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Title:

Interreligious Dialogue and Theologies of Storytelling: Australian Perspectives

Short title:

Dialogue and Storytelling: Australia

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This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the Version of Record. Please cite this article as doi: 10.1111/teth.12554

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We are arguing that interreligious dialogue, learning and literacy involve more than enabling the communication of information about diverse religious groups. Effective pedagogies in interreligious contexts equip learners with awareness of and potentially the capacity to engage with the spiritual realities to which the traditions adhere. Approaches that incorporate rich stories are essential for genuine interreligious learning.

Keywords: interreligious learning, storytelling, narrative, literacy, pedagogy, religious literacy

The contemporary multi-faith and multi-cultural Australian classroom is a key place of interreligious encounter and, potentially, constructive dialogue. In this article we discuss some ways in which stories provide significant affordances for such dialogue. Developing relevant and respectful pedagogical approaches to teach religiously and culturally diverse students presents challenges to teacher capacity and teacher self-efficacy and to the writing and resourcing of curriculum. In the Australian context, in 2016 the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), responsible to a system of 2500 schools in one of the larger Australian states, released the current curriculum guidelines to be used in Victorian Government schools for primary students and secondary students up to year 10, after which students undertake the Victorian
Certificate of Education or alternative senior secondary programs. These guidelines also inform schools in the Catholic sector.

The Victorian Curriculum (2016) includes intercultural understanding as a key capability to be addressed across all year levels and subject areas. It also recognises the diversity of faith-based and non-religious world views represented by Victorian school students and teachers (Victorian Curriculum F-10, Retrieved from https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/foundation10/Pages/default.aspx).

This curriculum represents an acknowledgement of the need for interreligious learning in contemporary Government schools, which have a critical responsibility in the education of informed citizens. The curriculum writers from the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority also recognise the importance of respecting and valuing diversity in relation to student wellbeing. Nevertheless, the curriculum raises some important questions. For example, what do we actually mean by interreligious learning? What outcomes are intended through the curriculum? What educational approaches best support interreligious learning?¹

**What is interreligious learning?**

¹ Our central point concerns the value of storytelling as a means of interreligious dialogue (pedagogical or not), and therefore we have identified dialogue as a key aspect of learning. Likewise we have not further explored the particularities of explicit curricula or their histories. We are arguing that interreligious literacy involves more than accessing information about religious groups, more than being knowledgeable about the ‘exotic other’ and their cultural practices.
Interreligious Studies is a relatively recent and growing field of academic enquiry. From beginnings in comparative religion and ecumenical studies and given particular incentive at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, the area has gathered momentum in the academy especially since 2006 with the foundation of centres of specialisation, new journals and book series (Stanton, 2014; Mikva, 2018). As Paul Hedges has argued in the *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions*, interreligious studies give comparatively greater emphasis to the ‘encounter between religions and peoples’ than the longer established disciplines (Hedges, 2013, p. 1077). This attention to encounter, as well as the interdisciplinary complexity of the field and the compelling relevance of context in much of the analysis, has prompted Rachel Mikva to draw parallels with the field of Women’s Studies and ‘waves’ of scholarly energy in Interreligious Studies. Her analysis of the shared interest of both fields in ‘equality, difference, diversity, and intersubjectivity’ with each successive but related groundswell drawing momentum from the others is persuasive. She points overall to the contribution that interreligious learning can make across an entire curriculum, as she sees multiculturalism already doing, if boundaries between religious convictions are not feared but engaged as sites of potential understanding and mutual accountability (Mikva, 2018, pp. 461-3, 479). Pedagogical approaches that foreground story and experience foster such engagement. Alongside the educational literature supporting the efficacy of story in interreligious literacy, it is significant for our theme that theological work within Christianity also underlines the
value of shared liturgy for shifting the focus from a propositional or externalized concern: ‘What does this mean?’ towards a performative and participative stance: ‘What are we doing?’ (McCall, 2007, p. 76; O’Donnell, 2012, pp. 374-5). Equally, scholars of Hinduism concerned to expand the field from ‘philology, texts and doctrine’ have focused on ritual not as an alternative to ‘what is normative or authoritative’ but as a dimension of belief that is ‘particularly sensitive to cultural and regional context and personal and community preferences’. Belief expressed ritually is in a dynamic between received tradition and what is being forged (Clothey, Pintchman, Penkower, 2014, pp. 1, 2). It is not ritual or liturgy as a focus in itself that is educationally transformative but the bridge it forms between personal experience and the living system of belief. Advocating in 2019 for an approach to Buddhist pedagogy that above all presents Buddhism as a ‘dance partner not a cadaver’ Joseph McClellan condemned Western academic attention to village ritual as too likely to desiccate understanding. Instead, his teaching practice in Myanmar and Bhutan invites his pre-college students behind the cultural practices that have grown perfunctory through the stories of their own names and the philosophers and principles embedded in them. The point of connection however, was not simply doctrinal exposition so much as the stories of earlier heroes and heroines, and (as he found teaching interreligiously in Pakistan) ‘the tradition’s poetic richness’ (McClenan, 2019, pp.32-34, 35). Exploring liturgy explicitly as a mode of telling sacred story that suits the concerns of interreligious learning, Emma O’Donnell stresses the experiential language
of the liturgy. It speaks theologically not simply in words but also in the gestures and structures of ritual, in patterns of articulation and through ‘an engaged involvement of the person acting in time’ (O’Donnell, 2012, p. 371). Awareness of both the limits to and the capacity for communicating belief through shared ritual, poetic reflection or story, are part of a wider interreligious engagement.

