Morality as the substructure of social justice: religion in education as a case in point

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Moral issues and principles do not only emerge in cases of conflict among, for instance, religious communities or political parties; indeed they form the moral substructure of notions of social justice. During periods of conflict each opponent claims justice for his/her side and bases the claim on certain principles. In this article, reference is made to the differences among South Africans about the extent to which religion and religious differences in the population should be accommodated in public school education. Explorative hermeneutic phenomenology facilitates an investigation into the nexus between social justice and its moral substructure. This is followed by a discussion of the moral dilemma facing education policy-makers regarding the accommodation of religion in public education, with the aid of two contrasting metaphors, namely, the Strict Father *and the* Nurturant Parent.

Keywords: cycles of socialisation; morality; morality and religion; moral reasoning; morals; social justice

Let me give you the definition of ethics: it is good to maintain life and to further life. It is bad to damage and destroy life. And this ethic, profound and universal, has the significance of a religion. It is religion. — Albert Schweitzer

Introduction

Moral issues and principles do not only emerge in cases of conflict among, for instance, religious communities or political parties; they indeed form the substructure of notions of justice. During conflicts, as Grayling (2010:38-39) avers, each opponent claims justice for his / her side and bases the claim on certain principles. There are a few possibilities here: one of them is wrong, both are wrong or both are right, in which case we are confronted with a moral dilemma.

This point will be illustrated with reference to the differences of opinion among South Africans about the extent to which religion and religious differences in the population should be accommodated in public school education. The first step is to conceptualise this problem in order to highlight the nexus between social justice and its moral substructure. This will be followed by an explorative hermeneutic-phenomenological discussion of various theoretical approaches to morality that could have been followed by parties concerned, among others, the authorities (Department of Education) in their efforts at addressing the impasse between the different conflicting groups regarding the matter of religion in education, thereby escaping from the moral dilemma that has recently become an increasingly greater problem in pluralistic societies (Gray, 2009:21). This will be done by employing two contrasting metaphors, namely the *Strict Father* and the *Nurturant Parent*.

Conceptualisation

Moral reasoning

People have the capacity to make choices and to act in accordance with the choices that they make. These choices are based on our personal and socially constructed values, assumptions and beliefs. This personal set of values, assumptions and beliefs informs our understanding of what is morally right or wrong and of the type of conduct that would be just, fair, ethical and equitable. Moral reasoning is thus an individual or collective reasoning about what, *morally*, one ought to do (Nieuwenhuis, 2010:1).

If we want to understand the nexus between social justice and its moral substructure from a moral reasoning point of view, it becomes necessary to explore the ontology and cosmology of morals, morality and social justice itself.

Morals

The concept of *morals* is derived from the Latinate *mores*, meaning customs. Morals are standards of behaviour concerned with how we live our lives. These standards refer to habits of conduct regarding what may constitute appropriate human behaviour (Lusenga, 2010:17-18). They may be used to judge others as being moral or immoral (*ibid.*) and since they are socially negotiated and mediated (see explanation of the cycle of socialisation mentioned below), they help define social conventions as the behavioural uniformities that coordinate interactions of individuals within social systems (Shariff, 2006:9). Morals are inherently unstable and because they are also considered to evolve (Rossano, 2010:174), they have to be re-discovered, re-invented and re-defined by each generation as they search for a way to make their living to-gether more just, fair, ethical and equitable (Nieuwenhuis, 2010:5). This implies the continual organisation of social life around issues of *morality*.

Morality

Morality (from the Latin *moralitas*, meaning "manner", "character" or "proper behaviour") is a system of ethical conduct that is virtuous (Raz, 1988:7). It relates closely to the Buddhist term *Śīla* (Sanskrit) or *sīla* (*Pāli*) that is usually understood to denote "virtue", "good conduct", "morality," "moral discipline" or "precept" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2011). As ethical motive, it can be understood as motivation based on ideas and principles of right and wrong (Harenski, Antonenko, Shane & Kiehl 2010:2707; Harris, 2010:17). Morality is concerned with how people conform to standards of behaviour and character based on such principles. It is concerned with the distinction between good and evil and with goodness according to a recognised code of conduct. Morality is, at the very least, the effort to guide one's conduct by reason (Nieuwenhuis, 2010:1). This necessitates a brief exploration of the relationship between morality and religion.

