

Hindu and Islamic Identity in Australia and Ramifications for Curriculum Development in Select Areas of Social Education

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Recent research by the author into significant Hindu and Islamic communities in NSW, Australia, has uncovered conceptions of identity which clearly differ from those which are assumed in the formation and development of new curricula in the areas of Religious Studies (cf. NSWBOS, 1991a) and Values Education (cf. NSWBOS, 1991b). This paper will explore these conceptions and their likely impact on these educational developments.

While the role of the school as a religious and values formator was beyond question for most Hindus, especially the more orthodox followers stressed a separation of the notions of religious and cultural values. Cultural values were essentially concerned with the material; they were about finding a working place in society. Religious values, on the other hand, concerned the soul, rather than the material. These represented the ultimate set of values, without which all material values, even the most noble, were useless. Ultimately, the material, including the individual body, is impermanent, while the soul is eternal. The supreme value for a Hindu concerns that which will move the 'atman' (personal soul) towards 'paramatman' (the immortal soul). While courses of study in religion and values could expose a student to a certain number of important Hindu values, their capacity to deal with the ultimate religious values of Hinduism was doubtful. Here, the only proper tutelage would be in the form of a Hindu guru, whereby the essential disciplines of meditation could be taught. Clearly, this kind of tutelage was beyond the responsibilities or even capacities of the school and its curricular pursuits. Nonetheless, many wished to make the point that provision for the possibility of this kind of search ensuing from such studies should be recognized and catered for.

For the Hindu, while a great deal of religious and values education could be achieved within the confines of a good school program, including an effective and sensitive teacher, there would always be something about Hinduism which could not be communicated in such a way. Whether specifically in the religious or the values sphere, there is a spiritual dimension which defies the kind of teaching to which school curricula are restricted. While, for the most part, this extra dimension represents something entirely complementary with that which can be covered in the school curricula, it is possible at times that the two could be at odds with each other. It is certainly something of which teachers and syllabus developers in these

areas need to be aware.

Most Muslims agreed that school was important in teaching their children about religion and morality, and that having their children exposed to other faiths at school, and increasing the confidence of Islamic youth about their own faith, were integrally linked. A number of Muslims, however, spoke freely about their concerns regarding the non-sectarian goals of the new Religious Studies. These were strongly of the view that only a Muslim should attempt to teach the Islam sections of the syllabus, and only a Muslim should attempt to offer insights on Islam in other sections. Some could not accept the assumption behind the syllabus that it was designed to achieve greater

tolerance. The opposite view was that the syllabus could actually lead to a sharpening of inter-religious conflict. Especially in a public school with a mixed religious make-up, they maintained, it was often preferable to avoid targetting religion as a topic, for all this achieved was an inflaming of bigotry and passions. They were pessimistic that students, in such a situation, would opt for the more academic approach. It was far more likely that their 'home' values, largely based on ignorance and prejudice, would surface. In any inflaming movement, minority religions and their followers would be the first victims.

It seems it is difficult for a non-Muslim to appreciate how much the Islamic faith is a total 'metaphor of meaning' for the Muslim. Islam is the over-arching organizing principle for the conduct of daily life, and teachers would need to be sensitive to the strains that could result in some of their students as they live an Islamic life while adapting to realities of schooling in secular Australian culture. As an instance, an issue like gender equality could be potentially divisive. It is clear that the Koran teaches that men and women are equal and created of a single soul. However, equality under Islam, and equality as given by the contemporary feminist thought that dominates the current syllabuses are clearly not the same thing.

These varying conceptions of identity and culture need to be borne in mind when considering issues of educational policy and practice in subject areas like Religious Studies and Values Education. It is clear that both of these religious groups have sufficiently important an historical purchase and, currently, are in sufficient numbers to warrant major attention in the design of syllabuses presenting as genuine multifaith and multicultural religious and moral education curricula. The contemporary statistics reveal that both groups have numbers in excess of well known and relatively well represented Christian groups (Bentley

et al., 1992). Islam, in particular, as the ninth most populous religious tradition in the country, is larger than Seventh Day Adventism and the Salvation Army, while Hinduism is not far behind. Similar calculations can be made in relation to Judaism (cf. Lovat et al., 1993). I am interested to explore the seeming anomaly of allowing purportedly multifaith and multivalued curricula of these sort to reach endorsement stage without there having been sufficient representation of the views of such clearly important religious communities within the broader society. I believe this anomaly reveals something of the somewhat schizophrenic climate of multiculturalism and multicultural education as it is currently conceived and proceeding.