**Personal experience and relationship building.**

A powerful way of enabling meaningful connections in a multi-faith and multi-cultural society is through the sharing of personal stories about experiences which inform peoples’ religious identity in the contemporary world. Enabling meaningful ‘encounter between religions and peoples’ requires the building of relationships and the sharing of experiences. An example of this process in action in the Australian educational context is the *Building Bridges: Interfaith Dialogue in Schools Program* established by Dr Tim McCowan in 2004 (Retrieved from https://www.buildingbridges.org.au/home/program-overview/).

The Building Bridges program operates in groups of schools of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, largely Jewish, Christian, Islamic and Buddhist. Student participation is voluntary and is open to students in the final two years of secondary schooling. Sessions are facilitated by trained leaders who range in age from approximately 20 to 35 years of age. In the program, ‘sessions include interactive
activities on trust building, learning of the faith practices of the host school, a vegetarian meal, and small facilitated single-sex groups.’ ‘Students learn from and engage with each other’s personal experiences of life and faith.’ This is the crucial point. Building Bridges works so well because it focusses on the sharing of stories of personal experiences, faith and identity in contemporary society. At the end of each year there is a presentation evening ‘to celebrate the students’ learning, and share this with the wider public, including parents, and community leaders.’ (McCowan, 2004, retrieved from https://www.buildingbridges.org.au/home/program-overview/).

In the Building Bridges Program stories are not included primarily to offer theological analysis or the acquisition of academic knowledge. Rather they are understood as a fundamental way of engaging in the affective realm of learning where individual stories from diverse religious contexts illuminate understanding and empathy, leading to the building of relationships and shared experiences.

**Literacy – a category beyond knowledge**

There is a folktale that relates the experience of two beautiful women, sisters perhaps: Truth and Story. Truth strode the village streets, bold and naked, calling out her message. The people were afraid. They closed their doors and hid. They had no time for Truth and heard nothing of what she said. Story appeared quietly. She shared their work, enjoyed their food, and knew their names. The people loved Story and listened to her
eagerly. Truth raged in sorrow and anger. Story held out her hand: ‘Come,’ she said, ‘Let me clothe you’ (American Library Association, 2008). Raw truth, doctrinal proposition and lists of facts are not the heart of an interreligious classroom. That place is held by story.

