

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 10

Volume 10 • Number 1 • January 1986

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership, interpreting the Christian faith for
contemporary living.*

GENERAL EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



Published by
THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

The Use and Misuse of Religious Language: An Exercise for Teachers

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Reprinted with permission from Journal of Christian Education, July 1985

At many points, religious education deals with people's beliefs and with issues of faith. It is suggested in the present article that it will improve classroom communication and help students in clarifying their own beliefs if the language patterns used by teachers acknowledge the belief elements in many religious utterances which on the face of it purport to be presenting generally accepted facts. For this purpose, a worksheet has been developed in the Queensland Religious Education Project for use in training and briefing teachers of religious education. The worksheet provides practice in distinguishing between fact-type and belief-type statements. Note that the issue is not whether a statement is true or false, but what kind of a statement it is.

THE WORKSHEET

- a. *Indicate beside each of the following sentences which of them are statements of belief (B), and which are statements of fact (F). A fact-type statement is one which could be verified by normal methods of scientific and historical research or which is a reporting of personal experience.*
 - i. God planned that people should care.
 - ii. Some of the basic problems of the early Christian community were learning to love and serve one another and the varying customs among different members.
 - iii. Prayer gives me a feeling that someone really me.
 - iv. Solomon was the son of David and Bathsheba. From the time he was young he was specially favoured by the Lord.
 - v. The Father of all Spirits woke the Sun Mother and sent her to cover the earth with plants and to bring to life birds and animals.
 - vi. Everyone has sinned.
 - vii. Knowledge can help us to spoil the environment—or it can help us to take care of God's world. p. 75
 - viii. Most Christian churches keep Sunday as a day for meeting together to worship God.
 - ix. Rama, as a human form of the god Vishnu, performed many heroic feats.
 - x. The good that you do will not be treated with ingratitude, since God knows those who act piously.
- b. *Write some statements about heaven and/or hell which you could make to a group of students, of whom some are believers and some non-believers. [Space provided].*

FACTS AND BELIEFS

Of fundamental importance in effective communication is the way in which teachers speak about beliefs, whether their own or those of others. Belief statements in this context are those about which differences of outlook are found within the community, which in

religious education includes statements about God, claims about Jesus or other religious leaders, interpretations of the Bible and views on the authority of the Bible.

In speaking about Jesus, a distinction is to be made between saying that he was crucified at a particular time or place and saying that he was the Christ who died for the sins of the whole world in accordance with God's plan. The first statement could be the factual reporting of any observer and is potentially open to historical research. The latter statement presumes a belief about who, ultimately, Jesus was and thus is of a different kind.

Students from religious education classes often express two seemingly contradictory criticisms about their teachers:

- (i) Some are seen as pushing one view and being unwilling to listen to what the students think, feel or believe; and
- (ii) other teachers are seen as failing to give a clear indication of what they themselves believe or what they are trying to achieve.

There is a simple but effective way out of this dilemma. It is a method that is already used by most teachers in general social interaction and yet its use in the classroom seems to take practice. adults talk to other adults who may have a different point of view, there are simple social protocols or manners which avoid any appearance of 'pushing ideas down someone else's throat.' This is a way of showing respect for others and allowing them the freedom to share their views in return. It is done adding qualifying phrases to the p. 76 comments about beliefs, such as, 'It seems to me', 'I think ...' or 'In my church ...'

Even those teachers who see students as deserving of the same respect as adults, however, can still find it hard to change their way of talking in religious education. They may acknowledge that they do not like it when others appear dogmatic with them about religion, yet they find themselves either doing that with their students or becoming non-committal when they try to be more open.

The problem seems to arise partly from the way most people have experienced religious education themselves in the past, which leads to the assumption that 'that's the way it's meant to be done'. This seems to be happening when staff teachers who teach very creatively in other subject areas revert to speaking at the students and moralising when they teach religious education. The style used in printed curriculum materials for religious education often helps to maintain this same problematical tradition.

THE PROBLEM OF PRESUMPTION

In essence, the problem has to do with teachers, speaking presumptively. This means that their way of talking presumes that their hearers are believers who necessarily agree with them. Such presumption is shown by talking about issues of belief as if they are simple matters of fact to which no alternative view can be offered.

The use of such pronouns as 'we', 'us' and 'our' to create an appearance of shared belief between the speaker and listeners may be another form of presumption. Of course, there are times when the use of 'we', is a valid expression of having reached agreement or having shared experiences. At other times these language patterns represent an attempt by one person to speak for others when there is no acknowledged consensus. Such presumption tends to create resentment in those who do not share the view expressed.

Among the more obvious forms of this language problem are such statements as 'We go to church', 'Because we love Jesus we don't do things like that, do we?' and 'We should care for our bodies because they are God's gift to us'. Teachers would do well to pause and

ask themselves who it is that 'we' represents. If it is meant to be those present, it is possible to check whether the views expressed are shared by all.