There has been no shortage of testimony from the literature that, in general terms (cf. Sargent, 1994), and with particular reference to education (cf. Bullivant, 1981; Barcan, 1988; Partington & McCudden, 1992), the influence of an hegemonic culture has persisted in Australian social life in spite of apparently strenuous attempts to dismantle it. Sargent sees the most recent attempts to redress this situation as being largely cosmetic and characterizes the policy of 'mainstreaming' of immigrant services of the late 1980s as in fact implying a reduction of such services justified by a rejuvenated assimilation mentality. Some of the deeply-held beliefs and assumptions that justify such a position are variously described by Van den Berghe (1981) and Lepervanche (1984) as 'extended

nepotism' and 'natural inequality', both betraying an ethnocentrism that regards those of ethnic difference as alien and inferior.

There are clear implications of this type of thinking for the educational context. There would seem little point in emphasizing the distinctiveness of various cultures. Indeed, this would likely appear as a backward step. Similarly, there would seem little point in concentrating on an understanding of ethnic difference through multicultural studies. The ideal is clearly not a cultural pluralism but assimilation into the dominant culture as soon as possible. In fact, the so-called 'ethnic politics' of the 1960s and 1970s implicitly supported such a view. These politics, which arose out of the sheer numbers of immigrants in Australia after a certain point in time, characterized immigrant disadvantage in terms of mere class structure and socio-economic opportunity. Immigrants were characterized as poorer because, having been slotted into the bottom end of the Australian pyramid, they were unable to compete with the dominant classes. Their ethnic distinctiveness was, in effect, their problem. The solution was, therefore, to shed this

distinctiveness as soon as possible. Schools could help best by extending their normal compensatory education to cover the needs of immigrants. Bullivant (1981) indicates how dominant approaches to multicultural education can and did lead to a de facto disadvantaged education mode, whereby the needs of the ethnic minority (read 'culturally disadvantaged') were conceived as standing alongside those of other disadvantaged groups like the physically disabled or academically slow. This resulted, throughout the apparent 'high age' of multicultural education (ie. the 1970s and 1980s) in a none too subtle maintenance of the old power divisions in education.

A natural feature of the phenomenon in question is to be found in the ethnocentric curriculum. Where an assimilationist mentality is predominant, the humanities and social sciences, in particular, will be dealt with from the prevailing viewpoints of the hegemonic culture. Partington & McCudden (1992) provide some evidence in affirming that the core curricula in Australian schools have tended to function to enforce an assimilationist mode of multicultural education. They acknowledge the need for some mainstreaming theme to persist if all students are to be given access to the community's goods, but they also point out the need for all students to experience cultural continuity so that the cognitive, social and language competencies of all can be maintained and extended. In making this point, they cite the National Advisory and Coordinating Committee on Multicultural Education's report, Education in and for a Multicultural Society (NACCME 1987), in asserting the need for schools to be, in some respects, at odds with the mores of the mainstream if life chances for all are genuinely to be extended.

Clearly in the spirit of this, we find current curriculum directives (cf. NSWBOS, 1991c) that determine that every student, including the prime English speaking student, is required to study 100 hours of a language other than English. The languages that are mandatory include Arabic, Italian, Greek, Vietnamese and others which are particularly pertinent to Australia's multi-ethnic make-up. It is said that these provide the opportunity for immigrant pupils to specialize in their native tongues and the opportunity for prime English-speaking pupils to gain greater access to, and understanding of, the

various ethnic groups which make up the population. Alongside such noble individual-oriented goals, however, is a goal of a different sort. The directive states that the shape and form of this language policy helps " ... to advance important National and State goals." (1991c:52)

