

## EDUCATION FOR RECONCILIATION <sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*South African state schools have begun to admit pupils from different linguistic, cultural, religious and political backgrounds. This could raise problems for Religious Education which traditionally has been instruction in the Christian faith rather than education in religion. If the subject is to gain credibility a new approach must be adopted, one which has the aim of reconciling people from different backgrounds. Suggestions are made as to how this could be done, viz, a study of the world's major religions as a way of inculcating attitudes of tolerance and respect, an emphasis on the importance of inter-personal relationships, as well as God's demands for justice and righteousness. If this line of approach is followed not only will the person-building potential of Religious Education be realised but the subject could make a contribution to the policy of reconciliation.*

### 1. The place of Religious Education in the 'new' South Africa

In the light of the 'new' South Africa and the prospect of non-racial and, therefore, multi-cultural state schools becoming a reality, the nature of Religious Education (RE) and its place in the school curriculum must be thoroughly analysed.

Approximately seventy two per cent of the population of South Africa claim to be Christians and, officially, the country is a Christian one. In the eyes of the state authorities, Christianity is considered to be the only authentic religion and society is seen as having the responsibility of transmitting the tenets of the Christian faith to the next generation. RE is, therefore, a sensitive topic and any thought of changing the *status quo* regarding the teaching of the subject is bound to cause heated debate.

Owing to the policy of separate schools existing for different racial groups it has, until now, been a fairly easy task to teach RE as school communities were generally homogeneous. Where this was not the case provision was made for pupils to withdraw from RE lessons.

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1. An earlier version of this paper entitled 'Does God really care? Religious education in post-apartheid South Africa' appeared both in *Panorama: International Journal of Comparative Religious Education and Values*, 2.1 (summer 1990) 35-40, and in the *Conference Proceedings* of the National Subject Didactics symposium, held at the University of Stellenbosch (26-28 September) 549-557.

What this paper proposes is that the present Christian-Reformational approach to the teaching of RE be discontinued and be replaced by an approach more relevant to the changing situation in this country. Despite the Christian predominance, South Africa is a pluralistic country with almost every type of religious and secular viewpoint being represented and a core syllabus should be adopted which takes into account this diversity of beliefs. Although other countries already face the problem of teaching religion in a multi-faith context, in South Africa the problem is only now emerging as pupils and teachers from different linguistic, cultural, racial, political, social and religious backgrounds find themselves together in the classroom.

## 2. The history of Religious Education in South Africa

From the time of the first white settlement at the Cape until the present, RE has always occupied a special place in state schools but has meant little more than instruction in the Christian faith. As such it has often been more of a 'Calvinist' attempt to convert pupils to Christianity or the nurturing of the faith of those who already claim to be Christians rather than genuine Religious Education (Rose and Tunmer 1975: 134-135, 142).<sup>2</sup>

Initially education for whites was controlled by a Dutch Reformed Church still strongly influenced by the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619) (Rose and Tunmer 1975:113). Suggestions that RE be given outside of school hours were always strongly opposed as was any attempt to establish secular schools which were not under the strict control of the church (Rose and Tunmer 1975:89ff; Holmes 1962:29ff).<sup>3</sup>

Black pupils have also been given Christian instruction for many years for, prior to the takeover of 'Bantu Education' by the state, mission schools were the predominant educational institutions.

When education for all sectors of the population came under state control, Christian instruction in the schools was not dropped but was maintained in the forms of daily worship and the teaching of RE. In fact, the Christian faith became one of the pillars of the state education system with the implementation of the policy of Christian National Education (CNE) in 1948.

From then onwards this policy, designed originally to protect the identity of the Afrikaner nation, became the basis of South Africa's education system.<sup>4</sup> For example, the document produced in 1948 by the Institute for Christian National Education (ICNO) states:

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2. Inferred from the fact that the syllabus is based on the creeds of the Dutch Reformed Churches (Rose and Tunmer 1975: 134-135, 142).

3. As, for example, in the 'secularising' educational policies of J A de Mist (1804).

4. This standpoint has been disputed by Professor J Ch Coetzee, one of the founding fathers of CNE (Rose and Tunmer 1975:117). For a brief outline of CNE and its influence on education in South Africa today, see Christie (1985:15).

