

## RELIGION AND VALUES: WHAT WENT WRONG? \*

Gordon Mitchell  
University of Cape Town

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### Abstract

*In this paper it is argued that 'transmission teaching', an educational model of the all-knowing teacher who imparts religious values, should be replaced by a model in which dialogue is central. Support for such a contention is found in the works of John Colenso, post-colonial developments in religious education in sub-Saharan Africa and in the rise of 'people's education' in South Africa. A consequence of the emphasis on dialogue for religious education is that this must include, at the very least, interaction with all the religious traditions to be found in the country. The theological problem that some might have in accepting any idea of multi-faith religious education is overcome by a recognition of the difference between catechism which is the responsibility of the church and religious education which is more properly in the hands of those accountable to the community as a whole.*

### 1. Introduction

It is a remarkable fact that South Africa's most widely known biblical scholar, Bishop John Colenso of Natal, has only in recent years been remembered for his rather remarkable attitude to religious education (Mosothoane 1988). His understanding of the missionary as a pupil, which brought him such ridicule from contemporaries, is evident in his earliest work. In the Preface to the first of his commentaries on the Pentateuch, Colenso (1862) writes:

Here, however, as I said, amidst my work in this land, I have been brought face to face with the very questions which I then put by. While translating the story of the Flood, I have had a simple-minded, but intelligent native, - one with the docility of a child, but the reasoning powers of mature age, - look up, and ask, 'Is all that true? Do you really believe that all this happened thus, - that all the beasts, and birds, and creeping things, upon the earth, large and small, from hot countries and cold, came thus by pairs, and entered into the ark with Noah? And did Noah gather food for them all, for beasts and birds of prey, as well as the rest?' My heart answered in the words of the Prophet, 'Shall a man speak lies in the name of the Lord?' Zech. xiii.3. But I was thus

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driven, - against my will at first, I may truly say, - to search deeply into these questions; and I have since done so, to the best of my power, with the means at my disposal in this colony. And now I tremble at the result of my enquiries,

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Colenso then proceeds with commonsense logic to demonstrate that if understood as scientific history the Pentateuch is indeed fraught with contradictions. Such apparent scepticism, particularly from a bishop of the church scandalized many, and the notion of an Englishman having anything to learn from 'a native' was found to be so ludicrous that it released a flood of humour, as in a popular limerick:

A bishop there was of Natal,  
Who took a Zulu for a pal,  
Said the Native 'Look 'ere,  
Aint the Pentateuch queer?'  
Which converted the Lord of Natal.

Colenso's approach was also cause for serious concern from fellow-missionaries. Typical of this is a letter from Rood (1869) where he complained that:

... native Christians when conversing on religious topics are I think too apt to let the habit and love of discussion interfere with the simple love to know the truth. I have often noticed this with feelings of regret in the adult classes in the Sunday School ... Take such questions as polygamy or the demanding of cattle for daughters when given in marriage, they will go back to the Old Testament history, to Jacob and others, and they will say that they find these customs were approved by God and nowhere in the Bible do they find them forbidden, and they will argue with zeal and boldness ... They may say the same of the practice of beer drinking, of dancing and other evil customs. So also some of the great doctrines of the Bible, such as the Divinity of Christ or the Sovereignty of God may be disputed ... and the more confident will they be because they can point to the teachings of Bishop Colenso and others who profess to teach the truths of God.

But doesn't the scenario that so disturbed these missionaries appear profoundly educational? Instead of a passive audience there is dialogue and discovery. It does seem that Colenso, regarded by contemporaries as a heretic, introduced an approach to religious education which is completely orthodox in its relationship to current trends in educational theory.

Colenso's approach was based clearly more on theological grounds than motivated by pedagogical considerations. Inter-religious dialogue was an essential feature of a universalist theological position which he had adopted under the influence of Maurice (Darby 1981:66-109). It was this which more than anything moved him away, at least in his general ideas of how religion should be taught, from what is now known in educational jargon as 'transmission teaching'. Arguably those operating with a particularist theological position had little impulse from within their paradigm which could undermine the prevailing attitudes. One of the basic presuppositions of transmission teaching is that the teacher has access to knowledge which is not

available to the pupil from everyday experience. Somehow not even the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was ever really seen to apply, particularly when it came to children and 'primitive' peoples. And when it came to other religions then it was clear that they were erroneous if not satanic. This would preclude any real dialogue on equal terms with those who do not yet possess the truth.