Some teachers seem to be hoping that beliefs will somehow 'rub off' onto students if they are said with great conviction and without any recognition that they are beliefs. In other cases religious words seem to p. 77 be 'dropped' into sentences to make it sound like a religious education lesson. One result is that some students answer 'God' or 'Jesus' to almost any question because that seems to be what the teacher wants to hear.

Some curriculum materials tend to be heavy in presumptive language and this has come to be expected by many teachers. Their style implies that teachers and students hold the same beliefs, which is usually not the case even in church schools. Hence, the language of teachers is often inappropriate when dealing with belief issues.

The RECP *Teachers Notes* have been written without resort to this presumptive language. In them, teachers are invited to talk about their beliefs but the materials do not presume to make faith statements on their behalf. Once they become aware of the reasons for this change, most teachers appreciate the greater freedom that it gives. For example, the *Teachers Notes* themselves do not have to be limited by some 'agreement' to deal only with areas in which no major disagreements arise. Points of difference are acknowledged as well as points of similarity within the religious traditions.

OWNING AND GROUNDING

The problem of presumption in religious education is overcome by altering the patterns of the sentences used by teachers. It is possible to find a way of speaking which leaves them free to state clearly what they believe, what this or that tradition believes and does, or what the Bible says, without denying to students the freedom to respond from their perspective. As noted, adults have this skill in other areas of life, but they seem to find it hard to apply in teaching religious education.

This process may be described as the 'owning' and 'grounding' of belief statements. These terms sum up the way adults qualify their belief statements in everyday conversation:

- (i) sometimes they own the belief as theirs, by the use of such terms as 'I believe ...', 'It seems to me that ...', 'I feel ...', 'I think ...' and 'In my experience ...'
- (ii) alternatively they ground the belief by attaching it to some group of people who hold it or to some source from which it comes. This is seen in such statements as 'Christians believe ...', 'The ... church teaches ...' or '[Genesis 1:1](#) says ...'

Owning or grounding a belief does not prove that it is true or that it is authoritative for others. At the same time, because it does not presume p. 78 upon their agreement, the students are more likely to be able to hear and to discuss what is being presented.

When beliefs are owned or grounded, they sound less dogmatic, and this may lead some to fear that they will sound less authoritative. When the source of their authority, whether in personal experience or in the tradition, is made clear, however, this provides important data for those who are being asked to consider where they stand in relation to those beliefs. This is in keeping with the custom, in both academic writing and preaching, of acknowledging the authority on which a statement is based.

A quick way to check the authority or source of a belief statement is to ask 'Who says it?' or 'Who believes it?' This assists teachers to either *own* the statement or to *ground* it by indicating who believes it to be true.

OPEN COMMUNICATION

The debate about what is appropriate in religious education has often centred around such words as 'evangelism', 'indoctrination', 'formation', 'objectivity'. Mostly these words focus on what teachers try to do *to* students. In contrast, the view described here refers to a way of teachers being *with* students. In it, their common humanity is affirmed, their individual contributions are acknowledged, and the tradition is presented and studied.

This is stated with full recognition that in many schools religious education is dependent upon the efforts of volunteer teachers, often motivated by a desire to share their faith. What is being suggested is a way in which teachers can seek to make their beliefs comprehensible to the students, to bear witness to them by their words and actions, and to help the students reflect on what those beliefs could mean for them. In the end, however, it is the students themselves who decide what they will believe and teachers can create problems for themselves and the students if they try to take away that responsibility.

SUMMARY

The careful use of language in the classroom provides a simple and practical solution to these potential problems. Several benefits can be seen to follow when teachers either *own* or *ground* belief statements.

- a. It gives teachers greater freedom to deal with their own beliefs in class; p. 79
- b. It makes conversation about beliefs more open and easier to develop, in that once teachers and students learn either to own or to ground statements of belief, it is easier for others to respond with their beliefs, whether these are the same or different;
- c. By this approach, speakers do not presume upon the beliefs of their hearers, thereby helping avoid the negative reactions and 'discipline problems' that such presumption can generate;
- d. While most denominations acknowledge the importance of faith decisions as part of the development of religious maturity, when beliefs are referred to as if everyone thinks that way, the role of decision is hidden. In contrast, if beliefs are owned or grounded, the issue is brought into the open for consideration. In this way, students can become aware of the importance of such decisions, without any implication of an attempt to enforce or require commitment to a particular belief;
- e. Some students are placed in a situation of tension, in that they receive contradictory views on belief issues from various significant adults. The language of teachers can heighten this tension or can support and encourage the students in working out their own patterns of belief. If this is done by teachers from the earliest primary school years, students may be better prepared to work through the faith struggles which often characterise the teenage years;
- f. One of the difficulties facing religious education teachers is to make the content as concrete as possible. When beliefs are owned or grounded they are linked to individuals or groups who hold them. This will help to make them more concrete in that the beliefs are seen as having implications for people's lives;
- g. When referring to the Bible, care in owning and grounding can help clarify the way in which it is being used. This will involve distinguishing between (i) quotations from the Bible; (ii) interpretations or summary statements based on someone's reading of the Bible; and (iii) implicit claims concerning the authority of the Bible in people's lives. The statement 'The Bible says ...' is a form of grounding only if it can be followed by the question 'Where does it say it?'