Hence, in a distinctive touch of schizophrenia, we find allied to

a multilingual policy like that just outlined, an example of the kinds of mainstreaming curriculum initiatives that Sargent suggests may well be no more than veiled assimilationism. Within the same directive, the centre-piece of the language policy is declared to be 'K-12 English'. The word 'English' is used without apology, as against 'Language Arts', the term which had been used for most of the earlier decade. The document makes it clear that any student, including the immigrant student, will be required to demonstrate competence in the dominant and purportedly unifying language of this society. This is seen clearly to be in the best interests of the individual student, immigrant or otherwise.

The current social and educational context would seem to represent something less than the high age of multiculturalism, including multicultural education. Perhaps, rather than the emotive language of schizophrenia, one could talk more simply of a measured multiculturalism, one which attends to the obvious diversity of the population but holds to an imperative for a cultural core that was absent in some of the earlier curriculum initiatives of, for instance, the Multicultural Education Program. In this context, it should not be surprising that an apparently multi-faith approach to religious and moral education should be proposed that, in fact, maintains something of the traditional hegemonies in these areas, however subtly this might be done.

It is of particular pertinence to the thesis being put in this paper to note that, in 1964, a genuinely adventurous document emerged from the NSW Department of Education, titled General Religious and Moral Education (NSWDE, 1964). On the one hand, this seemed to represent an attempt to revivify the vision of the Public Instruction Act of 1880 that religious and moral education should be an important part of public education and that they had an integral role to play in inducting the young into the personal and civic morality so necessary for good social order. On the other hand, the language of the document portrayed a recognition of the changing circumstances of Australian cultural life and an explicit, non-measured call for a religious openness that was not in fact a reflection, at that time, of community attitudes. This was a bold attempt at a curriculum whose assumptions and perspectives truly were at odds with prevailing community sentiment, in the way proposed by the NACCME report (1987).

While the Religious and Moral Education document pointed predictably to subject matter of a Christian orientation, the adventurousness was seen in its recommendation that there is a " towards, people of races and religions ... other than their own. an awareness of the beliefs and moral values taught by the great

religions of the world." (1964: 9) Within the syllabus itself, alongside Moses, Joan of Arc, Martin Luther and Pope John XXIII as exemplars of holiness, stood Confucius, the Buddha, Muhammad and Ramakrishna.

The suspicion that this document has had little practical effect on the religious and moral education agenda of NSW schools is confirmed by Barcan (1988), who points out that, at the time of the release of the Rawlinson Report (1980) on religious education in NSW schools, a large percentage of teachers had no knowledge of the 1964 document. Furthermore, he points out that a significant number of teachers had no awareness of the general religious and moral education perspectives of the 1880 Public Instruction Act. It seems clear that the authors of this curriculum were some years ahead of their time. To be precise, it would be nine years before the first state education report proposing such an approach to the study of religion would be accepted as official educational policy (cf. Steinle, 1973). It would be sixteen years before a similar report would emerge in NSW (cf. Rawlinson, 1980), and it would be twenty-eight years before a syllabus to match such public policy and acceptance would become a reality in NSW. By the time this came to pass, social and educational mentality and policy had changed. The high age of multiculturalism and multicultural education had passed in favour of a more measured, and perhaps mean, addressing of the real needs, desires and perspectives of those Australians who do not represent the hegemonic culture. In this climate, it would not be surprising that a purportedly multifaith religious and moral education curriculum would be endorsed, whether or not its terms and parameters were truly suitable to religious minorities.

Conclusion

One does not wish to give the impression of 'looking the gift horse in the mouth'. Those who are dedicated to the advance of religious and moral education curricula can only be delighted that these curricula are now in place in NSW public education. I believe this research points out, however, that the job is not yet done. Especially granted the political climate of the day, there is a danger that we could settle for the form of the curriculum without ensuring that it truly has the force to represent and provide the continuity of culture and the genuine learning forum for those of all religious persuasions. This, I am sure, is ultimately what most multifaith religious and moral educators would want.

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