... our ideal is and remains the Christian-National school but we realise also that our provisional task is directly to leaven the ordinary public schools through the medium of our Christian-National spirit and direction (Article 8, Clause 7).

Consequently RE gained an even greater status because it contributed directly to the Christian aspect of the CNE policy. In each separate education department controlled by the state the teaching of RE became mandatory. The ICNO document stressed this importance:

Not only must the Religious Instruction itself be of a high standard, but it must take such a central place in teaching that it determines the spirit and direction of all subjects and of the whole school (Article 6, Clause 2).

### 3. The situation today

The Christian emphasis in education remains. RE is still taught along explicitly Christian-Reformational lines. A few examples taken from the preambles of various syllabuses will illustrate this point:<sup>5</sup>

i) RE syllabus, Transvaal Education Department.

... every lesson should bring the child nearer to a living, practising faith in Christ and through Him to the knowledge, love and service of God. This faith should inevitably lead to love and service of our fellow men (sic).<sup>6</sup>

ii) RE syllabus, Department of Education and Training.

The approach to the subject matter in the inspired Holy Scriptures is that it can only be understood and explained by those who are enabled to do so by this same Holy Spirit and who are constantly under His guidance (II Peter I vv 20-21).

iii) RE syllabus, Provincial Administration of the Cape of Good Hope.

Scripture-teaching must be Christo-centric ... it is earnestly hoped that ... the pupil will be led to submit to God's claims on his (sic) life .

Serious questions have to be asked about the nature and role of RE as it is taught in South Africa at present. For example, does it serve to glorify God and lead to the service of our fellow beings? Is South Africa a better country, morally and spiritually, than any of its Western counterparts because of compulsory school RE? Despite the changes which have taken place in the country is there still a lingering

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5. One exception being in schools falling under the jurisdiction of the House of Delegates. The subject 'Right living' has recently been substituted for RE.

6. It is interesting to note how closely the provisions for RE contained in this syllabus resemble those of the 1907 Smuts Act (cf Holmes 1962:39).

doubt that RE was introduced with a 'hidden agenda' in that the authorities hoped that sufficient Christian teaching would dampen any revolutionary fervour?<sup>7</sup>

Was RE intended to be just another conservative force in the school curriculum? Is it a 'tainted' subject, part of the generally oppressive nature of education in South Africa? Does it simply reflect the position of 'State Theology' spoken about in The *Kairos* Document? Certainly this is the way it has often been interpreted. An anonymous South African teacher (1983:341-344) for example, writes:

The response of Black students towards the Religious Education curriculum is a negative one because it is often identified with *apartheid* and the history of white dominance ... Without being political, I have to say that the biblically-based syllabuses will probably be changed or even scrapped should a government come into power not wanting to have anything to do with *apartheid* ...

How will this problem of the 'credibility' of RE be solved? What fate will the subject suffer under a new form of government? It is strange that a country which claimed to be Christian had, as its national policy, the very antithesis of what is expected of a Christian country.

Notwithstanding the stress placed on RE in state schools up to the present the subject has failed in two ways:

- i) Biblical knowledge is virtually non-existent among school leavers even after twelve years of concentrated instruction. Even if certain biblical facts are 'known' these appear irrelevant in the face of modern life. (Kerr 1980: 68ff.)
- ii) More importantly, RE has contributed little or nothing towards a peaceful solution to the country's problems.

South Africa remains in a state of political chaos. Has RE in any way attempted to be a reconciling factor in society?

Only a carefully thought-out programme of RE, based on sound educational principles and placed within the framework of a unitary education system will dispel the fears and suspicions of those who mistrust the present role of RE in state schools. The subject will almost certainly come under scrutiny when a genuine 'people's education' is introduced, with the syllabus being re-drafted in accordance with the needs and aspirations of people.

#### **4. The nature and role of Religious Education in the 'new' South Africa**

In September 1990 the Minister of Education in the House of Assembly introduced various models for state schools wishing to admit pupils of different races.