Here we would like to introduce the idea of religious and multi-faith literacy. The term religious literacy, like historical literacy, is often used in literature and discourse to refer to knowledge. There is not a commonly agreed definition of historical literacy but it can be summed up as requiring ‘coherent, conceptual, and meaningful knowledge about the past that is grounded in the critical use of evidence’ (Downey & Long, 2016, p. 7).

Historical literacy is, therefore, a form of epistemology.

Literacy in the discipline of History, however, relates to the reading, viewing, writing, speaking and listening practices which enable the comprehension of written, visual, oral and material sources and the communication of knowledge and understanding. We suggest there is a clear parallel with literacy in Religious Studies and Interfaith Education. As in History, students studying religious traditions need to be equipped with the skills to engage with a diverse range of sources in an informed manner and to do this they need to be taught explicitly the literate practices necessary to read and interpret a range of genres and media. Every discipline has its own discipline specific vocabulary and metalanguage too and these also need to be introduced to students systematically and in relevant textual, socio-cultural and historical contexts.
At one level literacy refers to the ability to read and write, to have an operational understanding of alphabets, grammar and syntax. Literacy, however, is much more than that. Literate practices involve understanding and making meaning from multimodal texts, that is, texts which might be written, oral, spatial and visual. Understanding or ‘reading’ conceptual and metaphorical meaning, not just literal meanings are also part of literate practice. In the 1990s, Australian academics Allan Luke and Peter Freebody developed The Four Resources Model for reading. This model proposes that being literate means being able to decode written text, understand and compose meaningful texts, use texts functionally and analyse texts critically. In critical analysis the intention and positioning of the creator of the text is significant (Anstey & Bull, 2003, pp. 75-101).

A related and important contribution to effective literacy pedagogy is the Multiliteracies theory developed by the New London Group also in the 1990s. This approach is underpinned by definitions of literacy that encompass linguistic, oral, visual, aural, gestural, spatial and intertextual patterns of meaning, and the variability of meaning making in different cultural, social or domain-specific contexts (New London Group, 1996). Although developed in the context of Literacy education, this multiliteracies framework has much to offer a discussion of interreligious learning. Of course in Western classrooms there is a long history of using stories to teach about a range of religious traditions and there is an awareness of the different modes and genres of storytelling; the linguistic, oral, visual, aural, gestural, spatial and intertextual. Alongside these
approaches established pedagogies of Object Based Learning, with their understanding of the power of experience and ways in material culture can convey multiple meanings, can also contribute profoundly to interreligious dialogue and learning.

Australian Education academics Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope elaborate on the multiliteracies theory by articulating the influence of culture, gender, life experience, subject matter and social or subject domain in the making of meaning from multimodal texts. Every meaning exchange, they argue, is cross-cultural to a certain degree (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). Although not the focus of the work of Kalantzis and Cope, this explicit articulation of the significance of personal and socio-cultural context on the reception of texts across a range of modes certainly applies to the sharing and receiving of multi-modal religious texts in interreligious dialogue.

Multimodal pedagogies grounded in multiliterate practices can enable very powerful learning in a dialogic classroom where the pedagogy of social constructivism underpins teaching and learning. This approach draws on the theoretical framework developed by the formative Russian theorist Lev Vygotsky in which he maintained that language is the most powerful cultural tool (Vygotsky, 1934; Vygotsky, 1978). An acknowledgment of the influence of cultural context is, of course, highly relevant to a discussion of interreligious learning. Vygotsky, like the seminal educational thinker, John Dewey, argues that potent learning can occur when the prior knowledge and experience of the student is acknowledged, valued and used as a foundation for new learning. The
understanding of oracy as a literate practice enables teachers to effectively facilitate and enable classroom discussions which value listening, as well as speaking, and which are grounded in questioning techniques which lead to conceptual and analytical thinking. Such Social Constructivist pedagogies also link classroom oracy and epistemology, as educators and learners together develop new knowledge.