## 2. Present-day 'Bible Education' in South African schools

The syllabi for 'Bible Education' in South African schools are unequivocal in reinforcing such a model of the teacher who transmits the truth, by stating that the aim of the education is to lead the pupils to conversion. What is clear from the discussion so far is that we are talking about more than just a difference in opinion about pedagogics but that 'under the rug of technique lies the image of man' (cited in Barnes 1976:176). As one looks over the past few decades it becomes clear that a form of Christian fundamentalism which claimed to have ready access to truth through a written text offered firm support to prevailing pedagogical thinking.

The title of this paper *Religion and values: what went wrong?* implies first of all that there was a time before things went awry, and perhaps it is being assumed that I am proposing the reign of the former Bishop of Natal as some kind of Golden Age. This would be giving him too much credit and idealizing a career that was fraught with inconsistencies. The title also suggests that blame will be apportioned for things having gone wrong, certainly an easier task! The obvious target is the much attacked policy of Christian National Education which is viewed as something imposed on everyone else by Afrikaner nationalists. It is not difficult however to detect similar tendencies within the English community. Speaking at a 'Conference on Religious Education in our changing society' held at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1980 Staples (1980:38) could argue:

Yes, I believe the State has not only the right but the beholden duty to teach FAITH. As education below the age of 16 years is compulsory and seeing that the Church and home combination is reaching less than 40% of the total population we are left with no alternative. As FAITH is consequently linked with Salvation and that with eternal destiny it would be the grossest neglect for any person, body or institution to neglect any God-sent opportunity to preach in unambiguous terms the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

If the motives for this way of teaching religious values are so laudable why should anyone object? That there are objections is an empirical fact, and the reasons for them is that there is more to the whole procedure than meets the eye.

In a paper delivered at the 1990 Congress of the Southern African Biblical Society, Ferdinand Deist (1991) demonstrated that the current syllabi for Biblical Studies and 'Bible Education' in South African schools function as instruments of religious, cultural and even political imperialism. What this means is that a small sector of society, albeit one with political power, has taken upon itself the task of imposing its religious ideas on everyone else. This was not simply done to people of other faiths but also to all those who have a significantly different interpretation of the Christian

faith. In addition, Maimela (1987) has shown how the system has consistently overlooked the context and questions of the oppressed majority in South Africa.

Maimela and Deist are by no means the only ones to have offered trenchant criticism of the syllabi. Indeed it is disheartening to read back-copies of *Scriptura* and to realize that the main lines of much of what has been argued there over the past ten years was ignored by those responsible for drawing up the new 'Draft Syllabus'. Not only was there an obvious lack of dialogue with those outside their own group when drawing up the new syllabi, the arrangement of teaching material under abstract concepts like the kingdom of God is a certain conversation stopper and reveals an out of date pedagogical philosophy. The good news, however, is that even if ideas have had little impact, it does appear that the forces of history will be on the side of a significantly new approach.

It should perhaps be asked at this point: didn't they realize what they were doing? Part of the answer is that those responsible isolated themselves to such an extent within their own communities, that they didn't realize that there could be any truth but their own. Or, to put it another way, they failed to realize how perceptions are influenced by context. For the same reason they stand hurt and amazed when their ideas are resisted and rejected. We all need to come to terms with the mistakes of the past, if only to avoid making them again.

Having said that history is on the side of significant change I have sneaked into the world of futurology. What are the trends which will shape religious education in the future? It seems reasonable to begin with a survey of what has happened in other African countries in order to predict what could happen here.

In sub-Saharan Africa after independence education, including religious education, was placed under the control of the state, a move which was welcomed by many black church leaders because of the way in which the churches had previously worked hand in hand with the colonial rulers in the field of education. It was felt that now at last the masses would have their voice taken seriously.

One of the most significant lessons that had been learned from the European missionaries' failure to take the religious experience of Africa seriously has been the need to reject the notion of an all-knowing teacher. Based on the belief that God is active in creation and in his people, a model emerges in which everyone becomes a teacher, and the official teacher is seen as being as much a learner as anyone else. A typical representative of this trend is Kiggundu (1975:8) who writes:

The basis of this approach is that no one has the answers in advance: the teacher and the students together look at the material for study; together they face an 'obscure' situation, and together they try to see how a concrete problem can be tackled. The teacher and the students are together to discuss and increase their awareness of the topics to be studied. This way is much more demanding on the teacher, who is no longer secure in his 'ivory tower'; he must be open to having his statements challenged, and even to having to change his own opinions! This is why many teachers are afraid of this new approach, because their 'status' seems to suffer!