Morality and Religion

Shariff (2006:12) and Rossano (2010:174) argue that religion and morality share social life as a common evolutionary source. They agree that religion paved the way for social life and that social life allowed the spread and increased complexity of religion memes. Each shaped the cultural evolution of the other and each was forced to adapt continuously to the latest in-cantation of the other. This ties in with Dennett's (2007:283) opinion that all religions provide social infrastructures for creating and maintaining moral teamwork. Thus: while religion is not necessarily the origin of morality, it is nevertheless closely related to it. Originally, religion

reinforced morality by virtue of increasing social scrutiny — creating a mystical inhibition against norm violations. The dynamism of the process meant that those religions — and social communities — that did not keep pace and did not morally adapt, were weeded out by selective pressures. Different social convention environments, constantly emerging all over the globe, posed new moral problems which themselves required new and uniquely adaptive moral solutions. To this day, religion continues to serve as an important reinforcement mechanism for morality. In a more modern context, religion strengthens self-control, thus increasing the likelihood that individual followers of a particular faith will practice moral self-restraint.

Dennett (2007:283) points out that the value of religions as organisers and amplifiers of good intentions far outweighs any deficits created by the putative incoherence created by contradictions between (some of) their respective doctrines. He opines that it would amount to an act of moral ineptitude if we were to distract ourselves with minor conflicts of dogma when there is so much work to be done as far as effecting social justice is concerned. This is why Jansen (2009:18-23) sees morality as a perfectible skill. Since religion provides a venue for intentional, purposeful moral practice, it makes sense to argue that moral skills should be purifiable to the highest level of decorum. Religion's evolutionary role in moral development has always been as a reinforcer of within-group morality (either individually or collectively) (Nieuwenhuis, 2010:1). Our moral reasoning and associated moral behaviour depend, amongst others, on how we have been socialised.

Cycle of socialisation

Chetty (s.a.), Harro (2000), Jarvis (2008) and Francis (2010), amongst others, argue that every individual is born without guilt, blame, biases or prejudice. According to them, we are then all socialised by our parents, friends, teachers and other people whom we love and trust. They help shape our expectations, values, norms, behavioural roles and dreams and it is from them that we eventually also learn stereotypes and prejudice. They are also co-responsible for us getting misinformation and limited information. Consciously and unconsciously our socialisation is continuously being reinforced by learnings that Jansen (2001:1) refers to as the *social curriculum*, i.e. messages from religious institutions and services, schools, legal systems, the business community, the broadcasting and printed media, adult conversation, friends, direct observation, sport groups, social customs and practices, language, etc. (also refer Francis, 2010:passim; Jansen, 2001:1; Shariff, 2006:10-11). More often than not, this process of socialisation is accompanied by *politics of displacement* (i.e. "What we used to enjoy, we no longer can or are allowed to enjoy …") (Jansen, 2009:11-16). This may then result in dissonance, silence, anger, guilt, collusion, ignorance, stress, self-hatred, horisontal aggression, inconsistency, violence, crime, internalisation of patterns of power, etc. (Francis, 2010:passim; Harro, 2000:passim), leaving the individual with a choice: s/he can either decide to continue the cycle by doing nothing and promoting the *status quo*, or s/he can decide to take a stand, raise consciousness and start questioning and reframing the *status quo* (Francis, 2010:passim; Harro, 2000:passim), thus turning it into a social justice issue.

Social Justice

The term "social justice" was coined by the Jesuit Luigi Taparelli in the 1840s and is described in much of John Rawls' writings (refer, for example, Rawls, 2007). It is a part of Catholic social teaching and is one of the Four Pillars of the Green Party upheld by the worldwide green parties (Jovanović, 2010:12). Social justice also has a central place in Judaism where one of

its most distinctive and challenging ideas is that of ethics of responsibility as reflected in the concepts of *simcha* ("gladness" or "joy"), *tzedakah* ("the religious obligation to perform charity and philanthropic acts"), *chesed* ("deeds of kindness"), and *tikkun olam* ("repairing the world") (Brown, 1997:449,451,453). Social justice depends, to a certain degree, on respect for human rights.

The current architecture of human rights, established along with other formations of modernity, was inspired by Enlightenment philosophy and the development of nation states (Christie, 2010:3). There is, however, no more scholarly consensus on what human rights means than there seems to be on the character of the good or on what 'social justice' means and entails (Gray, 2009:34). As with other dimensions of modernity, rights are not always what they seem. While elegant in abstract, rights are often less clear in the complex conditions of material life. Since the ontological basis of human rights is still open to question (Christie, 2010:3), a universalist sense of social justice will remain difficult to define.

