

The challenge of religious revitalisation to educating for shared values and interfaith understanding

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Religion has come back on to the agenda since September 11, 2001. Policy makers, educators, law enforcement and security agents, now all seek to know about religions. We must remember however, that it was coming back before then.

Religious revitalisation

Religious revitalisation has been sweeping the globe. Most noticeably in Islam in Indonesia, Iran, Iraq and elsewhere. But there is also the Christian Right, muchly noticed in the USA, but also Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia. But it is also happening here. Second generation Muslims are more religious than their parents and the Christian right is growing in numbers and influence.

There is a noticeable shift to the right: conservative/family values, anti-abortion, anti-fetal stem cell research, pro-creation/science, pro-familist.

Australians are not prepared for this. We have little experience of, or training in, religion. The reigning secularist hegemony in universities made the study of religion, particularly living religions, seems obsolete and irrelevant. Religion was supposed to fade away according to Freud, Marx and other gurus of the Chardonnay liberal left. But it is not.

While many secular analysts keep trying to do so, revitalisation cannot be reduced to other explanations—concern for social justice, poverty or ignorance. Those who flew the planes into the Twin Towers were not ignorant, poor or concerned for social justice. They had religiously inspired goals and considered themselves god's agents. Similarly the Christian right are not ignorant, or poor, nor are they motivated by social justice. They are both technologically well advanced on liberal Christians, using latest cell phone technology, the web, and advance audio systems.

Revitalised religion is a religion of the aspiring middle class. It always has been. It is at times a mechanism for transition to middle class from traditional economies and cultures. Often associated with the introduction and acceptance of free market economies. They are more ready to compete in a world of religious ideas and practices.

Moreover, religion is back with teeth. Revitalised religions tend to be more hard-edged pursuing, offering and demanding moralities of purity and exclusivity. While starting out by insisting also on withdrawal from engagement with the world, they are now moving to engagement with the world. Thus, not only are today's religions revitalised and more conservative: they are also engaging the world in shifting from disengagement to engagement.

Examples of this process can be seen in the neo-cons in the USA, religious links to government in Iran, and Islamic movements in Asia-Pacific, and Malaysia.

However, engagement is a two edged sword. Yes religious conservatives will have an impact on other sectors of the society. The irony of engagement is that it leads to a loss of purity. For

example, The Family First political party won a senate seat in Victoria with only 44,000 votes, but they did so only through a deal with the devil—The Australian Labor Party. Engagement requires compromise, listening and the formation of alliances which in time erode the pure positions of radical religious groups bringing them closer to more widely accepted positions and the acceptance of greater diversity.

The religious and spiritual life of Asia Pacific

The religious and spiritual life of Asia Pacific has become not only more vital, but also much more diverse through revitalisation, migration and conversion. It is also more prone to conflict; both conflict within, and between, religious groups as well as increased tension between them and other groups. As a result of migration, mobility and globalisation religious groups which previously existed in isolation from each other are now more likely to come into contact with others who are different.

The likelihood of conflict is increased by the presence of intensified ideologies of conflict stemming from residual and renewed Christian missionary zeal, new found Pentecostal zeal, Wahabbist theologies of Islamic purity and domination, as well as conflicting political interests.

Again it is important to note most of these causes are not social/economic. Yes declining economies exacerbate the situation making conflict more likely. But these are not movements of social justice; they are movements of believers seeking to put their beliefs into practice. These are not easily reconcilable beliefs or practices. Theologies of purity are exclusivist, denying the right to exist of those deemed to be in error.

Educating for shared values has become much more difficult

Religious revitalisation and conflict make the Asia Pacific a very different context for education in values and religious education. It does not presuppose the liberal, laissez-faire values basic to much of Western education. It does not commence with mutual respect, but moves with suspicion. It does not commence with inclusivity, but preaches exclusivity. It commences with a negative assessment of difference, resistance to multicultural policies and a readiness to condemn. This poses a huge challenge to those who do operate from values of inclusion, fairness, openness, tolerance, and who view diversity positively.

For many, including many at this conference, the call to shared values becomes a call to take my values, become like me. On what basis is this missionary approach taken? On what basis do we seek to impose, develop, or cultivate our values among these people who are different from us?

The problem with saying that we really do share certain universal values is that while they may be similar, or seem to be from outside, these values do not hang in space—unless you subscribe to a neo-platonic world view—but are grounded in difference, in different communities, histories, traditions, and religious belief and practice. What are the bases for shared values? Externally perceived similarities laced with a few differences which will not lead to conflict so long as each group makes a few “minor” corrections to its beliefs and practices?

The attempt to educate for shared values may well be inimical to conservative, revitalising religions. It undermines the very differences they seek to emphasise. It relativises the absolute truth claims they make. Educating for shared values often operates, usually uncritically, by proposing “another” value system, one that is overtly or covertly claimed to “transcend” the value systems of those being educated.

The problem of values education in a multicultural multifaith society

What is needed? First of all, classmates need information about the religious beliefs and practices of other classmates, those whose difference they deal with daily. What do my classmates do when they are being religious/spiritual? This can be extended to a description of the religious and spiritual life of other Australians, particularly for students in comparatively religiously homogeneous classrooms.

This is not a “comparative religions” approach, because that approach takes a superordinate view of religions, comparing one with another in terms of some set of themes, analytical frames, or intellectual structures. It is also not a “history of religions” approach or “sociology of religions” for similar reasons.

This learning needs to be offered early in schooling. It provides information about different religious groups/practices current in Australia. It should use Australian material, Australian data, and Australian examples. What is needed is an introduction to Australian religion and spirituality as practised today by a diversity of Australians including Indigenous and more recently arrived Australians, groups as diverse as Anglicans—noting their internal diversity—and Brahma Kumaris.

The call for this kind of education was one of the dominant and oft repeated themes of the research Des Cahill and I did. This study of Religious and Cultural Diversity in Australia involved community studies, discussions among faith leaders in each capital city and the gathering of responses from many ordinary people. At all levels, people were sensing their own need for education about the religions and spiritualities of Australians. They did not feel helped by overseas material because, like it or not, Australia is different.

The call is for materials, curricula, and the personnel able to implement them. The need is at all levels of education.

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