earlier argued, then the teacher committed to a secular world-view too cannot fully avoid indoctrinating his/her pupils in the secular life or ideological stance to which he/she is committed. As Hulmes rightly puts it: 'Even in appearing to espouse neutrality this [kind of] teacher is in a position to proselytize in a manner which can easily escape detection' (1979:9). In other words, the neutral and secularist teacher is more likely to be over critical of religious beliefs and values and so end up giving pupils the impression that since these beliefs and values cannot be proved, they are not to be taken seriously at all.

Fourthly and lastly, the educational aim of promoting a critical and open approach to all beliefs and values in life is contradicted or compromised by the teacher's failure, due to Neutrality, to declare and submit his/her own beliefs and values for rational scrutiny in the classroom. Unless the teacher can somehow lead by example even in the area of ideological self-disclosure, it will be very difficult for him/her to help pupils to critically and openly discuss and therefore appraise their own religious or secular beliefs and values.

Professional Religious Commitment

At this point it is clear that both the dogmatic, religiously committed teacher and his/her strictly neutral and professionally committed counterpart have problems which make their positions and work as teachers of RE untenable. It therefore seems that in order to move forward a middle path which combines the educationally positive aspects of dogmatic religious commitment and the practical aspects of strict

called professional religious commitment possible.

According to Cooling (1993), this approach partly responds to John Hull's view that RE teachers need to search for a 'rational personal theology' which will enable them to reconcile the conflict of loyalties to religious commitment and professional commitment - a conflict that he finds 'spiritually destructive' among the teachers. The approach means that the teacher should freely declare his/her religious commitment or beliefs and values when necessary and ensure that they form part of the subject material under critical examination. Rather than tip the scales towards indoctrination, this self-disclosure by the teacher will actually encourage most pupils to freely disclose and submit their own background beliefs, values and religious or secular questions for open discussion. In addition, the knowledge of the teacher's commitment-religious or secular - will enable the pupils to be conscious and sensitive to any attempts by him/her to evangelize or indoctrinate. The teacher himself/herself will also be conscious of the fact that his/her commitment is common knowledge and will therefore be in a better position to professionally restrain himself/herself from proselytizing. I think this dialogue or free expression and sharing of beliefs between the teacher, pupil and the whole class cannot be achieved under the rigid atmosphere of both strict professional neutrality and dogmatic religious commitment but is only possible under the flexible atmosphere created by professional religious commitment.

Apart from resolving his/her problem of trying to maintain an impossible neutral position, the RE teacher's disclosure and rational use of his/her religious commitment as a resource in his/her work is even more important. Since RE as a subject is more about a religious approach to life than a secular one, religious commitment, if liberally and professionally used, can enable the teacher to understand and handle the religious traditions on the syllabus more confidently and openly and therefore help pupils better than a non-religiously committed teacher. As Hulmes (1979: 31) argues, communication of religious insights demands positively that the teacher himself or herself possesses that insight, not as

a notion but as his or her own personal experience. In other words, the teacher's first hand religious experience will be very important in such situation as class debates on controversial beliefs and values and critical analysis of key doctrinal issues where a teacher without such experience would easily mislead or fail to effectively guide the pupils. Thus as Nichols puts it, '[religious] commitment does'... make a difference to the quality of [pupils] religious understanding' (1992: 118).

Additionally, since a teacher of RE more than any other is likely to be approached by pupils with disturbing and challenging religious and even other social problems, it is true that religious commitment will be helpful, if not indispensable, in dealing with such counselling cases. This is especially the case in Zambia where a good number of RE teachers are also school chaplains, patron/moderators of religious clubs or members of School Counselling and Guidance Committees. The counselling services provided by these teachers especially in the many rural boarding High Schools where children have to remain away from home and parents for nine months each year are too important to be provided by neutral teachers or those without some kind of religious commitment to serve as an example. Even in urban day schools many pupils are either from broken homes or homes where parents and guardians still hold that the school will prepare their children fully for life. Again, if such pupils are to be meaningfully helped especially in our fast changing socio-religious situation here in Zambia, there is need for RE teachers to be religiously committed but neutral.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has argued with reference to Zambia, that dogmatic religious commitment in the RE teacher's work is untenable under modern liberal education because the approach is indoctrinating. Similarly strict professional neutrality which liberal education encourages in the RE teacher's work is equally untenable because it is impractical. Therefore a middle path approach like professional religious commitment which allows the teacher to be religiously committed while remaining liberal and neutral in his/her work is the best way forward. In short '[t]he ideal RE teacher should be committed...ecumenical [and] professional (Henze, 1994:106).

Exercise

Commitment can be explained in two ways. Identify the two ways, distinguish between them and explain how they are both part of RE.

Although school education is compulsory, children or pupils still have individual rights. Suggest ways in which teachers of RE can strike a balance between inculcation of commitment in learners and respect for their (learners/ pupils') rights.

'Where dogmatic religious commitment is found in a teacher, it causes a whole syndrome of troubles.' Discuss the practical problems that are likely to be found in an RE classroom (in Zambia) where the teacher is religiously committed.

Some scholars have suggested that a non-religiously committed person might be a better, professional teacher of RE than a religiously committed person. In what specific ways do you think a committed Christian who is professionally trained can make a better teacher of RE in Zambia than a non-Christian or secularist person who is also trained?

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***Some
Basics
of
Religious
Education
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Zambia***

***compiled by
John Henze***

2007

ISBN 978 – 9982 – 07 – 337 – 0

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Printed and published by
Mission Press, P. O. Box 71581, Ndola, Zambia
e-mail; mpress@zamtel.zm