In developing these new understandings respectful dialogue has an important place in the multi-faith classroom, through challenging stereotypes, countering misinformation and developing empathy but this is not the same as developing theological understanding. Understanding theological concepts, philosophical propositions and doctrinal positions, with their underpinning values and faith positions is not the same as knowing about beliefs and practices. The latter is a cognitive and observational process. For example, teachers might take their students to places of worship or learn about the objects used in rituals. For some students, however, a ritual or a place of worship represents a lived experience with a meaningful affective and spiritual dimension. Developing both religious literacy and literate practices can lead to deeper knowledge and richer understanding but it does not necessarily lead to religious experience, nor is that the intended outcome of interreligious learning and Religious Studies, as distinct from Faith Development.

For learning to take place students need to be engaged. It is a very usual practice for educators in primary and secondary schools to introduce students to religious knowledge
through the telling of story. This is indeed a very good way to engage the interest of students and without engagement, knowledge building and reflection do not occur (Love, Baker & Quinn, 2009). It is also easier for students to remember information conveyed in a narrative because this mode provides contexts and connections, rather than isolated pieces of information. However, like ritual, sacred stories embody concepts and cultural capital which are often implicit and understood by those within but not necessarily accessible to those outside the specific faith community. As sacred stories, sometimes initiation is required before one can hear certain stories. The language of sacred story can have specific contextualised meaning too. Stories can be a source of belief and a means by which traditional practices are communicated both within and across religious traditions, and the limits of this communication as well as its possibilities help shape the boundaries of communities. Sharing stories to enrich traditions within is evident in, for example, dialogues and transformative practices sometimes found in Christian communities with members who draw on Indigenous spiritual traditions or non-Western cross cultural symbolism. Foundation, revelation and salvation stories, such as the Exodus or the revelation of the Qur’an to the Prophet Mohamed form core expressions of identity for individuals and communities.

Scriptural stories are often read in translation but are also sometimes read by scholars and faithful devotees in their original written language such as Arabic, Hebrew, Greek or Sanskrit. Stories, such as those of the Hindu Vedas or Aboriginal Dreaming are
sometimes communicated through intricate symbolic movements in traditional dance, as well as orally and visually through complex iconography and typology. Like oral and written stories, material culture and artworks are culturally and socially contextualised. They too embody layers of meaning and their informed interpretation involves what the art historian Michael Baxandall refers to as the ‘period eye,’ by which he means that our interpretation of visual images is conditioned by our experiences and cultural context (Baxandall, 1974).

Socio-cultural theorists Pierre Bourdieu, Paul Foucault and Basil Bernstein also stress that literacy is socially situated and argue that it inextricably relates to power. Like Vygotsky, Bourdieu argues meaning is socially and culturally contextualised. For Bourdieu the cultural capital one brings to a context (field) impacts on the extent they are empowered or disempowered by the discourse (Bourdieu, 1991). To be effective, educators need to ask what cultural capital religiously, culturally and socio-economically diverse students bring to the classroom discourse and how, if at all, they perceive themselves fitting into the dominant discourse and cultural context. Christianity, Judaism and Islam share stories but how are they understood theologically? Who owns the story? What is historical narrative? What is metaphor? What is religious truth? Who decides and how?

Story teller, theologian and writer Megan McKenna writes, ‘Telling the story is a work that introduces the text in a unique way, filtering it through mind, heart, culture, and
body. The teller incarnates the words, and those who hear the story subtly alter the presentation and delivery’ (McKenna & Cowan, 1997, p 46).

Further, of stories in scripture McKenna says, ‘I believe that the words themselves have power, and the word order, verbs and repetitions have to be carefully tended if the text is to reveal itself on ever deeper levels. A scriptural text is not just any story; it is a text that is divinely inspired, more alive in many ways than other tales. Its power is enhanced, deepened and accentuated within a community of hearers who believe (our italics). The hearers become the context: they live and breathe and feed upon the text, listening to it and cherishing it, hoping to make it flesh and blood, vibrantly alive in their own time and place’ (McKenna & Cowan, 1997, p 48).