While opposition to open schools may be rife at this stage and while there is a certain amount of ambiguity in the statements made by the Minister of Education (not

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7. Cf Christie (1985: chapter 5) for ways in which education systems can reflect a 'hidden' curriculum.

to mention the vagueness of what the 'new' South Africa will entail) there is no denying the fact that within a few years the number of white school-going children will be a small minority - 8.2% (Dostal 1988). Mixed schools will be a reality for not everyone will be able to afford to contribute financially to the privatisation of the local school.

The important question now is: what should the nature and the role of RE be in an open school system? There are four possible options:

1. RE should have no place in the school curriculum. Schools should provide a secular education only, with the teaching or imparting of faith being carried out by a separate faith community. Given the diversity of beliefs which will be found in the classroom it is possible that RE could be (like religion often has been and still is) a divisive and not a binding force in society.

With the religious and more specifically Christian attitude of many people in South Africa, however, it is most unlikely that RE would be omitted from the school curriculum in the 'new' South Africa. It is interesting to note that after independence Zimbabwe opted to retain the subject, albeit in a very different form to the one taught in 'colonial' days, while Namibia opted for a similar syllabus to that used prior to independence.

2. RE should remain as part of the school curriculum but 'faith' instruction should be given in separate classes by the spiritual leaders of a pupil's particular religion or denomination. The danger of creating religious *apartheid* under such an approach is very real, however.

3. Each school should be given the authority to select or design its own syllabus according to the cultural composition of the school.

4. A core RE syllabus should be used in state schools which would be educationally rather than instructionally based and where no attempt would be made to convert pupils to any particular religion or to elevate one religion above another.

## 5. Education for reconciliation

At the outset it is important to stress the fact that reconciliation is not a mere 'glossing over of past mistakes', or a 'peace at all costs' policy while life continues as usual. Reconciliation has to be based on justice for, as the authors of The *Kairos* Document (p 9) for example, state:

... there can be no true reconciliation and no genuine peace without justice. Any form of peace or reconciliation that allows the sin of injustice and oppression to continue is a false peace and counterfeit reconciliation.

In a society with a long history of racial division, RE has to contribute to an education for RECONCILIATION so reconciliation should be the dominant theme in RE for possibly the next twenty years. Consequently, the last option given above would be the only viable one under the present circumstances.

It is important that pupils are taught that working for reconciliation is a costly undertaking because it means not only striving for justice but also making restitution whenever and wherever possible. It is essential that the subject matter of RE keep pace with developments in the country and be relevant in the light of the socio-political changes taking place.

Another important consideration is the fact that pupils in an open school may come from vastly differing political backgrounds as well as different linguistic, cultural, racial and religious backgrounds. If the teaching of religious doctrine is capable of causing dissension how much more a political standpoint which supports either *apartheid* or revolutionary violence? Pupils in the classroom may be suspicious of one another - the oppressors against the oppressed. Apart from being religiously pluralistic, South Africa is also politically pluralistic and religion is not regarded as politically or ideologically neutral. Although the majority of South Africans claim to be Christian, nevertheless, groups from different political persuasions often claim a 'religious' justification for their standpoint. RE must attempt to contribute towards the minimising of friction between cultures, religions and political standpoints.

If RE is to contribute to a general climate of reconciliation the subject matter to be taught will have to undergo radical revision and it is for this reason that the Christian-Reformational approach must be dropped. In looking for alternative approaches three important considerations must be borne in mind:

i) The stress in RE must fall on education which must be education in the broadest sense of the word comprising *inter alia* knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, the development of the ability to think critically and to make personal choices. RE must be a study of religion in general, not devotion, nurture or evangelisation. As Smart (1989:42) states:

The aim of Religious Education in schools should be that of creating in pupils certain capacities to understand and think about religion.

