The Use of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Religious Education Pedagogy

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Questions about the effectiveness of Religious Education methods were raised in a qualitative study of the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents attending Catholic secondary schools in Western Australia. Foucauldian discourse analysis was used to interpret the data from that study to show how the participants constructed their beliefs about God and how they positioned themselves in relation to discourses involving family, school and Church. The conclusions drawn from the analysis are in harmony with the general thrust of New Evangelisation and point to the need to develop a Religious Education pedagogy that is relational.

Keywords: Religious Education, New Evangelization, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, Pedagogy, Relational, Religious Education, Spiritual formation, Christianity, Youth

Introduction

The Catholic school "tries to convey a sense of the nature of Christianity, and of how Christians are trying to live their lives" (The Religious Dimension of Education 1990, 61). This is the context for considering the subject called religious education, which Holohan (1999, 28) describes as "a means of handing on the Christian Faith." However, the ideal is not the reality. The Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (2009-2015), through which the Bishops of Western Australia direct Catholic schools to engage in mission of the Church, states that the new evangelisation of the Catholic Church is needed where “entire groups of the baptised have lost a living sense of faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel” (General Directory for Catechesis 1998, 59). Religious education is an integral part of the Catholic school’s participation in new evangelization.

Teachers will always face issues relating to the engagement of students in learning, the relevance of what they teach and the multiple intelligences of the students they teach. What makes the teaching of religious education more challenging is the issue of religious identity, which can be defined as "a sense of belonging to a community of believers with a distinctive history" (Ghosn 2012). A Catholic person’s religious identity can be recognised through their use of scripture, their participation in liturgy, and through use of the Church’s doctrine to construct their moral response to life. These four “languages” of faith were known as “the Four Ways” in the early Church, and are recognised as ways through which believers deepen their relationship with Christ (Holohan 1990, 138).

The curriculum of primary and secondary schools in the State of Western Australia is organized into eight learning areas, to which the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia has added a ninth area: religious education. To cater for the inclusion of this learning area, the Curriculum Council, a State Government body, developed the course of study for the final two years of secondary education. Religion and Life engages students in a study of the interplay of religion and society. The concept of religious identity and its relevance to the interplay of religion and society are important aspects of Religion and Life, which is mandated as the religious education course for senior secondary classes in Western Australian Catholic schools. The Catholic strand of the course is constructed in compliance with the stated position of the Catholic Church in relation to education. The expectation is that religious identity is considered in a Catholic context.
It is proposed in this study that students’ statements about their faith made during interviews reveal the presence of discourses. Their religious identity is constructed from these discourses. One important aspect of a student’s religious identity is the position they adopt towards religious education. Identifying the discourses negotiated by students and how they construct their religious identity from them has an important part to play in evaluating the effectiveness of religious education taught Catholic schools. Two research questions were set to guide the investigation:

How do the participants construct their religious identities?
What role do the participants attribute to religious education in the task of constructing their religious identities?

Epistemological Framework

Each person’s world is made up of social groups, beginning with family and opening out to include peer groups, school, religious groups, the local community and social groups beyond this relatively intimate gathering of significant others. It is proposed that people construct reality through discourses of the social groups to which they belong. Such a view of reality is referred to as “social constructionism.” Burr (2003, 63) defines discourse as "a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events." She states (2003, 25) that “discourses make it possible for us to see the world in a certain way, producing our ‘knowledge’ of the world, which has power implications because it brings with it particular possibilities for acting in the world.”

Social constructionism challenges the view that knowledge is created from “the objective, unbiased observation of the world” (Burr, 2003, 3). For the social constructionist, knowledge is an artefact of culture. Knowledge is constructed through the daily interactions of people in society. In this view, language is essentially a social interaction. Drawing on the work of Wetherell and Potter (1988), Talja (1999) examined interviews as social texts. Her basic assumption about discourse analysis is that interview answers are manufactured out of pre-existing linguistic resources with properties of their own.

