

Let's Talk About God-the neglected dimension of the RE Classroom

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'Why are we more comfortable teaching about religion, faith, and spirituality, than teaching about God?'

Over the past 20 years Dr Cullen has observed around 450 RE lessons, observing only one lesson about God – where God was the intended subject of the lesson. Why are we able, how are we able to consider RE without reference to God? Why are we more comfortable teaching about religion, faith, spirituality, etc. than teaching about God – than letting God be the focus of the RE lesson? In this session Dr Cullen will outline some reasons for this and then suggest that religious educators need a space to develop confidence in their own God-talk and appropriate support for how to do this

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 20 years I have observed around 450 RE lessons in second-level schools (12-18 year olds). I think that I have observed 1 lesson about God – where God was the intended subject of the lesson. When I was preparing for this paper this realisation stopped me in my tracks – why are we able, how are we able to consider RE without reference to God – why are we more comfortable teaching about religion, faith, spirituality, church, world religions, ethics, the life of Jesus etc. than teaching about God – than letting God be the focus of the RE lesson? Is it that to teach about God makes a personal demand on us in a different way than other topics we cover? Do we fear that we don't have the words to explain things clearly or do we fear that we might be exposed in terms of our lack of understanding or our deeply held questions and doubts? Can a teacher share their doubts?

For the parents here – or the teachers of relationship and sexuality education – it might be analogous to teaching about sexuality – do you remember your daughter or son (and yourself)

squirming as you tried to engage them about sexeasy to explain the body parts and with much embarrassment the mechanics....however less easy to speak with them about emotions, ethics, first love, sexual readiness, identity, crushes, why – for fear of hurting them, being seen as judge-y, lacking understanding, being past it.... Does the same fear, embarrassment, uncertainty affect our talk of God? Let me share a moment from my own experience – I was part of a family Mass team in my parish for over 12 years during which time our little group (all women) became and remain very good friends. We know far too much about each other’s lives but not once have we ever talked about God, our beliefs, our doubts, how faith and its expression is changing now our children have grown.... yet every Sunday we worship together.. but why can’t we share why we do this or what it is that we are doing? Why can’t we talk about God? But as I get older how do I talk honestly about God if I feel alienated from my tradition because of beliefs, lifestyle, doubts, events, hurt, anger etc. Is what I say about God irrelevant or even wrong? Is my personal faith allowed to be part of classroom conversation if it does not seem to be ‘orthodox’? Is this why I have seen so few lessons about God?

I want to suggest that for a number of reasons talking about God is the neglected dimension of religious education.

I will outline some reasons for this and then argue for a God-focussed religious education that might open up the possibility of God-talk in classrooms.

Key shifts

Three key shifts have been happening since the middle of the twentieth century that have impacted on our talk of God in classrooms – (i) education: the move to a child centred education which facilitates the development of the agency of each child and their right to freedom for and from religion, (ii) theology: the recognition of the implication of an incarnational theology which emphasises that God is known in the experience of the reality of human living in all its glorious messiness, (iii) ecclesiology: the emergence of the laity- I think this is changing how we are thinking about God, church, what it means to believe, the questions we ask...all interconnected...is this a problem or an evolution?

Analysing the context

I draw on Lieven Boeve's identification of three interlinking features of sociocultural developments in Europe (which I think will hold some resonance here) that have an impact on religion and consequently on religious education.¹ Using the image of Between the Lines to express this: Gijs Van Vaerenbergh <https://wanderlustpulse.com/reading-between-the-lines-borgloon/>

The first feature is detraditionalisation, the second is the individualisation of identity formation, and the third element is the pluralisation of religion.

Boeve uses the term **detraditionalisation** to mean that religions can no longer assume that their tradition and traditions will be passed from one generation to the next, either through the workings of the state or even within their own Churches. One obvious example

¹ Boeve, L. (2011). Communicating faith in contemporary Europe: Dealing with language problems in and outside the Church. In J. Sullivan (Ed.), *Communicating faith*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press (pp. 293-308).

of such detraditionalisation is 'a shift from belief to unbelief'. You are probably familiar with Grace Davie's phrase, 'believing without belonging', where people are free to rethink and reshape their spiritual heritage without reference to a tradition or faith community. I suggest that in schools we often see more belonging without believing which often leads to a closed down response or the cynical clown who shuts the door for any God-talk to occur. The steady decline of people connecting with traditional expressions of religiosity, such as church attendance, belief in God, and moral attitudes is confirmed in many research projects. The evidence suggests that people are either not as religious as previous generations generally were or that whilst religious identities remain important, their significance is eroding. The same is true of teachers. The detraditionalisation evidenced in research with young people since the 1980s (who now in their 50s picks up on this theme so distancing is not new and has had an impact).