The moral substructure of social justice

Differences with regard to the fundamental requirements of social justice are not only to be respected but they mirror differences in moral outlook in the wider society (Gray, 2009:35). Claims about rights and justice are enmeshed in conflicts of value, the value attached to the notion of the 'good life'. In the present discussion, the phrase 'the good life' refers to what would be to the advantage of all South Africans in how religion is accommodated (or not) in public education. Many Christian groups, for example, typically believe that social justice is brought about through Christlike actions of mercy and compassion, especially those that assist people who have been marginalised by society. Islamic perspective on social justice is similar; one of the Five Pillars of Islam is that all must give to the poor. However, certain sects of Islam also promote different fundamental requirements of social justice with respect to, for example, gender (Ellis-Christensen, 2009).

Elsewhere Grayling (2009:26) calls the discussion about the "good life" an essentially ethical enterprise, claiming that ethics is about character and quality of one's life as a whole, and how one lives it; in short, it is about what sort of person one is — from which the nature of one's specifically moral agency generally follows.

In modern pluralistic societies, conflicting communities may claim that they invoke the same principles of (social) justice. This, Gray (2009:26-27) claims, partly reflects their different interpretations of their shared history but also partly is an expression of the fact that their interests are in many ways opposed. When communities contend for power, say when they compete for a dominant status for their religion in the public domain, they are likely to justify their contentions and claims by arguments of fairness. When different groups' (religious) interests are at odds, shared principles of justice are likely to yield incompatible judgments of what justice demands.

Similarly, the postmodern critique on the idea of a just society may equally provoke an interesting debate. Can there ever be a just society, *per se*? Can we ever view all people as inherently equal and entitled to the same rights and privileges? Most scholars would probably agree that no one has ever created a completely just society, where *all* people have equal opportunities (Ellis-Christensen, 2009).

In practical terms, as far as recent events in South Africa with respect to the accommodation of religion in public education are concerned, this moral dilemma can be briefly outlined as follows. On the one hand, we have a number of traditional or mainstream religions, in-

cluding traditional indigenous-African religions as well as a grouping that can be regarded as secular humanist/rationalist. The democratic elections in 1994 created, amongst others, an awareness of religious diversity and this is reflected in the South African constitution and the South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996a & 1996b). To fulfil the requirements of transformation in any multireligious society, as indicated by the Schools Act (1996b), it was understood that religion should be playing a vital role (Roux, 2000:110). Before 2003, some of the members of the first group, in some cases vehemently, insisted on inclusion of their particular sectarian brand of religion to be recognised and included in the curriculum of the public schools (which entails approximately 90% of all the schools). On the other hand there were those who felt that the inclusion of confessional religion education would be divisive in the increasingly pluralistic South African society. There is also the post-apartheid Government that is obviously deeply wary of any factor or circumstance in the populace that might in any way be construed as divisive and therefore reminiscent of the apartheid dispensation prior to 1994. As a result of all these dynamics, and after consulting religious parties and leaders on all sides for a long time (1996–2003), government in the form of the Department of Education in 2003 promulgated its *Policy on Religion and Education* (2003) as its final step in overhauling the education system. The Policy provides for the teaching of Religion Education as part of Life Orientation as well as for the Grade 10–12 academic subject called Religious Studies. It also provides for religious observances on condition that they are fairly and equitably managed during school hours. No provision is, however, made during school hours for confessional or sectarian religious instruction since that was seen as the task of the parental home and the place of worship. According to the Minister at the time, this arrangement is not secular since it does not embody a deep division between church and state but rather provides for cooperation between school, church and parental home (refer Department of Education of South Africa, 2003, articles 22, 54, 55 and 58 et seq.)

The question now is whether all parties concerned, including the Minister and his Department of Education, have followed the best course in terms of certain moral considerations. What avenues were open to them to consider before promulgating the Policy? Did they take the best course of action, morally speaking? Can the fact that most South Africans silently acquiesced with the Policy be construed to indicate that they are satisfied with it, or should it rather be ascribed to the fact that they feel intimidated by the power of the ruling party? What would, morally speaking, have been a better alternative for the policy makers in question to follow in formulating a policy, thereby contributing to greater social justice in South Africa?

Social Justice vis-à-vis Morality

From the plethora of theories about social justice and morality that are available in the literature (all of which can be demonstrated to be in some way relevant to the topic under discussion), I have selected only five to illustrate the point that whichever theory a role-player in this debate chooses to propound, it will always have a social justice side undergirded by a moral side. In the discussion below, I attempt to show how a juxtaposition between social justice and morality can potentially impact on the discourse on the place and role of religion in education in South Africa, among others because of the dominance of one of these two sides over the other in particular circumstances.