Thinking of McKenna’s statement, to what extent is the power of the story changed when told to a non-believing or multi-faith community such as a contemporary classroom? The ways in which we hear stories can broaden our understanding of diversity or can, sadly, reinforce damaging assumptions and stereotypes.

The importance of story in interreligious learning has long been recognised in a range of curriculum documents and pedagogical approaches in Australia and internationally. The Victorian Curriculum (2016) notes that, ‘The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians recognises the fundamental role that education plays in building a society that is “cohesive and culturally diverse, and that values Australia’s
Indigenous cultures”. The Intercultural Capability within the Victorian curriculum addresses this role, developing students who are active and informed citizens with an appreciation of Australia’s social, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, and the ability to relate to and communicate across cultures at local, regional and global levels.’ (VCAA, 2016a, Retrieved from https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/intercultural-capability/introduction/rationale-and-aims).

‘The Victorian Curriculum F–10 includes multiple opportunities for students to learn about world views and religions. This enables students to be more informed and engaged at both a local and global level, understanding the perspectives of diverse local communities and being better informed about the beliefs and practices of traditions other than their own.’ (VCAA, 2016b, Retrieved from https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/foundation-10/crosscurriculumresources/Pages/WorldViewsandReligions.aspx).

The Victorian Certificate of Education study, Texts and Traditions, an elective subject consisting of four units generally studied across the final two years of secondary schooling in the State of Victoria, is an exegetical study of sacred texts across traditions, modes and genres. Texts and Traditions includes an exploration of how ‘texts have been used by people both within and beyond the religious tradition to bring meaning to issues or ideas in a new cultural setting.’ (Retrieved from https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/vce/ttxtradtn/2017TextsTraditionsSD.pdf)
In the United Kingdom, the Education Act (1996) requires that ‘RE should be taught to all pupils in full time education in schools, except for those withdrawn at the request of their parents…’ (Retrieved from https://www.oxford.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Pan-Berkshire-Syllabus-2018-2023-RBWM.pdf). The stated curriculum focus in Britain is on learning about and from religions and worldviews. However, Section 375 (3) of the Act states, ‘Every 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.’ (Retrieved from https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/section/37).

In the above examples fundamental narratives of major religious traditions and world views are understood as central to understanding beliefs, values and practices. Obviously the above references in no way cover the scope of narrative content and pedagogical approach in Religious Studies curricula in Australia or internationally, but to consider such documents more comprehensively is outside the scope of this paper. Likewise, in this conceptual paper there is not the scope to analyse or undertake empirical studies which consider the efficacy of such pedagogical approaches. Such empirical studies are, however, crucial research necessary to inform future decision making in approaches to interreligious learning. We argue though, that it is not just the incorporation of stories in teaching and learning that is important. The crucial issue is how, why and by whom they are told.
Crain powerfully points out in her article *Reconsidering the Power of Story in Religious Education*, that tellers of story have power; the power to interpret and convey messages according to their own values, beliefs and contexts. ‘For religious educators, “story” includes both the sacred story and our individual stories. Story is both the content and the method of religious education.’ (Crain, 2007, p. 244). ‘Interpretation gives meaning to a story.’ (Crain, 2007, p. 243). Of the receiver of the story she says, ‘Our responses are shaped by our worldview, religious values, families of origin, gender, adult choices, ethnic heritage, and myriads of other pieces of life experience. Stories have a way of being rooted in a culture and value system.’ (Crain, 2007, p. 242). This position aligns with the multiliteracies theory of Kalantzis and Cope discussed above, as well as the socio-cultural frameworks of Bourdieu, Foucault and Bernstein.

