

## **An educational strategy for combating moral degeneration in South African society**

### **ABSTRACT**

The authors' study of the insidious problem of moral decay in South Africa and of the anatomy of religion and of spirituality leads them to contend that one of the most effective strategies for combating the problem of moral degeneration in South African society and schools will be the reintroduction of confessional religion (and spirituality) in the public (state) schools. Their contention is validated by four arguments. The reintroduction of confessional religious education in schools might, however, lead to inter-religious conflict. The problem can be pre-empted if educators (teachers) were adequately prepared for this specific form of education.

### **1. ORIENTATION**

After having made a study of the problem of moral degeneration in South Africa, of the post-1994 South African Government's policies with regard to religion in education, as well as of the anatomy of religion and spirituality, we concluded that the problem of moral decay in South African society can also be addressed by purposely nurturing the spirituality of school learners. In that process, they can be afforded opportunities for spiritual expression. All of this will facilitate the development of the thick moral norms that could in due course play a role in combating the moral degeneration in South Africa.

We will now defend this contention by following four strategies. We firstly explain why, in our opinion, South African society is currently struggling with the problem of moral deterioration. We then depict the link between the problem of moral degeneration and negligence of learners' spirituality. This is followed by a discussion of the South African Government's policies with respect to religion and education. In this process, we advance reasons why in our opinion the current official approach will not contribute towards alleviating the problem. After presenting empirical evidence of educators' persistent preference for an alternative approach, namely for spiritual nurturing in the context of confessional religious education, we conclude the article by considering the validity of our claim and by making a few recommendations.

At a philosophical level, our methodology was informed by transcendental pragmatism. This is an approach described by Alexander (2006:206, 212, 214) as a view from somewhere (as opposed to a supposedly neutral view from nowhere). It is a view that allows for the application and co-existence of different methods, and that embraces ideas representing the best available non-dogmatic formulation of the good – in this case, the best way of providing for children's religious education in schools. This ties in with St Clair's (2005:451) contention that we have to take all aspects of the problem into consideration and then act upon them.

## 2. THE PROBLEM OF MORAL DEGENERATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY

South Africa is currently staggering under a wave of delinquency. The particulars of the problem are well-known, so let us mention only a few succinct facts. The crime levels of the so-called social fabric-category crimes, e.g. rape, assault (grievously bodily harm), drunken-driving, sexual molestation and common assault have risen between 2 and 7% per year since 1994 (Marais 2005). According to the Moral Regeneration Movement (South Africa 2000:Preamble), the moral crisis in the country is characterised by murder, robbery, violence, abuse, rape, fraud and drug trafficking. More subtle manifestations of the problem include the devaluation of people, racism, sexism, the breakdown of family, the increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots, laziness, individualism, selfishness and corruption (also see Swartz 2006:555).

Other manifestations of the problem are learner and educator misconduct, the increase of self-centredness, rising levels of ethical illiteracy and violence (see Burnett 1998:789-795; De Wet 2003:168-175; Du Plessis & Conley 2007:42-59; Mabeba & Prinsloo 2000:34-41; Maree 2000:311-317; Mentz, Wolhuter & Steyn 2003:391-412; Prinsloo 2005:5-10; Van der Walt & Oosthuizen 2007:316-337; Van Wyk 2001:195-201).

When South Africa turned its back on the apartheid system in 1994, there were hopes that Nelson Mandela's 'rainbow nation' would make a peaceful and orderly transition to democracy. The moral decay that South African society has been plagued with ever since seems to militate to the contrary, to such an extent that Makhanya (2007:29) recently lamented that South Africans were not making a success of the challenge to change into a new society.

There may be, of course, a variety of reasons for this state of affairs. These reasons can range from blaming it on the post-modern times in which we live (see Sheldrake 1999:5,6), on a backlash from the country's apartheid past, a too rapid political transition from apartheid to democracy, the alleged inexperience of the political and parliamentary hegemony, a technicist and mechanical approach to education, the divide between the haves and the have-nots (capitalism) (see Palmer 1998:4; Wood 2005:77).