Methodology

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (hereafter referred to as FDA) is a form of discourse analysis and a research method that is underpinned by the principles of social constructionism. The data analysis in this study will be carried out using a form of FDA developed by Carla Willig (2008), who has described a six stage analysis of the relationship between power, knowledge and language. Her method emphasises the interpretative dimension of the social construction of knowledge: what a person chooses to include in responses to interview questions positions them in relation to the object(s) of the analysis. In this study, it will be shown that discourses relating to religious education and attendance at Sunday Mass interact with other discourses to construct the religious identities of the students used in the study and the interaction contributes to the evaluation of religious education.

The analysis will be carried out more with an awareness of the steps of Willig’s approach rather than a slavish adherence to each step. This approach is supported by Walton (2007) who states that doing discourse analysis has more to do with being confident in the use of analytic concepts that are part of discourse analysis. He also states that reporting the analysis must be consistent with the epistemological underpinnings of discourse analysis.

Willig (2008) describes discursive objects, action orientation, positioning, practice and subjectivity as analytic concepts. Discursive objects are the themes or foci of discourses used to construct a personal worldview. Action orientation refers to the indicators of personal stance(s) being taken in statements about discursive objects, which prompt questions about motives for recalling events related to the discursive objects. Positioning identifies subjects within the structure of rights and responsibilities – as will be shown in the analysis, the positions adopted by parents and children regarding Sunday Mass attendance. Practice refers to the ways in which
“discursive constructions and the subject positions contained within them open up or close down opportunities for action” (Willig 2008, 116). By constructing particular versions of the world, and by positioning subjects within them in particular ways, discourses limit what can be said and done. Finally, subjectivity, describes what is “felt, thought and experienced from within various subject positions” (Willig 2008, 117). These concepts will be used as guides to the data analysis.

Data Collection

Two data sources were selected for analysis from the data sources used in a previous research project (Branson, 2012). Cameron and Morgan were final year students attending Catholic secondary schools near Perth, Western Australia. Cameron lived at home with his parents and his younger brother. Morgan also lived with her parents and her younger sister. Her father was often away from home because of his career. Cameron and Morgan had agreed to participate in a doctoral research project designed to study the role of the imagination in the religious conversion of adolescents attending Catholic secondary schools in the Catholic Archdiocese of Perth.

Data was gathered by means of a semi-structured interview. Five main areas were raised for reflection in the interview. These were presented through the following questions:

- What do you believe about God?
- How does your belief in God influence or shape the way you live your life?
- What events in your life have led to changes in your relationship with God?
- Has your faith grown stronger or weaker in the last twelve months? Why?
- Who has played a significant part in your faith development?

Each question had subordinate questions that were intended to broaden and, hopefully, to help Morgan and Cameron to identify what was meaningful for them in their experiences of lived religious faith. Questions about religious education were included in the interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and line numbers added to the transcripts to facilitate the analysis and discussion of the findings. The text of transcripts of interviews can be downloaded from http://bransonworld.org, including those not used in the present study.

Data Analysis

Evidence was sought of the participants’ sense of belonging to a religious community and how the sense of belonging influenced their actions, including the act of believing (the “doctrinal” way). Even though they weren’t asked to do so, each participant identified their religious affiliation. Morgan and Cameron stated that they were raised in Catholic families. For instance, Cameron said in his interview, “I think being brought up in a Catholic family …” (line 13) as a justification for his beliefs about God. Similarly, in response to a question about how she prayed, Morgan stated, “Our whole family’s Catholic. So I was brought up with that faith” (lines 77-78). She acknowledges her family as her primary place of learning about her faith, however, there is evidence in the interview that she is confused about her religious identity. This appears to have come about because of conflicting discourses that impact on her life. By contrast, Cameron seems to have viewed other discourses as opportunities for developing his religious identity. In both cases, the discourses that contribute to the construction of their personal worldviews also provide insights into the effectiveness of religious education they experienced at their schools.

Morgan draws on discourses critical of religious education in her responses to questions about her experiences of her religious education classes. She concludes that her teachers taught her little that she needed. In response to a question about the impact of her RE teachers on her faith development, she replied, “I already had that sort of thing more like with my family and through Church ’cause I have to go to Church every week” (lines 268-270). The clue to the dominant discourse in her faith is her statement “I have to go to Church every week.” In one short response, the statement “have to go” is repeated three times. She is not happy about being
forced to go to Mass.