Lakoff (1995:passim; 2002:155-156; 2004:passim), Johnson and Lakoff (2003:passim) and Szilágyi (2010:11-12) argue that there are essentially only two conceptual models of morality. On the one hand, the model of *Strict Father Morality* advocates that people can

become morally good through discipline (including self-discipline), austerity and strength. On the other hand, the model of *Nurturant*[1] *Parent Morality* emphasises the values of empathy, compassion and self-development. I would like to develop this metaphor somewhat further. A government that adopted the *Strict Father* approach, may feel morally justified in expecting the populace to be and become morally good through discipline (including self-discipline), austerity and strength, but this would probably be detrimental to the citizens' understanding of social justice: they might be expected to acquiesce to demands that are in conflict with their notion of what is socially just, as well as with their notion of personal freedom and of morality. A government that bases its approach on *Nurturant Parent Morality*, on the other hand, would emphasise the values of empathy, compassion and self-development. Although these values could well be morally justifiable, it remains a moot point whether such an approach will necessarily result in a well-governed, socially just society. From current political developments in Egypt and Libya, for example, it would nevertheless seem that a government that seeks to dispense social justice like a *Nurturant Parent* is favoured above one that tends to deal with it like a *Strict Father* would.

The theory of *moral relativism* argues that there are no universal truths about what is right and wrong, and that we should rather attend to what counts as such in each community's own traditions, beliefs and experience. There is no objective ground for deciding between them. This theory seems to fit the style of *Nurturant Parent Morality*. The motive of moral relativism is to avoid cultural imperialism as practised by dominant societies in the past, such as the apartheid regime before 1994 in South Africa (which arguably represents an archetypal example of *Strict Father Morality*). Relativists, according to Grayling (2010:7-8), wish to accord equal dignity and validity to the moral outlooks of the different communities, even if they may clash with their own. Chances are that if the education authorities had followed this approach with regard to religion in education, they would arguably have accommodated all the different religions in the public schools even if they believed that such a move would be divisive and would require a series of special measures to ensure peaceful coexistence in schools. Although this would have been viewed by many as a morally justifiable solution, it would probably not have been in the best interest of everybody and thus it would probably have defied the purpose of social justice.

The opposite of moral relativism is *moral absolutism* — a theory of morality that agrees largely with *Strict Father Morality*. Based on neurological research, some researchers contend that "the ultimate basis for moral judgement is hard-wired — and therefore universal. So even when customs differ, fundamental morality does not, and if it does, one of the differing moralities must be plain wrong" (Grayling, 2010:9). If differences over questions of morality are indeed only apparent, "and actually rest on underlying but unobvious agreement, that fact would be a significant help in resolving some of the tensions in the world" (Grayling, 2010:9). However, as is often the case, questions of morality are not only multifaceted and complex, but they also prove to be inextricably linked with a variety of related issues.

The relationship between religion and education was seemingly not a top priority of the new government as it started to restructure the education system after 1994. The desegregation of schools and decentralisation of governance tended to enjoy priority. Discomfort about the inherited dispensation regarding the relationship religion-education did, however, simmer in the background (Wolhuter, Van der Walt & Potgieter, 2008:205). In a first White Paper on Education (Department of Education, 1995) parents' right to choose the religious basis of their children's education was recognized. The ensuing South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996,

section 7(1)) also stipulated that "every learner and every member of staff of a public school shall have freedom of religion," and section 7(2) that "religious observances may be conducted at a public school under rules established by a governing body provided that such observances shall be conducted on an equitable basis and attendance at them by learners and staff shall be voluntary" (RSA, 1996b).

When South Africa's *Policy on Religion and Education* (2003) was finally published in 2003 it soon became apparent (see below) that the relationship religion-education was more complicated than was initially anticipated. The Policy suggests that the authorities may, indeed, have entertained the theory of moral absolutism in their deliberations. According to Grayling's (2010:9,23) logic, the Policy effectively amounts to moral determinism or even imperialism.

Because of government's refusal to opt for a model of confessional pluralism the Policy can also be interpreted as the intentional establishment of a (state) religion of secularism and neutralism (Colditz, 2003:32-37). Irrespective of how socially just this Policy may be deemed to have been at the time, it may yet prove to be morally indefensible, because it creates the impression of attempting (*de facto*) to impose some sort of master (state) religion on all the learners in public schools. Because the Policy also does not attempt to level out all of the divisive intrinsic differences among the various religions in the country, moral relativists, favouring a *Nurturant Parent* approach to morality, may rightly criticise the Policy because of the reductionism it implies. They may rightly complain that "the rich and complex variety [of religions] is far too great for a brain-only attempt to explain them" (Grayling, 2010:10). This effectively renders the Policy morally unjustifiable, according to them, despite its best efforts to serve the interests of social justice.