### 3. Religious Education in Africa

There is a tremendous amount of variety in Africa which makes it difficult to generalize about what is happening in the field of religious education. Thus just as there is a move in the direction of participatory forms of education, so there is a disturbing trend in the form of a massive influx of North American religious fundamentalism into many African countries over the past decade (Gifford 1990). With a Roman 13 theology and sufficient US dollars to offer free teacher training and glossy *curriculum* material, they are busy winning their way into the heart and mind of several African governments.

It can only be hoped that momentum to introduce more participatory modes of education is not lost. In several African countries, most recently in Malawi, *curriculum* developers have taken the notion of dialogue beyond the Christian religion and included a dialogue with other faiths, particularly the other two prominent religions of Africa, traditional African religion and Islam. The trend was initially stimulated by a drive amongst Christian theologians to rediscover their African roots as a reaction to colonial cultural domination. This led to the development of models broad enough to include both streams of tradition, Christian and African (Kibicho 1981). In west and east Africa it has taken the form of a Protestant African theology, while in central Africa it has been Roman Catholic. Continuity between Christianity and African religion is emphasised.

In the interests of national unity many African governments have embarked on a multi-cultural approach to education, and multi-faith education has been a natural consequence of this. For example the Religious and Moral Education Syllabus in Zimbabwe has these general aims for those in its schools:

1. to develop an awareness of a Supreme Being;
2. to understand their own religion and tradition and, by searching and discovery, develop their own belief system;
3. to know about and appreciate all other religions they are likely to encounter in Zimbabwe;
4. to respect people whose beliefs differ from their own, thus developing a spirit of tolerance;
5. to see the relationship between religion and morals;
6. to work out their belief systems in moral behaviour; (*Religious and Moral Education Syllabus* 1985:25; Ter Haar 1990:143).

In an important study Westerlund (1985:57-60) has examined statements of African theologians and politicians on the subject of religious education and comes to the conclusion that the majority consciously see African theology as serving the interests of national unity. That they are aware of what they are doing perhaps makes this a less problematic form of civil religion. Another important observation by Westerlund is that the African scholars writing on African religion usually have a background in academic Christian theology and are intent on constructing an African theology rather than presenting detached information on religion in Africa.

Undoubtedly this is an important and much needed exercise, but were it not for the immense power of denominationalism one might need to be concerned that this would constitute a single religious system which could be imposed on a society rather than being a party in the process of dialogue. The idea of a single all-embracing religious system is indeed a feature of policy in Zaire, but this is by no means the norm. For example, the Zimbabwean policy outlined above is certainly one that appears to avoid the imposition of a single all-embracing system of belief on the community. It should also be added that the annual consultations of leaders in the field of religious education from central and east African countries (mainly Christian theologians) have repeatedly produced statements in support of a system of religious education which recognizes the need to teach other faiths in addition to Christianity (Phiri 1987,1988).

In the literature there does seem to be a certain awareness of the dangers of indoctrination. Thus Ugandan, Nabeeta (1972:299), an Anglican Christian, can write of 'the detestable misuse' of religious instruction in schools as a tool of conversion. Attitudes like this are not the result of some kind of double-think but are consistent with a distinction being made between religious education in state schools and the catechetical instruction of the churches (Ter Haar 1990:97-100). The use of the expression 'religious education' is itself indicative of the shift.

#### **4. Religious Education in Southern Africa: the path ahead**

Reading through the syllabi for Bible Education, etc, in South African schools one is struck by a sense of unreality. It is simply accepted that everyone who teaches the subject has not only an adequate theological training but as a very zealous evangelist will use the material to lead the pupils to conversion. If the result of a survey in 1990 of prospective teachers at the University of Cape Town is anything to go by, an overwhelming majority feel that such expectations take little account of their unwillingness to accept the role. Now in the case of Christian education or catechism that takes place within a church context the church has always insisted on the necessary training, care and discipline of those it uses as teachers, and quite rightly so. What needs to be recognized, however, is the difference between the catechetical ministry of the church and religious education which is the responsibility of the state. It is unfair to expect teachers in state schools to do the work that the church ought to be doing.