Morgan is critical of the religious education she received at her school. She refers to it as “the stuff that you learn at school” and refers to scripture as “stories and things” and then dismisses it as “a load of rubbish sometimes” (lines 223-227). However, she recalls learning about conscience in Year 11 and states that it “sort of helped me develop my understanding of it” (lines 252-255). She is indirectly critical of her religious education teachers for failing to let their students express their own ideas. Morgan states: “I think it should be more about whether, y’know, things about what you experience and how it relates to you rather than just bulk material” (lines 263-265). It appears at first that apart from what was taught about conscience in Year 11, her experience of religious education contributes little to her religious identity.

Despite her dismissal of religious education, she appears to have been influenced by what she was taught in religious education. For instance, Morgan refers to the “unconditional love of God” discourse to criticize and reject her mother’s belief that God’s love is conditional. She remembers her mother saying to her: “Well, if – if you’re not gonna be good then God doesn’t love you anymore” (lines 214-215). Morgan also reports, “Mum’s like, ‘You have to go to Church otherwise God won’t love you.’” (line 268). She counters this belief with “But I think … ‘Yeah, well God’s suppose to love everyone no matter what you do.’” (lines 216-218) almost as if she is recalling an argument with her mother about her mother’s belief that God punishes wrongdoers.

The discourse about the unconditional love of God can be found in the religious education she received in primary school and in secondary school. Even though she dismisses the importance of what her teachers have given her – “it’s just the basics, y’know” (line 242), she draws on the foundational premise of salvation history to counter her mother’s views. Morgan chooses to reject the discourse that shapes her mother’s knowledge of the relationship between God and people. She states: “… she makes up all this stuff…” (line 271), distancing herself from her mother’s belief about the obligation to go to Sunday Mass. A series of negatives, which cumulatively emphasise her feelings of frustration, follow her rejection of her mother’s knowledge of what God expects of people: “it doesn’t … I don’t … I don’t … you shouldn’t … it’s not …” (lines 272-276).

Morgan proposes a contrary view to her mother’s belief. She draws from a different discourse when she states: “You shouldn’t have to go to Church all the time. I mean once in a while it’s fine…” (lines 273-275). Her father is included in her argument. According to her, he provides a different discourse on faith, one that does not use obligation as a way of controlling people. She reports that her father goes when his wife forces him to go (lines 280-283). She then interprets his Mass-going as an expression of his need to seek God’s help when he feels “insecure about a situation” (lines 284-287). This provides a warrant for her own position: engaging in religious activity is governed by what is happening in her life and how it affects her – the need for help prompts one to turn to God.

The peer pressure discourse is significant in her description of the factors affecting her religious identity. When she was asked how her belief in God shaped the way she lived her life, she responded in part with “… sometimes you hide that sort of belief when you’re in front of your friends” (lines 118-119) and cited fear of rejection as a reason for not speaking about her faith. She returned to this theme later in the interview, and alluded to her reticence about speaking about religion in front of her peers. Even though she states “I haven’t really learnt much through my friends” (line 239), it appears that their attitude towards religion contributes to her de-valuing of religious education.

Cameron’s view of religious education is constructed from discourses that favor the individual over the institution. He appears to ignore the religious education discourse that is his school’s religious education program. He endorses the use of discussion as a learning activity (lines 263-273) and also states that the retreat program in his school was a valuable religious experience (lines 249-258). With both sets of experiences, he focuses on the expression of personal opinions about life as a value to be promoted through religious education. In support of his view, he describes his religious education teachers in the same way, referring to how they brought “their own style of religion” (line 277) to their classes. He states: “… in RE sometimes I
feel it’s more about actually writing what they want you to write rather than what you actually feel sometimes” (lines 261-263). The “writing” to which he refers is likely to be about how the teachings of the Catholic Church address life issues. The students would have been given questions to answer about how the Church addresses the issues through its doctrines, its sacramental life and through the use of the scriptures.