The individualisation of identity formation

The concept of religious identity may be defined as how the person understands, responds to, and internalises the multi-faceted nature of religious affiliation. Every person inhabits increasingly multiple worlds - family, peers, school, formal and informal communities as well as the online world so is therefore thrown into spaces which demand the construction of a public self-expression of identity and identities. This individualisation of identity formation can no longer be perceived as quasi-automatically being educated into pre-given horizons, views, and practices that condition one's perspectives on meaning and social existence. Religious identity and tradition are not given or fixed, but fluid and contextual. The inference may perhaps be that young people are not necessarily willing to be educated into a particular worldview or religious tradition but may be happy to try it on for size first.

Furthermore, religion may be a resource for such identity formation, but cannot be assumed to be the sole source of identity formation. The person chooses the religious option among the many available to them, and chooses to express their identity within traditional religious categories or outside of a traditional frame. The one who self-assigns as Catholic may not hold beliefs consistent with the Catholic church. The young man who identifies as atheist may be comfortable with using religious symbols. There may not any coherence to their belief in God or Jesus, their attitude to diversity or with their ethical concerns and responses. It is not uncommon to hear a person describe themselves as a Catholic Buddhist or to hear a student describe praying to Ganesh as she lights a reiki candle, then say a Hail Mary as she concludes the session. In their minds there is no contradiction in this.

Pluralisation

The third element of the contemporary context, as outlined by Boeve, is a pluralisation that acknowledges difference and otherness, especially to the effect of other truth claims to its own claim. At one level this pluralisation may be understood in terms of the globalisation that is changing the impact of belief systems on identity development. The presence of people from other cultures, increasing mobility and participation in an online world mean that identity is continually being shaped by how the young person deals flexibly with these complexities. The young person must also engage with the diverse voices within the community with which they identify. When our students and teachers exhibit different levels of affiliation, points to the internal and fuzzy-edged nature of religions and people's varying engagement with these either at the level of the individual, the group, or the tradition.² This

² Jackson, R. (1997). *Religious education: An interpretive approach*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

inner diversity within a religious tradition may arguably be more significant than the differences between traditions.

Attention to pluralisation can however lead to fear: *Many people now avoid religious and spiritual language because they don't like the way it has been used, misused and abused by others. But when people stop speaking God because they don't like what these words have come to mean and the way they've been used, those who are causing the problem get to hog the microphone. Jonathan Merritt New York Times 2018 October 13th*

An overview of a number of international research projects suggests a few themes which colour our talk of God in schools:³

- Religion has not gone away in the lives of many young people but for an increasing number of other young people religion does not play any part in their experience or worldview.
- Many young people state that they belong to a particular religious tradition but have varying degrees of engagement or identification with the core beliefs and practices of the tradition.
- Belief in God remains an important part of many young people's identity, however what this belief is and how it is expressed is not necessarily consistent with traditional categories. What might be called non-conventional beliefs sit easily alongside more traditional beliefs.

³ Cullen, S. (2019). 'Turn up the volume: Hearing what the voices of young people are saying to religious education' In: Gareth Byrne and Leslie Francis (eds). *Religion and Education: The voices of young people in Ireland*. Dublin: Veritas.

- Studying religion at school has shaped young people's views about religion; other than the classroom the opportunity for most of the young people to talk about religion or faith is limited.
- Young people do not necessarily adopt their parents' beliefs or viewpoints but are creating their own religious identities which may not be expressed in traditional measures of religiosity.
- Teachers are not a homogenous group and do not always easily align with 'official' teaching.

Woven through the data is the voice of the young person who does not claim a religious identity for themselves either on the grounds of non-belief, family practice, or ethical convictions. This voice cannot be problematised in religious education.

The way people speak of God may be so varied yet true in all instances - our concern with orthodoxy – using the right words - yet if we think about the history of Christianity it was always when someone spoke the unconventional that we got a new understanding of God.

What I want to propose is a God-focussed religious education

At the heart of religion is belief in God or the Transcendent. By focussing RE on this as the core fundamental concept around which the rest of religion revolves we can give RE coherence and be properly inclusive.⁴

⁴ Watson, B., & Thompson, P. (2007). *The effective teaching of religious education* (2nd ed.). Harlow: Pearson/Longman. p. 67.

Watson and Thompson call for a religious education that is God-focussed, that accepts that belief in God or the Transcendent is at the heart of religion. Terence Copley observes: 'Education is visibly preserving the discourse of religion, but sometimes rather like a fish that has been filleted, God, the backbone of religion, has too often been neatly excised from the presentation'.⁵

Such God-focussing emphasises that the concept of God, however that is articulated, is crucial for understanding religion and is what holds religions together despite disparate phenomena.⁶ Religion cannot be disconnected from its originating impulse. This moves religious education beyond the study of religion as a social phenomenon or cultural fact, into an engagement with people's response to their apprehension of God and must be considered both in its problematic forms as well as in its life-giving forms. It attempts to understand and engage with the inner world of the religion which cannot be adequately observed from the outside but demands theological knowing and sensitivity. In schools where we meet unbelief/non-belief more often than the opposite, the task of the RE teacher is to help people enter into conversation so that we can open up with them the depth or possibility of a coherent and life-giving response to life's great themes. The challenge for the teacher is to be able to articulate their own evolving response to these too.

