

Religion and Education in *The Morning Watch*, 1973-2013: Curriculum

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Introduction

“The most unusual and one of the most interesting facets of schooling in Newfoundland is the nature and extent of church involvement” (Cooper, 1975, p. 4). For most of the 19th and 20th centuries, the schools were owned and operated separately by several Christian denominations and were all funded by the government. In late 1997, a change in the Canadian Constitution authorized the province to replace the four denominational school systems with a single, nondenominational system for Grades Kindergarten to 12. In order to secure this change, however, the province bound itself with a constitutional requirement to include religious education² in the school curriculum, and also to allow religious observances in any school where parents request them. (Elliott, 1998)

On this occasion of its 40th anniversary, I will survey the articles published since 1973 in *The Morning Watch*³ which studied this distinctive feature of provincial schooling. Attention to the interaction of religion and education began in the very first issue (Gushue, 1973a) and continued in more than 30 papers for the next 25 years (Elliott, 1998). These papers studied only two general areas of the interaction: religion as a subject in the school curriculum; and religious denominations as major authorities in the school system. Since 1998, no papers about religion and education have appeared in *MW*.⁴

In this paper, I will review what was written about religious and moral education in the school curriculum. In a subsequent paper, I will review studies of the denominational education system in which religion, history, philosophy, and governance were central and intertwined topics.

In the first 25 years of *MW*, 10 papers discussed ingredients of the school curriculum related to RE. Eight papers focused on the moral dimension of religion; one discussed its narrative or mythic dimension; and the last described the framework for RE curriculum and instruction in the new secular school system.

The Moral Dimension⁵ of Religion: Moral Education

One dimension of religion is its attention to human relations and actions, usually called its moral or

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² Hereafter, religious education will be referred to as RE.

³ Hereafter, *The Morning Watch* will be referred to as *MW*.

⁴ Although published later, McCann (2002) seems to have been written in 1992 after the release of *Our Children Our Future*, the final report of the 1990 Royal Commission on education.

⁵ For teaching and learning about religion, several dimensions or aspects can be distinguished, namely, the narrative, experiential, ritual, doctrinal, moral, social, and historical dimensions. See, e.g., Ninian Smart (1969). *The Religious Experience of Mankind*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

ethical dimension. In the 1979 winter issue of *MW*, nine papers were published as a “Symposium: Values in Curriculum.” Eight papers focused on moral values; and the ninth (Clark, 1979), on intellectual values which are central to the conduct of modern science, e.g., preferences for scientific method and testable hypotheses.

The structure of the symposium was this:

- A keynote paper (Cochrane, 1979) whose author had recently published a study of moral education⁶ in Canada⁷;
- Four comments about Cochrane’s paper (Covert, McCann, Magsino, and Jackson, all 1979);
- Four discussions about values (intellectual or moral) in the science, literature, social studies, and RE curricula (Clark, Brown, Jones, and Shuell respectively, all 1979).

Cochrane (1979) proposed “that a justifiable goal for a program of ME would be to produce ‘morally autonomous agents’” (p. 327). ME should entail at least six processes in which students have –

1. regular experience of personal rights and responsibilities;
2. frequent opportunities to practice moral decision-making and to make mistakes in doing so;
3. practice of logical reasoning in all subject areas;
4. practice of logical reasoning in every aspect of life in the school;
5. awareness of moral and other issues in every subject area; and
6. opportunities in all their studies to analyze and evaluate their own contemporary culture.

Cochrane claimed that denominational schools and RE are inimical to authentic ME because they rely primarily on “values socialization” (p. 326), that is, on indoctrinating students and conforming them to the moral values espoused by the denomination. He also rejected “attacks from the ‘soft liberal left’” (p. 326) which are implicit in most public secular school systems, which propose that moral values are subjective and relative and cannot be demonstrated rationally, and which rely on “values clarification” and the promotion of tolerance for all moral beliefs.

Cochrane favoured a revision of school programs wherein ME would be a subject area in the timetable, would receive special emphasis in arts and social studies courses, and would be included as an objective in all courses.

In his response, Covert (1979) highlighted two special strengths in Cochrane’s views. By emphasizing the importance of rationality and practice, he connected ME with all the other subjects in the curriculum. Second, Covert praised the depiction of ME as “an all pervasive process that cannot be confined to one course or even the academic portion of the school. Everyone engaged in the schooling enterprise is involved in making moral decisions” (p. 336).