RE would, therefore, teach about religion and religions.

ii) This does not mean, however, that religion can be studied in a purely academic way. Religion, as ultimate concern, is more than just a belief in doctrines or dogmas, it is a way of life. Religion not only provides meaning in life but it also makes certain ethical demands on those committed to its teachings. Therefore, studying religion in a narrow historical or factual way only, reduces the significance of the subject for the learner. In order to be meaningful, RE has to be directly relevant to the life-experience of the pupils and consequently there must be a far greater emphasis on contextualisation, i.e., those aspects of religion which are relevant to life in South Africa today must be given priority in the teaching of RE. Although this is not a new idea it is one which should be implemented urgently.

iii) Pupils in the 'new' South Africa could have either a 'Western' or an 'African' world-view, or a combination of both. Syllabus designers and policy planners must ensure that neither the 'Western' nor the 'African' world view predominates, but rather that a third way be found which is neither 'Western' nor 'African' but one which emerges from the 'new' situation. At present the 'Western' view predominates

in state schools, resulting in a type of cultural imperialism. The 'Western' way of interpreting the Bible is seen as the only correct way, the assumption being that 'Western' hermeneutics and epistemology alone are able to reveal the message of the Bible, the truth (Deist 1991).<sup>8</sup>

The teaching of RE in state schools should then have four main aims:<sup>9</sup>

1. To study the phenomenon of religion, thereby inculcating attitudes of tolerance and respect for different religious and non-religious standpoints.

South Africans, sadly, do not take advantage of the richness of the religious and cultural diversity found in the country. Owing to the success of the *apartheid* policy, mixing with members of different religions has been restricted to a large degree. Consequently, an individual's own religion is often considered 'superior' and religious intolerance becomes inevitable.

In order to inculcate attitudes of respect and tolerance for different religious viewpoints, the teachings of both non-Christian religions and secular viewpoints should be included in the RE syllabus. It is important, if any type of reconciliation is to take place, that the viewpoint of different traditions be understood and, therefore, respected. Religious toleration will only come about when there is some understanding of, and empathy with, the beliefs and practices of different world-views. If this is done, RE can be truly religious education and not Christian instruction. No longer should the school be the place where faith (of whatever nature) is taught. The school must play a complementary and supportive role but, nevertheless, a subsidiary role to that of the home and the faith community. The responsibility for imparting faith lies with the mosque, temple, church, synagogue, etc, not with the school. The present practice of exclusive Christian instruction should, therefore, cease.

The best method to use when teaching other religions would be the phenomenological one where religion is studied as a phenomenon of reality. This approach eliminates to a large degree the dangers of explicit or implicit indoctrination.<sup>10</sup>

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8. I am grateful to Deist for these insights. The article is excellent and warrants careful reading.

9. These are only practical suggestions put forward for discussion and not a detailed philosophical analysis. They are separated here into four sections for convenience only, but obviously overlap to a certain degree. Religious educators in South Africa have not developed a comprehensive philosophy of Religious Education. What has been written to date has merely been a critical response to CNE, but an acceptable alternative has not been supplied.

10. The phenomenological approach to the teaching of religion in schools has been used in Britain for some time. Its success in what is now a multi-faith society can be measured by the fact that the 1988 Education Act states: '... any agreed syllabus shall reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain'. Consequently it is now illegal to teach an exclusively Christian syllabus in Britain. Cf 'Editorial' (1989:60). A great deal of literature is available on multi-faith RE. Apart from articles in the *British Journal of Religious Education* and the *Journal of Christian Education* (Australia) see, for example, Holm 1975.

The South Australian RE programme is an example of what this approach entails. Under the heading *What is Religious Education?* the following points (summarised) are found (Rossiter 1981:14):

The school may sponsor the study of religion, but should not sponsor the practice of religion.

The school may expose students to all religious views, but may not impose any particular view.

The school's approach to religion is one of education not one of indoctrination.

The function of the school is to educate about all religions, not to convert to any one religion.

The school's approach to religion is academic, not devotional. The school should study what all people believe, but should not teach a pupil what he should believe.

The school should strive for student awareness of all religions, but should not press for student acceptance of any one religion. The school should seek to inform the students about various beliefs, but should not seek to make them conform to any one belief.

The school can provide opportunity for a discussion of religious questions but should not impose religious answers.

The school's approach to religion must open up the issue not close down the discussion.

In summary, teaching about religion in the State schools is educationally valuable when it is a part of the academic program, when it does not give preferential or derogatory treatment to religion in general or to any single religion.