Such god-focussed religious education is a theological activity which takes on the character of a conversation in which the classroom community attempts to articulate its best current understanding of itself and its convictions about God. Such conversation does not just aim for

⁵ Copley, T. *Indoctrination, Education and God: The Struggle for the Mind* (London: SPCK, 2005), p.148.

⁶ Watson and Thompson, p. 68.

a cultural, theoretical or philosophical understanding, but is an invitation into the realm of the transcendent so that 'the sheer deep down-down loveliness' of it all is not being missed.

Arguing for a God-focussed religious education cannot necessarily assume belief-ful participation on the teacher's part. In a world characterised by detraditionalisation, the pluralisation of religion, and the individualisation of identity formation, it cannot be assumed that teachers of religion in Catholic schools share similar faith stances or worldviews. However, what could perhaps be agreed is that religious education be considered "a space like no other" in which the question of God can be taken seriously by the teacher and by the students.⁷

The RE classroom is a privileged space for talking about God – we note that such talk is about God rather than to God. This distinction is crucial for understanding the task of the classroom. The RE classroom occupies an in-between sphere – between the private sphere of church and family where God can be spoken of and to – and the public educational space where talk about God must be continually explained or justified. What is RE - in its formative sense it is concerned with proposing a vision of life and a meaning making structure that responds to the religious impulse and in its educative sense it aims to help people engage with and understand the religious impulse, the nature of religion, and their own personal engagement with this so as to be able to draw on that as a resource for their own spiritual wisdom and ethical practice.⁸ Suggesting that it is about rather than to is crucial for grappling with the problem – the classroom is not a worship space – it has to engage with the critique and the

⁷ Sullivan, J. (2017). A space like no other. In M. Shanahan (Ed.), *Does religious education matter?* (pp. 7--24).

⁸ Cullen, S. (2019). 'The religious education of the religion teacher in Catholic schools'. In M. Buchanan & A.M. Gellel (Eds.), *Global Perspectives on Catholic Religious Education in Schools*, Vol. II. Singapore: Springer.

problems....it has to be a space where no question or wondering goes unheard or unresponded to.

It is worth noting at this point that religious education has largely been shaped by the voices of adults; the various voices of the young people themselves, who are agents in and of their own learning, are too often muted. Like all education religious education is increasingly an activity that is done with young people rather than for them or to them. So what young people say about what is important to them takes on a significance that may not always have been acknowledged in some approaches to religious education in the past. To really hear what young people have to say about their experience and understanding of religion necessitates inviting them into a conversation about what really matters to them. So what are our students saying? Or perhaps more importantly what are we the teachers as people saying? *What are the issues that RE is concerned with? What are the issues our students are concerned with? What gets them out of bed? What will they march for? LGBT issues; Sexual abuse scandals; Climate change; Migration rights – detention centres, Rise of nationalisms; Black Lives Matter; Gun violence* - Then this is the stuff of God – this is God-talk. It also means that the teacher is an equal participant in the conversation and willing to live with tentativeness rather than insisting that it lead to agreement. Maybe this is our difficulty as teachers? It asks us what do I mean when I say God?

For the teacher to undertake this challenge they first must enter into a reflective mode to consider their own meaning giving frameworks and their own stance vis-à-vis the tradition. We have to ask ourselves the tough questions about our own perception of God - our commitments and doubts – our own faith journey – our own openness to sharing this.

We regularly hear about a crisis of language in RE – somehow if we had the right words all would be OK. I think though that what we have in classrooms is more a **crisis of perception.**

Do we see God? Where is our focus? What are our fears? Where does my story of God come from?

YELLOW CRAYON – so the job of RE may be just as simple as calling our students to attention.

What do we need to shine a light on?

I would suggest that it is our own perceptions and faith stances as teachers that we need to shine the light on – our evolving stories of God, our naming of God....

I share three images I try to live by which help me to talk about God

1. Paul's address at the Areopagus – speak the language of the people (Acts 17:16–34)
2. Open wide the spaces of your tent - Create room for encounter and time for reflection on one's own worldview position as an emerging adult (Isaiah 54:2)
3. Jacob: "Surely God was in this place, and I, I wasn't aware of it' ...the classroom as the house of God (Genesis 28:16-17)

Conclusion: My call is to allow God back into our conversations in RE. Our talk about God is never neutral; it is laden with meaning and shaped by experiences, assumptions and dreams. It is messy talk. Despite the fact that a lot of our talk about God is bruised and tarnished can we still talk God? Yes, but maybe not always in words.

Video: taken at the Church of St. Magdalene, Bruges

https://www.yot.be/nl/heilige_magdalenakerk/33

Task: take a moment before we go to the groups to reflect on....

2 questions to prompt conversation – you can respond to one or both -

1. Where does your God come from? What/Who has shaped this?
2. Which child are you at the moment when you hear the word God?