McCann (1979) praised Cochrane for his determination to do something rather than nothing

⁶ Hereafter, moral education will be referred to as ME.

⁷ Cochrane, D. & Williams, D. 1978. The stances of provincial ministries of education towards values/moral education in public schools. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 3(4), 1-14.

toward helping schools create “morally autonomous agents” (p. 337). However, McCann found the proposed ME concept and process too individualistic and therefore simplistic. School change is unlikely to happen without the social change required to liberate morality from religion by building it on rational foundations. McCann recommended that Cochrane’s program for ME in schools identify the barriers within society against authentic moral development and propose ways to destroy them.

Magsino (1979) rejected the claim made by both Cochrane and McCann that the only genuine morality is one derived from critical reason. He argued that religion necessarily includes morality and that religious morality is genuine both in its methods and its contents. He thereby affirmed that ME exists abundantly in the provincial denominational schools. Acknowledging, however, that provincial schools function within a democratic society which prizes and requires critical reason, Magsino joined Cochrane in recommending that secular ME be included in the school curriculum together with the already existing religious ME.

In the final response to Cochrane’s paper, Jackson (1979) commended Cochrane for providing a detailed overview of ME in light of which school practice can be interpreted and assessed. However, Jackson identified a practical dilemma in implementing a ME program in which moral values and practices are studied, criticized, and judged:

- On the one hand, if the school community is in general agreement about morals (as, e.g., in a denominational school), it will have little incentive to criticize them.
- On the other hand, if the school community is in general disagreement (as, e.g., in a large secular urban school), it will have little ability to develop an effective ME program.

The remaining papers in *MW*’s symposium discussed, with no reference to Cochrane’s keynote paper⁸, the content and methods of ME in three curriculum areas. Brown (1979) affirmed that “literary works have a moral dimension” (p. 354) because the attitudes and norms people rely on to guide their actions toward others, themselves, and nature are constantly displayed in literature. He identified at least four objectives which should be included in “teaching the moral dimension of a literary work” (p. 355):

1. become aware of moral issues;
2. identify alternative moral values;
3. identify how literary works relate to the values of one’s own times; and
4. evaluate the consequences of actions.

Jones (1979) discussed values in the social studies curriculum, many of which are moral values. He proposed, from a curriculum used in Alberta schools, both a definition of “values” and some criteria for evaluating them:

- Values are guides to one’s behaviour.
- Values may help improve one’s relationship with one’s social and physical environment if they are clear, consistent, and defensible in light of the life goals of each member of society.

⁸ It seems to me unlikely that these authors were aware of Cochrane’s paper.

Jones especially insisted that more was required in social studies education than helping students clarify values. He acknowledged that values clarification is necessary in values education; but it is not sufficient because low levels of cognitive achievement (namely, knowledge and comprehension) about values often result in “dogmatic and unsubstantiated outcomes” (p. 346). He recommended that teachers aim their classroom instruction at achieving student behaviours which manifest advanced cognitive achievement (such as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of values) regarding issues and policies learned in social studies.

In the final paper of the symposium, Shuell (1979) argued that, although the province’s RE programs differed among themselves in subject matter and goals, they must all include values education as subject matter. RE necessarily gives special attention to religious values; but it also includes value realms which overlap with other subject areas in the school curriculum such as moral, social, and environmental values. Shuell named six processes or strategies which must be included in RE regardless of the specific program: values socialization, transmission, clarification, classification, evaluation, and development. These same processes are also relevant for teaching and learning non-religious values throughout the school curriculum.

Overall, this symposium focused almost completely on moral values. Only Cochrane and McCann claimed that religious schools hinder, perhaps even prevent, effective ME. Magsino rejected their claim explicitly on philosophical grounds; as did Shuell, implicitly, on methodological grounds. The other papers gave no attention to this issue.

All the papers generally agreed on the following:

- Many opportunities for ME occur throughout the school’s curriculum and its daily life.
- Students may benefit by experiencing ME as a separate subject area.
- ME should be highly valued and strongly implemented in every school, religious and secular.