While a statement such as this could be criticised for ambiguity, utopian ideals, sexist language and emphasis on strictly academic teaching, it does serve the purpose of explaining the phenomenological approach.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, the major belief-system of the world could be studied together with those religious aspects which are directly relevant to the South African situation, e.g. African Traditional Religions and African Indigenous Churches.

While this approach may seem radical to those not reared in this tradition the following points should be carefully considered before this approach is rejected:

i) The uniqueness of one's own religion will not, of necessity, be destroyed. In this approach pupils are taught to understand and appreciate different religious beliefs but they are also to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of their own faith. A British educationalist, Leech (1989:75) writes:

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11. The original statement was prepared by J V Panoch for the American Public Schools Religion Studies Centre. It was adapted for use by the South Australian Department of Education.



Encouraging the phenomenological approach does not mean only that we should engage the children's understanding of the world of the religious person, but also that we should engage the children's understanding of their own worlds.<sup>12</sup>

In adopting this approach there is no attempt to destroy personal faith or to get pupils to convert to another religion. It is also not a case of relativising religious differences to such an extent that anything religious is acceptable and neither is it done in such a way that a 'menu' of religions is placed in front of the pupils requiring them to choose which one they like.

ii) This approach is not simply a cold, clinical study of religion but, on the contrary, stress is laid on the spiritual aspects of life as opposed to the material. Pupils learn that life itself is sacred and one should, therefore, cultivate a reverence for life. Religion (and therefore RE) deals with the 'inward' and the 'spiritual' and while religious commitment is much more than mere 'inwardness', RE must of necessity, deal with such issues as one's relationship to God, prayer, worship, and the meaning of life.<sup>13</sup>

iii) South Africa has always been a religiously pluralistic society comprised of people from differing religious backgrounds. Muslims, Jews, Christians, Hindus and other live side by side while Christianity itself is comprised of many denominations and sects. Is it really such a giant step to study the beliefs and practices of fellow South Africans?

iv) As far as possible teachers would have to suspend their own bias toward any one religious or non-religious viewpoint (Smart 1968:98; Leech 1989:72). While it would be perfectly acceptable for teachers to make their own religious affiliations known, there must be no attempt to convert pupils to any one particular faith and definitely no attempt to belittle the religious beliefs of others.

v) Religious societies should be allowed free rein in the schools but only as an 'extra-mutual' activity. Groups such as Scripture Union, Students Christian Association, Students Jewish Association, etc. would be free to pursue their particular objectives after school hours.

2. To extract a set of values common to the major belief systems of importance for a subject which wishes to contribute to a policy of reconciliation is the need for people to be accepted and treated as equals. The Golden Rule, 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' could be a starting point. While in the previous section belief systems were studied, now the values, ethics, norms and concepts of morality emanating from those belief systems would be analyzed.

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12. The whole article is important for a correct understanding of the phenomenological approach to the study of religion. Not every attempt at using this approach is successful, however. Cf Norcross (1989:87-91.)

13. The *British Journal of Religious Education*, 7.3, (1985), is devoted to a study of spirituality in RE.

Discussions on the ethical teachings and values of different belief systems should take place in an open, non-judgmental way and must not degenerate into doctrinal arguments. Values common to different standpoints must be noted. Topics such as prejudice, racial hatred, indoctrination, the mistreatment of minorities, religious persecution, sexism, the will to power, etc. could be studied - without any hint of 'instruction' or 'coercion'. If pupils are encouraged to be honest, the door to deep and long-lasting reconciliation could be opened.

### 3. To stress God's demands for a just and righteous society

Leading on from a study of ethical behaviour on a personal level is the necessity of pointing out the fact that evil is not only found in individual people but on national and international levels as well. Sin must be seen to exist not only in the lives of people but also in the structures on which society is based. As such it can be shown that society is a human construct based on laws made by people and that laws, if unjust, can be changed by people. In other words, the *status quo* is not a God-given absolute but justice and righteousness must be evident at every level of society. To date RE has been sadly lacking in this area. Simon Maimela (1983:72) a South African theologian, says, for example:

... it is not enough for religious education in schools to proclaim correct and theoretical doctrines about God and Christ without also seeing to it that what is proclaimed is matched by deeds and actions in the socio-political sphere.