Cameron uses a discourse about parental expectations in relation to Sunday Mass, which differs from that used by Morgan. He recalls childhood experiences of his parents “taking me to Church an’ talking to me afterwards about it an’ if I understood it all an’ commenting an’ listening to my comments an’ making sure I understood it all when I was little” (lines 171-174). This orientation makes it possible for him to construct the transition from a religious identity given to him by his parents to a religious identity that is of his own making. His description of the differences between his childhood experiences of attending Sunday Mass and his choice to go to Mass as an adolescent are illuminating. For instance, he states that “It’s not a chore anymore” (line 28) and contrasts the present with his childhood experiences of “Mum or Dad dragging me out to down to Church” (lines 159-160). He positions himself as the decider of his religious identity: “You’re not being driven any more. You have to do your own thing an’ take your own path” (lines 165-166).

When Morgan went to Mass, she would “just sit there and – yeah – just think about all the things that’s going on in your life” (lines 90-92). Cameron placed going to Mass in the wider context of being a Catholic. He described religion as “a support structure” (line 138) and something to be used when it was needed. The position he adopts in relation to going to Mass on Sunday (The obligation is “more about how you feel about it an’ how much you need it an’ how much you’re getting out of it” (lines 229-231) is not dissimilar to the position adopted by Morgan. The major difference is found in the discourses the participants attribute to their mothers. Cameron is empowered by his mother’s attitude towards him making his own choices, whereas Morgan’s mother accepts the Church’s discourse on Sunday Mass obligation and insists on her daughter going to Mass every Sunday. Cameron acknowledges the Church’s discourse (lines 227-236), but chooses to construct a position that replaces obligation with awareness of personal needs and wants, the position that Morgan has chosen for herself.

The religious identity nurtured by his parents finds expression in the way he expresses his ideas about the place of religion in his life. He appears to be engaged in the learning process in religious education, which he describes as where you “learn what religion means to you an’ you learn to put that sort of idea into words an’ make so it is useful for you” (lines 242-243). While both students want religious education to be practical, that is, to be about how to live within the moral boundaries of their Catholic faith, only Cameron seems to be positive about the experience of learning in religious education. He operates out of a worldview that belongs to someone who chooses how to express his faith in God and his parents, particularly his mother, supports him in his decisions. On the other hand, Morgan experiences frustration. She is not able to choose. She rejects her mother’s theological position and the behaviors it demands. She is forming her religious identity, which differs from her mother’s religious identity. It appears that her frustration with her mother’s inflexibility affects her judgment of religious education. The subject has not provided her with the tools she needs to change her mother’s mind, so she is negative about its influence and its relevance.

Discussion

The Catholic Church is clear in its statements about the place of religious education in the curriculum of the Catholic school. In The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School (1990, 67) (hereafter referred to as RD), faith is described as being “based on knowing Jesus and following him.” The Vatican-based Congregation for Catholic Education states that it is the task of the religious education teacher to “summarise Christology and present it in everyday language” (RD, 66). Teachers are encouraged to make use of “the discovery method” as they deal with the questions that students have. They are counseled to “respond with patient and humility, and should avoid the type of peremptory statements that can be so easily
contradicted” (RD, 67). Religious education approached in this manner is identified in the document as being “organic in form” (RD, 66).

The description of religious education above suggests that the subject is Christocentric and gospel-oriented, that is, that the answers to the questions students have can be found in the words and actions of Christ. The curriculum is formed from the interaction between the questioning student and the languages of faith referred to in the introduction. The data from the interviews reveals a different picture. The religious education that engages Morgan and Cameron is focused on the expression of opinions, not on what is revealed in the gospels. Cameron states it clearly: “You have really great class discussions an’ you really get to sort of voice your opinion and listen to other people’s opinions” (lines 263-264). Like Cameron, Morgan shows herself to be a thoughtful person with her own view of Catholicism and with an openness to a plurality of views about religion. When she was asked about the influence of her peers, she responded with “It doesn’t really bother me because it’s what they believe ... y’know, people have different views” (lines 236-238). Cameron described Jesus as “one of us but a role model” (line 41), while Morgan says that “Jesus was just there to bring out his word” (line 25). Neither student presented the construction of Jesus as saviour.