The Narrative Dimension of Religion: Storytelling

Ten years after the symposium on moral values, Collins (1989) highlighted another ingredient of religion, its narrative or mythic dimension. She described some reasons for the increased emphasis on stories in contemporary RE, both as subject matter and as instructional method. In the major religious faiths, storytelling preceded the development of creeds and theologies. Especially important is the “original story” which adherents learn early in their involvement with a religious tradition: e.g., for Christians, the life and work of Jesus; for Jews, Moses and the exodus from Egypt; for Muslims, the life and revelations of Muhammad; for Buddhists, the life and enlightenment of Gautama. Whatever historical experiences these original stories may communicate, they all depict spiritual experiences which are central to the religious faiths, and therefore to RE.

Also important in contemporary RE are stories about the faithful, past and present. Thus, in Christian RE, one learns stories not only about Jesus but also about faithful Christians from the beginning to the present, and about present-day students, teachers, and others who try to live as faithful Christians. Stories engage the imaginations, minds, and emotions of students and are, therefore, ideal content and method in RE.

RE Curriculum and Instruction in Secular Schools

Another decade passed before the last paper about RE curriculum appeared in *MW*. Writing at the beginning of the first year of nondenominational schooling (1998-1999), Elliott (1998) summarized the history of the denominational system and its abolition, described the framework for RE curriculum and instruction in the new system, and suggested some ways for denominations to participate in and contribute to the new structures.

The official rationale for the new curriculum emphasized that students and religions had many personal and societal concerns in common, e.g., the meaning of life and death, the conflict between good and evil, the ingredients of a good or happy or worthwhile life, and the nature of spiritual experience. Also, because the modern world is both secular and multi-religious, the school is obliged to help students prepare to live in and contribute to it - that is, help them learn, first, the world-views common in their own society and, second, those found in quite different societies worldwide.

The overall approach in the new RE curriculum was to be non-confessional; that is, the school would socialize students into learning about religions, not into practicing them. Cognitive content included the following:

- knowledge about the major world religions and secular belief systems, their interactions with societies and cultures in which they are found, and their “influences . . . on local and global events” (p. 565); however,
- “major attention will be given to Christianity because this reflects contemporary Newfoundland society and its heritage,” and also to the “spirituality and religious traditions” of the students (p. 565).

Affective content in the new curriculum included the following:

- “respect for different belief systems” and appreciation of “the intrinsic worth of each of these religions for [their] adherents”;
- “respect . . . for the place and role of parents and faith communities as primary influences on the faith lives of young people”; and
- acknowledgment “that human beings share essential truths and experiences that are much more important than those which divide them” (p. 565).

Acknowledging his own possible bias as a former executive officer of the Integrated Education Council, Elliott generally favoured the establishment of a single school system and the development of principles for a common nondenominational RE curriculum. “The result will, no doubt, be a strong curriculum and with periodic modifications will help prepare the students of this province to face the challenges of the twenty-first century” (p. 565).

Discussion

Most of the *MW* papers reviewed above derived not from RE but from other subject areas in the

school curriculum. Illustrated in all the papers, however, is that RE is essentially interdisciplinary in both its topics and its methods, with especially close connections with literature, history, social studies, and ME.

The symposium on values in 1979 could have been sidetracked by Cochrane's disjunction between socialization and ME - connecting the former with mindless RE and the latter with rationalist ME. Elsewhere in his paper, however, he urged that social context and processes are required for the education of morally autonomous agents. Fortunately for the symposium, the other eight papers either challenged his dichotomy or simply ignored it.

Finally, the non-confessional RE curriculum which began to be developed in 1998 was not a values-free undertaking. Especially in its affective goals, it emphasized the development of positive attitudes toward religion, not critical ones. Studies of its subsequent development since 1998 are needed, and are overdue.

Conclusion

On average, *MW* published one paper every four years about religion and education in the curriculum of provincial schools. However, such papers appeared on just three occasions, ten years apart, within the journal's first 25 years. The topic has received no attention in the past 15 years. Inasmuch as the inclusion of religion in the curriculum of secular schools is still quite rare in North America, the editors should perhaps consider actively soliciting relevant papers for future issues.

The most successful and interesting exploration of this topic was in 1979 - the symposium on values in the curriculum. Perhaps the editors should consider using this format more frequently in future issues.

While religion in the curriculum received little attention in *MW* during its first 25 years, papers about religion in the governance of schools were relatively abundant. These will be reviewed in a sequel to the present paper.

Abbreviations

ME	Moral Education
RE	Religious Education
<i>MW</i>	<i>The Morning Watch</i>

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