After considering all of these possible causes of the problem of moral degeneration we came to the preliminary conclusion that while all of them might indeed have been contributing to the problem in some way or another, there was one other explanation that had not yet been fully examined. That was that the moral deterioration could be linked to a loss of spirituality as a result of, among others, the way in which religion was being approached in society at large, and in the schools in particular. We began thinking that Hay and Nye (2006:48) were correct in their contention that the absence of religious coherence in society was only the surface appearance of a loss of spirituality that already begins in childhood<sup>1</sup>. Without (confessional) religion, society in general and schools in particular have lost a powerful vehicle for nurturing spiritual awareness. This is underscored by Kessler's (1998:49) argument that delinquency (in the form of drug abuse, sexual aberration, gang violence and even suicide) might be symptomatic of both a search for connection and meaning and an escape from the pain of not having a genuine source of spiritual fulfilment. These insights led us to a study of religion and spirituality as such.

## 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

We took cognisance of Yob's (2003:115) depiction of the complicated and intricate relationship

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1 Even in Bezuidenhout and Joubert's (2003) comprehensive publication *Child and youth misbehaviour in South Africa: A holistic journey*, the authors overlooked the loss of spirituality as a possible explanation for youth misconduct.

between religion and spirituality. We agreed with Abdool, Potgieter, Van der Walt and Wolhuter (2007:545-546) that spirituality seems to form the deep core of religion. However, we found De Mynck's (2008:7) definition of spirituality more helpful for understanding it as a phenomenon: spirituality is 'the manner in which one – by orienting oneself on sources – relates beliefs and experiences of inspiration and / or transcendence, more or less methodically, to the actual practice of life'. This definition provided us with four conceptual sub-frameworks in terms of which to think about spirituality: the transcendent (relationship with a source), inspiration (for e.g. bringing something about), personal search (for meaning), and connection with everyday life (practical life). (Also see definitions and discussions of spirituality by: Bowness & Carter 1999:219; Council of Europe Report 2006:141; Hay & Nye 2006:44-48, 65-71; Hudson 1995:15; Kimes-Myers 1997:61; Kourie 2006:26; Lickona & Davidson 2005:194, 198; Louw 2007; McCreery (in Hay & Nye 2006:60); Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2000; Ninow 2000:34; Nolan 2006:8 ff.; Palmer 1998:5; Roothaan 2007; Roux 2006:156, 160; Schneiders 1993:11-12; Sheldrake 1999:57; Shipka 1997:xxviii; Thatcher 1994:9-11, 1998:39-40, 1999: 3; Vokey 2003:174; Waaijman 2004:4; Wilber 2001:5, 13, 15; Zohar & Marshall 2001:4-5).

After having considered all of the above outlines and definitions we formulated our own working definition as a lens for looking at the situation in schools in South Africa: Spirituality is the way(s) (a kind of *lumen naturale*) in which people (learners and educators) strive to find meaning or make sense of every aspect and facet of their lives, and connect this meaning-finding and sense-making with their idea(s) of ultimate meaning or source of life. We particularly focused on the 'action words' in this definition (i.e. endeavour to find meaning; make sense of; connecting this process with). We asked ourselves: To what extent does schooling in South Africa indeed allow learners and educators to freely conduct such actions? In other words, to what extent does it provide them with opportunities for spiritual nurturing and expression that would in the long run help them with the thickening of their moral values?

To find an answer to this question, we looked for a possible connection between spirituality and religion. We found the connection in the analysis of the anatomy of religion by Abdool et al. (2007:547). According to them, 'at the deepest level, religions have a spiritual dimension (Lat. *spiritus*; Eng. breath or spirit). All people share certain primordial questions at a deep spiritual level. The answers that people give to these questions come from the deepest level of their humanity, their inner realm that is timeless, eternal, deeply profound, subjective, intangible as well as multidimensional'. By implication, a person (in this case, a learner) can only experience his or her spirituality in the context of a particular personal and confessional form of religion. (We worked with this straightforward connection between religion and spirituality despite views of spirituality as not necessarily connected to religion. Lickona and Davidson (2005:194), for instance, refer to spirituality as meaning-making, self-reflection, mystical knowing, emotion, morality, creativity, ecology, the quest for connectedness, and then finally, also as religion.)

#### 4. GOVERNMENT POLICY ON RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY AND EDUCATION

Broadly speaking, religion can be accommodated in schools in one of two ways. It can either be taught as an academic subject (say, Religion Studies) with an almost mechanistic preoccupation with information rubrics such as the history of religions in general, of each particular religion, the generic characteristics of religion, religious rites and cults, rituals, teachings, scriptures/holy books, symbols, calendars/days, principles of faith, lifestyles, religious customs, dress, festivals, artefacts, and so on. This amounts to teaching *about* religion. The learners become acquainted

with religion as a phenomenon, and encounter the different religions of the world as instances of an abstract conception of religion. In this context, the spiritual core of religious experience will then also be treated as an academic topic, with illustrations of how the adherents of different religions ask the deep spiritual questions and search for answers. This academic approach leaves no room for confessional-, sectarian-religious or personal spiritual experience. Any morality that might flow from taking this subject will accordingly also be of a general, generic and academically abstract nature.