Crain gives examples of biblical stories to illustrate her argument. One is the story of Jacob and Esau in the Hebrew scriptures. This story, she says, could be interpreted as being about God bringing a person to new life, it could be about Jacob tricking his brother or it could be about a patriarchal society in which women and children were property (Crain, 2007, p.243). Crain also discusses the way in which stories of Mary Magdalene, depicting her as prostitute, have historically been used to shape views of women (Crain, 2007, p. 245). ‘Religious educators’ she says, ‘must empower and equip the people of God to use and consume story critically.’ (Crain, 2007, p. 246). Such use
and consumption also includes the capacity to see diverse and divergent meanings within one text and to acknowledge or even embrace those ambiguities.

The crucial point being argued is that there is much more to the use of religious story in the classroom than just a way to engage and involve students through an interesting medium and genre. As Baumfield writes, the role of pedagogy is ‘...not simply the act of teaching but also needs to be understood as the “theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that inform and shape it (Alexander 2001: 540)”.’ “‘Different purposes…will be served by different types of process and call for different types of interaction, which in turn, will yield different types of understanding (Grimmitt 1981: 42)”.’ Baumfield, 2012, p. 206).

Crain’s argument is beautifully illustrated by the following personal story told by the contemporary Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who provides a powerful insight into the danger of a single story. Adichie tells of the English and American books of her childhood, books which she loved reading but which led her to assume books could only be about white people. She goes on to talk about other ‘single stories’ or one dimensional assumptions in her life. Adichie comes from what she describes as middle class Nigerian family and as a child her family had domestic servants. She felt enormous pity for the houseboy, Fide because she was often told by her mother how poor his family was. She says:
Then one Saturday, we went to his village to visit, and his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.

Years later, I thought about this when I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my ‘tribal music’, and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey.

She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove.

What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals (Adichie, 2009).
The danger for religious educators is that it is very easy for our own story to become the norm against which we hear all other stories.

*Beyond the Single Story*

As for education, so for theology: contextual, narrative and liberation theologians also point to the power of reflection on lived experience and to the significance of narrative that draws directly on experience, as key to theological understanding alongside Scripture and tradition (For example, Fasching, 1992; Hadebe, 2016). What then does it take to hear more than a single story of faith? If the simple answer to that question is ‘relationship’, how might we more effectively build the relationships that enable different stories to be clearly heard? We are interested in the theologies as well as pedagogies that enable us to tell, hear and hold more complex stories, not only across traditions but also, just as significantly, across the divisions within them.

We referred at the outset to the interest among some scholars in liturgy as one means for interreligious engagement and learning (O’Donnell, 2012). While we are not suggesting liturgical expression is the only way to move beyond religion as ‘mere culture, custom and ritual [as] grist for the academic mill’ (McClellan, 2019, 30), liturgy by its nature enfleshes doctrinal tradition. It is one way in which a community performs its beliefs and values at greater depth than is possible in other forms of exposition. Paradoxically, interreligious liturgical experience can also reveal the inaccessibility of the
tradition for outsiders as surely as it can reveal the vigor and complexity of the beliefs enacted. Awareness of the limits of interreligious understanding is a dimension of interreligious learning just as significant for social cohesion as informed awareness of distinct traditions. Liturgical expression that draws on more than one religious tradition to tell a shared story of faith is even more likely to expand fruitful engagement as well as to hit the limits of possibility. We turn then to focus on one such community of faith in which story is expressed liturgically drawing on at least two traditions in dialogue: Aboriginal Australian spirituality and Roman Catholicism.

Following the lead in the Victorian curriculum documents that foreground Aboriginal Australian cultures in the examples chosen, we conclude this article by foregrounding the community of writers and activists of the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry in Melbourne. In common with Christians from First Nations around the globe they have developed a hermeneutic of inculturation that is also a bridge for interreligious engagement, flowing out of storytelling (Walker & Kenny, 1996; Aboriginal Catholic Ministry, 2020).