If reconciliation is to become a reality, pupils must be aware of the type of society in which it would be desirable to live. Based, again, on the teachings of the world's major religions, pupils can discover how to work toward the building of a just and righteous society. Pupils should realise that God requires justice, mercy, compassion and righteous living at all levels.

Topics such as the following could be discussed: the elimination of poverty, oppression, the creation of a just society, ingredients for harmonious living, violence and war, conflict resolution, peace studies, etc. Discussions of this nature could help raise the level of awareness which is needed to improve society. Rigorous debate can again prove helpful in solving differences with stress being placed on the fact that no reconciliation is possible if injustice continues. True ethical behaviour also demands a constant and life-long evaluation of motives - especially one's own.

Writing from a pacifist viewpoint, Adam Curle (1973:80) describes this type of education:

If a more peaceful society is to develop ... changes must be brought about in social and economic structures which perpetuate those inequalities and injustices which are in essence violent. An education which aims to promote peace must therefore contribute towards changing those structures not only through the attitudes of mind it generates, but also through the actual knowledge and skills which it inculcates. Education for liberation must, in fact, include instruction in the techniques for creating social change ...

### 4. To aid personal development

While the approach to RE must be educational, a component should be introduced which, while still adhering to educational principles, nevertheless, contributes to the personal development of each individual. So, for example, the answers given by religion to the great 'existential' questions (the mystery of life, the fact of death, the existence of evil, meaninglessness, etc.) could be investigated. Ethical issues of a more personal nature (attitudes to sex, abortion, euthanasia, etc.) should also be studied. Again, however, these issues must be dealt with in an objective and unbiased way and while different opinions would be put forward the autonomy of each pupil must be respected. Another problem to be faced is that sectors of our society have come from such disadvantaged backgrounds that many of them have a low self-image: feeling unloved, unwanted and incompetent. Having been brutalised by socio-economic and political conditions, many people have lost all sense of dignity and self-worth. Maimela (1983:73) points out that

... black churches expect and want religious education in schools to promote forces that lead to the humanisation of men and women ... .

RE must address this problem and emphasis must, therefore, be placed on the fact of God's compassion and love for all people. Pupils must be shown that God wants the best for everyone and that injustice, discrimination and oppression are not part of his plan for this world.

## **5. Conclusion**

These suggestions may sound utopian, but if RE could be approached along these lines then the subject may have something to contribute to a peaceful solution to this country's problems.

The teaching of RE in an open school system will be traumatic for many teachers, parents and pupils and without doubt problems will be encountered in pursuing this approach. People are sinful and it won't be long before racism, religious rivalry or basic cultural differences become matters of dispute once again. In a country which has known so much hatred and violence it will take time before past sins and differences will be forgotten. If, however, religious rivalry and dogmatic bigotry rear their ugly heads to such an extent that religious intolerance results, then RE must be dumped on the scrapheap of history, condemned as irrelevant in the face of South Africa's problems. The study of religion must help the people of this country move towards a state of reconciliation and it is essential that people of all religious persuasions work for the well-being of this country.

Many practical details will have to be worked out by a suitable committee, one comprising not only university academics but also experienced RE teachers. A great deal of thought, research and planning will have to go into the design of such a syllabus. Flexibility in syllabus implementation must be allowed in accordance with local conditions for, if a particular school has a homogeneous population, the study of different religions need not be so intensive. Suitable study materials will have to be created and a decision will have to be made as to whether or not RE should retain its compulsory, non-examinable status. School activities such as assemblies where

Christian worship often predominates, may have to be re-evaluated in the light of this approach. Teachers will have a heavy load to carry, while teacher training will have to undergo radical changes, ensuring that teachers are better equipped for the task. More recognition must be given to the stages through which children pass in their religious development and attention must also be paid to methods of lesson presentation. The most obvious approach (in view of the dangers of 'cultural imperialism') would be that of the problem-solving method. Using this technique pupils from either side of the political/religious spectrum can participate freely (Deist 1991:20).

While many people may find these suggestions unacceptable, the challenge to them is to formulate alternative solutions which would help the country out of its present situation of chaos and turmoil. Those people who claim to have had an experience of God and who desire to transmit something of His love to coming generations, must seriously consider the future role of RE.

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