

## Preparing Students for a World of Religious Diversity

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The fishermen of Misali were ecstatic. They had discovered a new technique that promised to increase their catch dramatically. It was dynamite fishing. Unfortunately the waters in which they fished were home to valued coral reefs. Dynamite fishing was not good news for this finely balanced ecosystem. Local government officials tried to stop the practice, but their efforts proved ineffective. The fisherman ignored their pleas and responded no better to threats of legal action. When the gun boats eventually appeared, they simply evaded them. Finally someone had a bright idea. It occurred to him that the fishermen were all Muslims. So he contacted the local imam and explained the problem. The imam was horrified and started to teach his congregation that care for the environment is an Islamic duty. The dynamite fishing stopped<sup>1</sup>.

You are probably asking yourself what on earth this story has to do with teaching. My response is that it is a parable that shows how important it is to take religious faith seriously in the modern world. Too often, the influence of what I will call the sacred-secular divide means that there is undue pressure experienced in western democracies to treat religious faith as a private matter. Its influence was even strong enough to make Tony Blair, the former British Prime Minister, keep his mouth shut about his Christian faith whilst in office. To quote Alastair Campbell, one of the most influential non-elected politicians ever in Britain and Blair's communications director, policy was strictly "we don't do God". The most popular strategy for handling religious diversity in so-called secular democracies is to ignore it on the grounds that it's a private matter. The school remains strictly neutral, and only deals with religious diversity by teaching about it in an objective fashion, dissecting it like a biology class. Teachers and pupils alike don't reveal their own views. Religious diversity is ultimately handled by ignoring or marginalising it. The characteristic of this mindset is that religious faith is viewed as a problem to be contained by keeping it firmly in the world of the private. In this climate distinctively Christian schools are seen as "a problem".

I suggest that religious faith is too important, indeed too valuable, to be left at the classroom door in this way. It is simply not adequate to assume that all that matters in public society is the promotion of shared values. After all it is our beliefs that ultimately underpin our values. People don't treasure values because someone else tells them to; they treasure them because their beliefs lead them to see the importance of those values.

No doubt people in Anglican education will agree that schools should not be religiously neutral, but that still leaves open the question of how they approach religious diversity. This workshop is built on the assumption that being able to deal with religious diversity is a key component of *both* Christian discipleship *and* good citizenship. In order to prepare students for this, a school has first to have a clear understanding of its own stance. What dispositions and attitudes are to be nurtured and what dispositions and attitudes are to be discouraged? What are the skills that will be fostered? If staff are to be effective role

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.arcworld.org/projects.asp?projectID=170> for the story.

models in this area, they will need to have worked through some challenging questions; in particular how is the controversy engendered by religious diversity to be handled in the classroom?

I suggest that the model of *Scriptural Reasoning*<sup>2</sup> is an example of a much more effective strategy for preparing students for a world of religious diversity. Developed by David Ford, the Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, this approach encourages Muslims, Jews and Christians to meet together to discuss issues of common concern by sharing each from their own Scriptures. Mutual, but not neutral. It makes religion a very element of the public realm and highlights, for everyone to see, the points at which people really do agree and disagree. Religious faith is not seen as a problem, but as a resource. This is religious diversity “in your face”.

**The crucial point then is this. It is simply not adequate to imply to students that faith is a purely private matter if we are to prepare them for a world of religious diversity. Facing up to the controversy generated by religious difference is a duty for a global citizen and should be developed by schools. How then should controversial issues be handled by schools?**

A very topical example in Britain is how beliefs in creationism should be dealt with by schools. The situation has become so heated that the government has issued guidelines. The sum of their advice is that creationism is appropriate for Religious Education lessons, but not science lessons. The unwritten message is that religious diversity should be isolated in those areas of the curriculum which deal with private matters, like religion. When it comes to the public world of established knowledge, like science, then we stick to what is objective; that means no religion. This approach is reinforcing the sacred-secular divide and the message that religion doesn't really count as serious knowledge. It is not actually facing up to religious diversity.

I suggest that in order to prepare students for a world of religious diversity schools should plan to be places where pupils are prepared to deal with controversial issues. That's challenging because it means that everyone has to accept that their, possibly deeply-held, beliefs are controversial and therefore open to challenge by others. Try saying that to an atheistic science teacher who thinks creationism is rubbish.

I have some sympathy with those who are concerned that this will bring religious conflict into school. We certainly don't want religious zealots vying for “market share” through the classroom. That is why it is important to teach explicit strategies for dealing with religious diversity. Put bluntly, pupils need to know how to behave when meeting those with whom they may fundamentally disagree.

I suggest there are basically three models.

1. Implicitly I have already rejected the competitive, market share model which adopts predominance as its basic goal. This is not the way Jesus behaved and it offers a very poor prognosis for the future of a religiously diverse world.
2. The most oft adopted alternative is usually called the pluralist model, which demands that all religions give up their claims to be universally true. The only

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.stethelburgas.org/sr/pitchatent.pdf> for more information.

problem is that thereby pluralism is itself elevated to being the only universal model. It is an underhand way of liberal faith becoming predominant.

3. Finally I have commended to you the model which Professor Brian Hill has called "committed impartiality"<sup>3</sup>. Pupils who adopt this model are appropriately proud of their own commitment, but savour the opportunity to engage with others. To nurture this mindset requires promoting certain key skills and attitudes in an explicit, focussed and deliberate way.

In conclusion I would like to return to the fishermen of Misali. They model an important principle. That handled appropriately, the resources of religious faith can make a huge contribution to the public good. A proper attitude to religious faith can underpin positive citizenship in religiously diverse societies. This is something schools should be actively promoting, but it will require handling the controversial nature of religion in a sensitive and open fashion. Might it be up to Anglican schools to lead the way in this?

Some questions for Anglican schools to consider

- Do we encourage teachers to address religiously controversial issues?
- Do we promote skills acquisition and attitude development or do we just rely on passing on knowledge of other religions?
- Do we tackle religiously controversial issues across the curriculum?
- Do we have mechanisms for students to encounter religious diversity?

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<sup>3</sup> See his *Exploring Religion in School*, Adelaide, Openbook publishers, 2004, particularly pp142-143.