On the other hand, religion can be taught as a confessional or sectarian subject (say, Religious Instruction), in which the adherents of a particular religion are guided towards mastering its tenets for the purpose of inculcating adherence to, and a life according to them. In contrast to the academic approach, this approach is purposely aimed at nurturing the spirituality of the novices in a particular religion. It is also aimed at providing them with opportunities to experience their confessional spirituality in terms of their own religion, guiding them on their spiritual journeys, and giving them opportunities for spiritual expression. The morality flowing from these experiences will be of a personal, confessional, sectarian nature.

The pre-1994 apartheid Government in South Africa seems to have been preoccupied with the second approach (see South Africa Act 39 of 1967, in which it prescribed a Christian-reformational, i.e. confessional or sectarian, form of religion for schools for whites). That Government missed the point, however, by prescribing this confessional approach for all the schools for whites, in the process disregarding the confessional preferences of the adherents of other religions in the white community. Similar policies were followed for other South African groups (blacks, so-called coloureds, learners of Indian origin). Learners and educators in practice enjoyed no freedom of choice as far as religious education in schools was concerned. They were left with only two options, namely to either withdraw from the prescribed Religious Education classes and be taught by officials of their own religious denomination, or to be totally exempted from Religious Instruction. Those who remained in class were exposed to only one form of religion and to the spirituality at its core, namely the Christian-reformational.

The post-1994 South African Government deliberately chose the opposite route. In its *Policy on Religion in Education* (South Africa 2003) it provided for an academic subject (Religion Studies) in which the religions of the world should be taught abstractly and academically as described above. To avoid making the same mistake as the apartheid Government, it stipulated that all forms of confessional or sectarian religious instruction belonged to the private spheres of parental homes and religious institutions. In other words, the spiritual nurturing and experiences associated with confessional or sectarian religious instruction were relegated to the private spheres of the learners' lives and existence.

In developing its *Policy*, the Government made an about-turn. In its initial *White Paper on Education* (South Africa 1995), it acknowledged the parents' right to choose the religious basis of their children's education. This acknowledgement is understandable in view of the important roles that the parental home can play in offering moral education to children. The 2003-Policy then however deviated from this position by relegating all forms of confessional religion to the parental homes and religious institutions. Article 55 of the *Policy on Religion and Education* (South Africa 2003) stipulates that 'Religious instruction of this sort is primarily the responsibility of the home, the family, and the religious community ... Religious Instruction may not be part of the formal school programme ... although schools are encouraged to allow the use of the facilities for such programmes' (offered by clergy, or other persons accredited by their faith communities to do so) (also see Carrim & Tshoane 2003:802, supporters of this view).

In our opinion, this approach has exacerbated the moral degeneration of South African

society. We base this opinion on the thin/thick morality theory. The policy of only allowing religion in the school in the form of an academic subject is to bring home to children only thin moral values. In other words, it brings home only values devoid of confessional, sectarian, personal religious and life-view content. Carrim and Tshoane (2003:802), in supporting this view, maintains that the propagation of morality in the thick sense (i.e. based on confessional, sectarian, personal religious and life-view content/convictions) is the domain of the parental home and the religious sector, and should not form part of the formal school programme. Schools should not involve themselves in the inculcation of thick morality. This, we submit, is exactly the problem with schooling in South Africa – it has failed to touch the learners at the deepest levels of their humanity, in other words in the spiritual core of their religious experience.

Why, then, have the Policy-makers made the about-turn? Because they had no faith in school educators to nurture spirituality in the children? Or because they did not think the educators capable of managing the problems associated with inter-religious experiences and education? Or because they deemed confessional religious instruction with its concomitant spiritual dimensions to be potentially divisive, and conducive to conflict in the schools and in society? Whatever the reason, we believe that the Ministry and Department of Education have missed a pedagogical opportunity of touching the learners in their heart of hearts, i.e. in their spirituality, and in doing so have forfeited any chance of bringing home to them the thick moral norms necessary for the moral recovery of South African society. We substantiate this opinion as follows.