These issues relating to the language of RE teachers may actually be applied to any teaching context in any subject. But it is in the teaching [p. 80](#) of religion that they have special relevance. ‘*Owning*’ or ‘*grounding*’ their references to beliefs and attitudes can help teachers communicate more easily. It enables them to speak in a way that is inclusive of all students, without making assumptions about prior commitments. It also provides an example which can assist the students, in giving clearer expression to their individual patterns of belief.

POSTSCRIPT: A COMMENTARY ON THE WORKSHEET

(i) *God planned that people should care.*

This statement presumes belief in God and even a particular understanding of the nature of God. To a believer this may appear as a ‘fact’ but it would only be a fact-type statement if owned, e.g. ‘I believe that ...’, or grounded, e.g. ‘Christians believe that ...’

(ii) *Some of the basic problems of the early Christian community were learning to love and serve one another and accepting the varying customs among different members.*

This is fact-type statement in that it is open to historical research and is the type of statement that an impartial historian could make without having a particular belief commitment. The statement has problems for some in that the only historical source available is the Bible. Note, however, that a distinction can be made between statements in the Bible which deal with observable events and those which are interpretations or faith affirmations, e.g. compare ‘Jesus the carpenter’s son from Nazareth, was crucified by the Romans’ and ‘Jesus, the Christ, died on the cross for the sins of the whole world’. The concern here is with the *type* of statement, rather than with questions of accuracy.

(iii) *Prayer gives me a feeling that someone really understands me.*

While this statement deals with prayer, which involves beliefs, it is a fact-type statement because it is made as a personal affirmation. It is a statement about the experiences of the speaker, and is acknowledged as such or ‘owned’ by the use of ‘me’.

(iv) *Solomon was the son of David and Bathsheba. From the time he was young he was specially favoured by the Lord.*

The first sentence is a fact-type statement, open to historical [p. 81](#) research. To say, however, that he was ‘specially favoured by the Lord’ introduces a belief or interpretation. Not everyone would describe Solomon that way. Who makes that kind of claim? It might be owned as a personal view or grounded by reference to some persons or group who hold that belief, e.g. the writers of the Books of Chronicles.

(v) *The Father of all Spirits woke the Sun Mother and sent her to cover the earth with plants and to bring to life birds and animals.*

Most people readily see this as a belief-type statement, perhaps because it is easier to identify the beliefs of others. It could be grounded by referring to it as a dreamtime story or Aboriginal legend.

(vi) *Everyone has sinned.*

This statement depends heavily upon the meaning one gives to the word ‘sin’. Something more is usually meant than the breaking of a human code of law, and thus beliefs are involved, e.g. the Christian beliefs about original sin and the sinlessness of Jesus.

(vii) *Knowledge can help to spoil the environment—or it can help us to take care of God's world.*

This would be typical of statements made by many religious education teachers, with a preference to 'God's world' included in a seemingly factual comment. This hides the belief dimension instead of making it clear that one has to make some degree of faith commitment to affirm that this is 'God's world'. It would be more 'open' to split the sentence by simply referring to 'care of the world' and then indicating beliefs on which care for the world is based, such as the belief that this world is made by or belongs to God.

(viii) *Most Christian churches keep Sunday as a day for meeting together to worship God.*

This is a fact-type statement. It can be investigated by observation and does not depend on the beliefs of the observer. Similar fact-type statements could be made in discussing the beliefs that lead people to worship on that particular day, e.g. The choice of that day is linked to the belief that Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday.

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(ix) *Rama, as a human form of the god Vishnu, performed many heroic feats.*

To say that a man named Rama performed many heroic feats would be open to historical research, but to refer to him as 'a human form of the god Vishnu', adds a belief dimension. It could be translated into a fact-type statement by owning it as a personal belief or by grounding it as a belief held within the Hindu tradition.

(x) *The good that you do will not be treated with ingratitude since God knows those who act piously.*

Again, there is no indication as to who holds this belief, which in this case comes from the Koran and is a teaching of the Islamic tradition. It could be 'grounded' by saying 'the Koran teaches ...' or 'Islamic people believe ...'

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Book Reviews

EXPOSITION

Henri Blocher, [*In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis*](#)
Review by John Wenham

FAITH AND CHURCH

David Wells, [*The Person of Christ*](#)
Review by J. I. Packer

APOLOGETICS