Both Morgan and Cameron expect religious education to be a forum for the expression of their own beliefs. The Australian researcher Philip Hughes (2006) reflected on the findings of a study of youth spirituality conducted in Australia. He states: “Young people take what works for them. They put together their beliefs in a way that is meaningful for them. Those aspects that are not meaningful are not explicitly rejected, but rather fade into obscurity.” He refers to comments offered by Garry Everett, who was at that time a Deputy Director of Catholic Education in Queensland, Australia. Hughes summarises Everett’s view of adolescents in relation to religious identity: “They want their autonomy in matters of faith to be respected. But they are willing to enter into dialogue if they feel that the environment will let them explore faith in ways that are meaningful to them.”

The interviews given by Morgan and Cameron illustrate well the underlying issue of private faith versus public faith. In his paper on the formation and reformation of religious identity, Edward Queen (2009) provides an historical overview of the change from religious identity being ascriptive, that is, people are born into a religion, to people choosing their religious identity. He states that in contemporary western society, “religious identity becomes nothing more than a privatized affair without deep connections to the historical traditions of the community of faith.” The interviews conducted with Morgan and Cameron appear to support his position. Cameron uses parental discourses about freedom of choice to construct his religious identity, which is one that does not acknowledge the richness and diversity of the Church’s story, but which is marked by thoughtfulness and integrity, nonetheless. He wants to construct his own religious identity. Morgan provides a similar view. She seeks the freedom to give expression to what appears to be relevant and meaningful.

In their work on Catholic curriculum, D’Orsa and D’Orsa (2012, 115) describe the world of the adolescent in terms of the meeting of worldviews, which they outline in the following way: “Our personal worldview is an interpretive map shaped by the worldview of the culture in which our communities are embedded. This in turn is shaped by the worldview of the age in which we live. Our personal worldview defines the horizon of understanding we bring to the task of making sense of the world and our place in it.” Both Hughes (2006) and D’Orsa and D’Orsa (2012) contend that the worldview of the age promotes the construction of knowledge through social interaction. When the worldview of the culture becomes affected by this understanding of knowledge, then the shift from a public faith to a private faith is hastened. The study done by Ghosn (2012) illustrates how a strong ethnic identity can preserve ascriptive religious identity. In Morgan’s case, the influence of ethnic identity is undermined by the differences that exist in her family unit.

As they negotiate their way through and around the discourses that offer constructions of the world in which they live, Morgan and Cameron engage in the task of constructing their religious identities. It appears as though they have taken little from the religious education curriculum of their schools to help them with their task and this suggests that there needs to be
some changes in the pedagogy used in religious education. The success of the discovery process alluded to above depends on the adoption of a relational approach to religious education. The only way students will come to “know Christ” through religious education will be through discovering the relevance of his life and his teachings to the situations that concern them. Morgan’s description of the content of religious education as “bulk material” (line 264) and Cameron’s description of religious education sometimes being “just writing whatever to get the grade that you want” (lines 267-268) point to the failure to help students discover the relevance of the languages of faith to their situations. Both students demonstrated the value placed on thinking about life and about the decisions they have to make. Their interviews are arguments for a pedagogy that encourages the construction of each student’s religious identity through social interaction and reflection.

In October, 2012, the bishops of the Catholic Church gathered in Rome for the XIII General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. They had come together to make decisions about how to communicate with the Church about the new evangelization: “A new evangelization means to share the world's deep desire for salvation and render our faith intelligible by communicating the logos of hope (cf. 1 Pt 3:15)” (Lineamenta 2011, 25). Put in this context, religious education has to be relational in its pedagogy.

Conclusion

This study began with the decision to adopt a constructivist epistemology to examine the effectiveness of religious education taught in Catholic secondary schools in Western Australia and to make recommendations about changes in pedagogy. FDA was used to guide the data analysis of interview transcripts. The analysis highlighted the importance of recognizing the discourses that impact on decisions adolescents make about their religious identity: the discourses of a person’s social life contribute to the construction of that person’s religious identity.

It was shown that a person’s religious identity, which is constructed from interacting with various discourses, particularly parental discourses, impacts on students’ attitudes towards religious education and the relevance of what is taught. It was concluded that religious education needs to take cognizance of the social construction of knowledge and adopt a relational approach to teaching so that students are better able to engage with the languages of faith.

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