The South African Constitution (South Africa Act 108 of 1996), the South African Schools Act (South Africa Act 84 of 1996), the Ministry of Education's *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* (South Africa 2001) as well as its *Policy on Religion and Education* (South Africa 2003) all contain what we have referred to as thin moral norms, in other words, norms that are devoid of any personal, private, confessional, sectarian and spiritual content. According to Zecha (2007:55-59), a thin value is only the *name* of a value. 'Social justice', for example, is only the name of the value. What we in fact wish to attain with this value depends on how we thicken it on the basis of our personal religious and life-view convictions. By actualising a thin value, a person creates a thick value, i.e. one which according to Zecha (2007:55) is 'a piece of life-furthering or life-supporting means'. In our opinion, this is exactly why South African society is suffering from moral degeneration: the norms contained in all of the current education policy documents are thin, and therefore can not, and indeed do not affect the spirituality of the learners (or of South Africans in general). They remain distant and irrelevant in terms of their personal lives. This vindicates Hay and Nye's (2006:48) view: the absence of religious coherence in South African society can indeed be blamed on the lack of spirituality among its children and young people, and – we may add – on the failure of school education to nurture their spirituality and afford them with opportunities for expressing it appropriately. By implication, says Peck (1997:234), 'we are teaching them that values are unimportant, that the issues of meaning are irrelevant, that God is not a proper subject of discussion, and as far as our (in Peck's case, the USA) government is concerned, the children are soulless beings.'

Understanding this, i.e. the presence of only thin moral values/norms in policy documents, as the root cause of the problem of moral degeneration in South Africa seems to be gradually dawning on the powers that be. The Ministry of Education therefore recently (February 2008) announced its intention of introducing in schools a pledge of loyalty to the country to be recited daily by the learners (see Hartley 2008:8), a move criticised by De Klerk-Luttig (2008:7) as being more of a plaster than a true solution to the problem of moral decay in South Africa. Another recent step in the direction of addressing the problem of moral degeneration was the

Minister of Education's announcement, in collaboration with the Forum of Religious Leaders, to publish a *Bill of Responsibilities for Learners* (see Rademeyer 2008:2). Both of these steps seem to have been inspired by the fact that the Minister of Education and her Department had realised that all of the extant education policy documents only contained thin moral values, i.e. values devoid of all spiritual, religious and life-view content (cf. Swartz 2006:556; Zecha 2007:48-60). In our opinion, these steps are also doomed to failure as measures for remedying the problem of moral decay in South African society in general and in the schools in particular. Despite Goldstein's (2008:20) claims to the contrary, these plans all pivot around meaningless and contentless thin moral values / norms.

In our opinion, only the reintroduction of confessional, sectarian Religious Instruction in public (state) schools will in due course lead to an improvement of the situation.

## 5. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

We base this last opinion *inter alia* upon empirical evidence that many educators still prefer confessional religious education/instruction in the schools despite stipulations to the contrary in official Policy. Themselves staunch supporters of the current *Religion in Education Policy* (South Africa 2003), Roux and her co-researchers (see Roux 2003; 2006) found, for instance, in a case study that the learners were keen and eager to learn about their *own* as well as other religions. Based on another study, Roux and Du Preez (2005:279) remarked that a 'confessional approach, especially in the Abrahamic religions, may occur (among educators). This approach manifests mainly within Christian denominations'. Reporting on a qualitative study, Roux (2005:304) found 'that the 30 respondents' reports indicated that they observed religion in a much wider context as only the religion in the religion education classes'. She also found that the educators still tended to use teaching strategies that were not in line with the 'non-confessional' and 'neutral' approach prescribed by the 2003 *Policy on Religion and Education*. They were still using 'strategies that were outdated and confessional'. Quite recently, Roux (2008:6) reiterated that the stipulations of the *Policy on Religion and Education* were being ignored by most teachers/schools in South Africa.

Prinsloo (2007:161) in turn found that school principals 'mentioned that many and sometimes most of the learners ... lacked any religious anchor – they did not value and respect themselves, their elders or members of the peer group... There was a total lack of responsibility towards the own community and towards society in general. They had no vision or mission in life ...'. This finding is significant in light of the results of an empirical research study commissioned by the Department of Education to ascertain the most important values that stakeholders (parents, educators and learners) would have liked to see operating in schools. They seemed to want sets of thicker values to be present in the schools (Porteus, Motala, Ruth, Tleane & Tshoane 2002; Swartz 2006:558). In her study, Matsaung (2003:81) found that students were willing to learn and be taught about their *own* as well as other religions. In a project conducted by one of the authors of this paper in 2006, 86% of the 114 second year B Ed. students reported in an assignment having observed during practical teaching in schools in both urban and rural areas that the Bible and confessional religious education still formed the basis of values education. Teaching from the Bible, praying and singing of hymns were daily occurrences.