But is it possible to frame a system of education in which values are non-existent? The answer is clearly no. Even a more secular approach to religious education as in Zimbabwe is dominated by values such as national unity and tolerance, certainly values which are appropriate for religious education in schools. Our experience in South Africa over the past decades should teach us to guard against a situation in which values are imposed on people, or at least to minimize its possibilities. It does seem that a dialogical approach to drawing up a curriculum and to teaching would be the best way of ensuring this. The title of Barnes' classic work, *From Communication to Curriculum*, would seem an appropriate way of describing the kind of approach that would be most helpful.

In a participatory model for religious education the emphasis on the faith commitment of the teacher is not of primary importance. If one accepts that various teachers will have their own levels of faith and religious experience, then unrealizable expectations become unnecessary. This is not to say that the religious education teacher requires no training. The opposite is closer to the truth, as teachers should not only be familiar with the content of the religious traditions, but be able to use some of the more participatory ways of relating to these traditions in a classroom setting. More than anything it is a case of learning a new style. Again Colenso (1865:267-8) puts it rather well when he calls for teachers with 'large hearts, cultivated minds and generous views' and not those who would 'cram the native mind with creeds and catechisms, and raise a number of human parrots, repeating dogmatic phrases and formularies'.

Returning for a moment to our earlier question: will we become like the rest of Africa in adopting a multi-faith approach to religious education in our schools? Before answering this question that is probably impossible to answer anyway, it should be remembered that there is a lot of variety as well as change in the various African countries in their educational policies. One doesn't need to look beyond the Limpopo to be able to predict what the future holds for religious education in South Africa. There is no doubt that a deep respect for the notion of an African Christianity has again taken root here, with that grand old man of African theology, Setiloane playing a prominent role. In addition a theology of liberation that includes the economic and political dimensions of religious experience, and thus takes seriously the contribution of ordinary people, has shaped South African religious life to a considerable degree.

With regard to the educational programme of the churches in Southern Africa: the development over the past decade of 'people's education', with its emphasis on participation as a means of liberation, has had a profound impact on what is perceived to be the appropriate direction for educational policy and practice (Hopfer 1989). Much of the Bible study material produced in recent years has been collected by the Institute for the Study of the Bible at the University of Natal, where extremely important work has been done in analyzing the nature of the dialogue between the ordinary reader and the trained reader. A crucial issue that remains to be addressed is that the voice of an oral tradition is not being heard (Mazamisa 1991). At a purely theoretical level the understanding of religion as text militates against taking seriously the rich and varied traditions of African religion found for example in the African Independent Churches, traditions which happen to represent the religious values of most South Africans.

What remains a persistent danger is that having for so long lived with a dogmatic, intolerant, hierarchical approach to religious education, there is always the possibility that one form of it will simply be replaced by another. What should act against such a development is the emphasis over the past decade on participatory models for education. The momentum of events will undoubtedly also bring people of very different backgrounds together, a situation which promises a marvellous educational opportunity and offers a realistic classroom setting for dialogue. One

trusts that the retrogressive step of subdividing the class along religious lines and parcelling students off for instruction based on their particular religious affiliation will never be taken.

## 5. Religion and values: what went wrong?

I have argued that lying behind an hierarchical educational practice seems to be the belief that it is possible for a superior kind of person to know so much about religion that he or she may be offered the task of imparting that to the ignorant. What this has amounted to is the imposition of the religious (and other) values of a relatively small sector of the society on the majority. This paper has attempted to show that the way to move beyond this is through an understanding of religious education as a process of dialogue. Religious education as well as education in general is always formulated and practiced in relation to a set of values. In proposing a dialogical model we do so aware that our suggestions are also value-laden. However, enough theorizing has been done and we need to move to planning.

It is important that the complete range of people and opinions be involved in the process: from pupils sharing ideas on what would be meaningful, to teachers sharing with each other ways of encouraging participation and lesson outlines. My suggestion, made somewhat tongue in cheek, is that at this stage text books and curriculae be outlawed and that instead everyone involved in religious education go out and buy a loose-leaf file. Regional conferences can serve as places where ideas are shared and files stocked up. Hopefully the process will never be canonized, as it is the process itself that is profoundly educational. Those of us with a background in the field of Biblical Studies will probably also need to accustom ourselves to becoming players in a very much larger and certainly more interesting team than that with which we are now familiar.

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