For more than 30 years the foundation director, Vicki [Walker] Clark, a Mutti Mutti woman, her successor, Sherry Balcombe, of the Djabaguy and Okola people, and Elizabeth Pike, Noongar elder and former writer in residence at the Thornbury centre, have forged a practical theological dialogue between Aboriginal cultures and Roman Catholicism (Aboriginal Catholic Ministry, 2020b). Their approach has underlined the
vital role of shared stories in creating understanding across and within traditions. In particular their work pivots on the place of art and ritual and symbol that enable some fusion of horizons across distinct communities. Their recognition of the urgent need for social justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians has also included a call for the church in Australia to recognise that it will not itself be whole until the contribution of Aboriginal spirituality is welcomed and embraced. While the missionary heritage of Aboriginal Catholicism is well documented, it is not always recognised that religious encounter with First Nations people in Australia has also involved comparative theology, in which shared exchange of story and the forging of liturgical expression has been important (Massam, K. 2020).

Elizabeth Pike’s writing underlines the place of ritual and the role of a sacramental imagination in building religious understanding; even more fundamentally she points to relationships forged in conversation, in shared stories. Her 1999 article on ‘Reconciliation’, a term she recasts as ‘Conciliation through Restoration’, makes the point that story-telling is an incremental process that gradually establishes common memories from different histories and common reference points from distinct traditions. She is speaking here of the spiritual task of reconciliation but her remarks are relevant to interreligious understanding generally.

[O]ne of the most simple and yet one of the strongest means [for bringing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians together] is the tremendous power of
'story'. Before we can learn to get along, we have to get to know each other, in order to build firm relationships. Because we are such a minority group in the community, it is often very difficult for non-Indigenous people to meet us. It has often been my experience that when contact is made with genuine people, barriers are often broken down quickly. However, when this is not possible, the power of story can awaken the awareness and begin to stir the compassion needed in the depths of one's being. It requires very little intelligence to know that 'love' cannot be bought, sold or legislated in a document and love is what relationships are founded on (Pike, 1999, pp. 38-9).

Pike is in tune with liberation, feminist and narrative theologians elsewhere who also foreground shared story as a fundamental dimension of shared spiritual understanding. In a survey of those theological methodologies that look for feminist applications, Elizabeth A. Say identifies their shared assumption of the primacy of lived experience and their conceptualisation of theology as a conversation, as necessarily dialogical (Say, 1998). Within the theological dialogue Pike points especially to the role of ritual and symbol in communicating and also translating belief, or what she identifies as ‘the stories within the celebration’ (Pike, 1999, p. 33). Pike urges her Catholic community to recognise the generous resources of Aboriginal spirituality to ‘regenerate’ the church with a new vitality of the Spirit, ‘drawing on the mysteries of Aboriginal ecological cosmology’ to draw all into ‘the wholeness of God’s creation’ (Pike, 1999, p. 40). She expects that the
liturgy would be the meeting ground where such regeneration would most easily occur. At the same time she acknowledges ‘there is much pain and struggle as we wait’ (Pike, 1999, p. 40). Occasions when the Christian Scripture has been proclaimed in dance more than in spoken words, or when the reading has been accompanied by the visual symbol of a message stick, or when smoking rituals traditionally used for cleansing and healing merge with penitential rites, are steps towards a deeper understanding of sacrament (Pike, 1999, p. 33; Pilcher, 2016). The work of the ACM in finding those points of symbolic connection through incorporating Aboriginal symbol and experience into the Catholic Eucharist and other sacraments is outside our focus in this article. What we can note here is that the question of how and to what extent different traditions map onto each other and form new traditions and how those beliefs refract each other is fraught.

Once again, however, the analogy of story and storytelling is rich. Elizabeth Pike’s preface to a collection of essays in feminist theology is utterly orthodox in Christian terms. It hinges on what the liturgists have long called ‘dynamic equivalence’ of sacramental symbols and applies that dynamic equivalence to scripture and the Aboriginal creation stories written and read in the land. Her summary of the dynamic of engagement across religious world views is an interweaving of stories.

I see in the Dreaming the Alpha and the Omega.

In the beginning the Creator first revealed himself to Aboriginal people
in the land, in the waters beneath it and the heavens.

Out of the womb of the land, Our Mother,

all created beings came.