Most of these findings should be seen in the context of Religion Studies, i.e. the supposedly non-confessional neutral academic subject as prescribed in the *Policy on Religion and Education* (South Africa 2003). They reveal that many educators and learners wished to learn more about their own religion (as well as others), and seemed to prefer a confessional

approach to religion studies. The findings indicate that the official approach to religion in education either has not yet filtered through to the actual classrooms or has not yet been (fully) accepted by those on the ground. (Whether it will ever be allowed to filter through is doubtful in view of the recent release of the *Proposed Charter of Religious Right and Freedom for South Africa* (Coertzen 2008) in Stellenbosch. The compilers of the document positioned themselves diametrically against official Government Policy. Article 7 of the *Proposed Charter* stipulates, for instance: 'Every person has the right to educate his or her children in accordance with their own religious and philosophical convictions, and may expect from the school to assist them in this.')

This situation is not unique to South Africa. In the Netherlands, where the policy of religious and life-conceptual 'pillarisation' used to be in force since 1917 (see Dijkstra, Dronkers & Hofman 1997), there is a tendency nowadays, says Ter Avest (2008:8-9) for confessional religion to return to the domain of the public schools. Dutch educators, learners and parents have become sufficiently mature not to fear or avoid possible conflict because of religious differences among individuals and the groups to which they belong, but rather to live in, and explore the differences among them. Learners are being encouraged not to be(come) indifferent to each other but rather to interact with one another, to risk conflict but also to manage it wisely. According to her, 'Living together as citizens in a multicultural society needs learning to live together by sharing experiences, reflecting upon it in a cultivated shared language. Although life is imbued with (religious) life-orientation, ... to reflect upon it in order to learn from it, requires the specific domain of Religious Education' (Ter Avest 2008:8-9).

## 6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The four arguments presented above all bear out our contention that the problem of moral degeneration in South African society can be addressed to some extent by purposely nurturing the spirituality of school learners (in the contexts of their own respective religions) and affording them with opportunities for spiritual expression. All of this will also promote the development of those thick moral norms that could in due course play a role in combating the moral degeneration in South Africa. This conclusion now calls us to action (St Clair 2005:451):

Confessional religious education, with specific emphasis on the spiritual core of each specific religion, should be reintroduced in the domain of public or state schools. As the Dutch and Canadian experiences (see Jansen 2008:14-15) have shown, educators and learners need not fear or avoid possible conflict among the adherents of the different religions in a school or a class, but should do everything in their power to help the learners explore the differences among them, including differences in spiritual experiences. South African learners should not any more suffer from religious 'illiteracy' but should rather learn to live in the context of religious differences. Religious literacy, defined as understanding one's own religion and its concomitant spirituality as well as that of other religions (and if possible, also their particular forms of spirituality), should form a core component of citizenship education. (This is an aspect of education that is currently receiving much attention in other parts of the world, such as in the European Union, because of growing multi-culturalism and multi-religiosity.)

Educators (school teachers) should be trained (educated, prepared) for managing inter-religious dialogue, especially for managing potential conflict. They should be able to stimulate the religious and spiritual identity formation of their learners (pupils). Their own levels of religious literacy (understanding of their own religion and spirituality as well as of others) should be optimal. We agree with Ter Avest (2008:9) that they should 'develop a shared language to explore the diversity and *in difference* get to know each other' and their learners. They should

exploit every opportunity for reviving confessional religion in schools, in other words, show that they themselves need to belong, and indeed belong, to a specific religious membership group. At the same time, they should show that they are prepared to bridge the gap between different religions in their schools and classes, and that they are willing to at least consider sharing common religious values.

Bringing confessional religion back to the domain of the public school will, in our opinion, in due course lead to the inculcation of those thick moral values that can contribute towards combating the moral decay that South Africa has been suffering from for the past two or three decades. We are intensely aware of the fact that the reintroduction of confessional religion and spirituality will be difficult. There might be conflict along the way, but in our opinion, this will be an important way of helping learners acquire for themselves sets of thick moral norms. The inter-religious interaction among learners freely and spontaneously interacting with others on the basis of their own religious belief systems should become the core element of a new form of citizenship education in South Africa.

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## KEY WORDS

Education  
Religious

Religion  
Spirituality  
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#### **TREFWOORDE**

Opvoeding  
Godsdienstig  
Godsdiens  
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Moraliteit  
Burgerskap

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