The Dreaming story had begun, but the story did not end there.

The Creator’s communication with his people, like a story,

was to evolve until the word he spoke to creation in the beginning

became flesh like the people, and even more recognisable.

From the womb of Mary, our spiritual Mother,

came the person of Jesus, the Creator’s Son.

This Jesus came to show us an even better way to live – the way of Love.

It is the way back to our Creator and our true country (Pike, 2017, p. xi).

Pike offers a generous invitation that bridges religious worldviews. The acceptance of
more than one story opens the possibility of engaging the ‘other’. As the scriptural story
of Jacob and the angel would put it, it invites wrestling with the stranger and in that a
transformative encounter with God.
Philip Morrissey, in his insightful article *Bill Neidjie’s Story About Feeling: Notes on its Themes and Philosophy*, writes about key ideas in *Story About Feeling*, a collection of narratives by Aboriginal elder, Bill Neidjie, recorded in October and November 1982 by Keith Taylor. Morrissey writes, ‘Bill Neidjie was one of a remarkable generation of Aboriginal elders who in the late twentieth century mediated Aboriginal knowledges for a wider audience. These knowledges were individual and originated in each elder’s specific engagement with modernity’ (Morrissey, 2015, p. 1). Neidjie’s narratives reflect his ‘experiences of the sacred in Aboriginal Law and his subsequent interpretation and representation of those experiences for a non-initiated auditor or reader’ (Morrissey, 2015, p. 1).

Morrissey quotes Neidjie’s words ‘of the story about feeling itself’:

“No good I explain. If man or woman e don’t worry about this story, Just leave im, just let im go”. (Neidjie in Morrissey, 2015, p. 1).

Morrissey writes, ‘In other words, if someone is impervious to the story about feeling let them be’. The true meaning of some stories cannot be explained; it can only be felt and experienced. Sometimes the meaning of a story cannot be elucidated if has not already been received through engaged listening.
‘In the narrative titled ‘Spirit’, Neidjie tells the story of the ancestral being Jabiru (Badbanarrwarr).

“You listen my story and you will feel im

because spirit e’ll be with you.

You cannot see but e’ll be with you and e’ll be with me.

This story just listen careful”.’(Morrissey, 2015, p. 9).

Christian theology that dialogues has a long history (Origen and the Neo-Platonists, Aquinas and Aristotle) equally long as other strands of theology that are driven by polemic. A theology of dialogue and story-telling grounded in liturgy and ritualised self-reflection is, we suggest, a theology of genuine catechesis, where statements of belief are crafted in the language and with reference to the cultural structures of the people being addressed. It is an approach that is dangerous to the home tradition: too much emphasis on common ground can dissolve the dialogue partners not transform them. So exploratory theology that might be thought of as the opposite of apologetics, and which is known as ‘alienated theology’ by some, is risky. But if faith communities together are able to simultaneously hold the centre while engaging energetically at the edges then, there is a prospect not of speaking past each other but of finding that meaning ‘happens’ (to use the verb that Scripture scholar Sandra Schneiders applies), and that it is possible to share and use the deeply storied codes that enable us to
hear the reality of other people’s stories of belief. Such an approach to interreligious engagement offers what Hans-Georg Gadamer would call the ‘fusion of horizons’ enabling a more complex grasp of reality, looking what is at hand ‘not in order to look away from it, but to see it better within a larger whole and in truer proportion’ (Gadamer, 2014, p. 272).

Genuine interreligious encounter is relational and multidimensional. It is dialogical, not monological. It is respectful and life affirming but it is also complex and challenging. To engage in such encounters one needs to move outside a known way of thinking and being, to be open to a dynamic engagement. As we have argued, multimodal literate practices give a framework for potentially transformational encounter through story. These stories might be oral, textual or visual and they might be found in the symbols and experiences embedded in poetry or embodied in liturgy.

References


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Title:
Interreligious dialogue, literacy and theologies of storytelling: Australian perspectives

Date:
2020-11-10

Citation:

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/276945