It is, of course, also possible for a policy maker to conclude that, in view of all the criticism levelled against all the approaches being followed for purposes of effecting social justice in society, it would be better to do nothing and let (human) nature follow its course. It is also possible, in view of the objections to the pragmatic approach, to argue that unless a person achieves the utmost, let him / her do nothing. This, according to Grayling (2010:18-19), is the same as being careless and indifferent. Obviously, he says, we do not want this; obviously we would rather s/he made some effort, as much as s/he could without turning what s/he does into a penance or a serious interruption to other concerns. "In thinking this way [i.e. pragmatically], we are admitting that "doing one's moral best is a legitimate and worthy compromise" (Grayling, 2010:18-19).

The *laissez faire* ("do nothing") theory of morality cannot be supported, especially in the case of government and education authorities whose task it is to ensure orderliness in society. The government has to be actively involved, which implies that the *laissez faire* approach in principle is not open to any government unless it wishes to be blamed for complete negligence of duty. As far as social justice is concerned, the government may argue that by doing nothing it actually allows its citizens the constitutional space to exercise their right to religious freedom. It is for this reason that the government's intention to use the National Policy on Religion and Education mainly as an attempt to promote nation building in school (Asmal, 2003:6) may also be interpreted as a *laissez faire* or "do nothing" approach; by default it establishes a (state) religion of secularism and neutralism (Colditz, 2003:32-37). Such an approach would, however, not be morally defensible, because a government that promotes nation building through secularist neutralism is in point of fact abandoning not only its most basic governing duty, but also its fiduciary duty towards its citizenry.

According to the "no harm" theory of morality, one should be careful not to cause harm

to others when exercising one's own liberty (Grayling, 2010:220). This theory clearly favours *Nurturant Parent Morality*. Its conceptual roots are located in the Judaist ethics of responsibility as reflected in, specifically, the concepts of *tzedakah* ("the religious obligation to perform charity and philanthropic acts"), *chesed* ("deeds of kindness"), and *tikkun olam* ("repairing the world") (Brown, 1997:149-162). Every citizen has the right to individual freedom, privacy, secure possession of private property, the expression of opinion without prior restraint, and freedom to hold and exercise personal beliefs provided doing so does not harm others (Grayling, 2010:259). The main point of civil liberties is to create, and to maintain, an open space for individuals to choose their own way of realising what they choose to value, consistently with the principle of not harming others (Grayling, 2010:261-262).

Government (in this case the Minister and Department of Education) should indeed create space for the free exercise of citizens' liberties, also in the context of schooling. Any policy that is promulgated on religion in / and education should not only recognise the students' and their parents' rights to their freedoms, but should provide space for them to be exercised. Measures should be taken, however, to ensure that the free exercise of these rights does not impinge on the rights of others. The Minister and his/her Department should therefore have insight into human rights as entrenched, in the case of South Africa, in the second chapter of the Constitution of the Republic, and to formulate policy that would avert harm being done to others.

According to the tenets of social justice, all people have certain rights and these rights may not be violated. Because Religion Education, as envisaged in the Policy, does not acknowledge the right of South African citizens to religious freedom, specifically their right to believe according to their own religious convictions, under section 15(1) of the Constitution, it could be submitted that instead of "no harm", the Policy indeed causes harm. Against the backdrop of the "no harm" theory of morality, it is doubtful whether the Policy is serving the cause of social justice, or whether it is morally defensible.

Which moral approach would be most conducive to the religious pluralist situation in education in South Africa?

Analysis of the discourse in South Africa regarding the line of thinking (philosophy, ethics) followed by the policy-makers in arriving at the *Policy on Religion and Education* (2003) is not very enlightening. Neither the Minister nor the Department of Education openly declares that s/he / it followed a particular theory of morality in arriving at the contents of the *Policy*. This means that the method that was followed by them has to be inferred from the *Policy* itself and from other publications by the Minister and the Department, such as the *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* (Department of Education of South Africa, 2000).

Having attempted to do exactly that, Claassen (2007:2) — reporting on behalf of no less than 14 churches and/or clerical organisations across South African (including the South African Council of Churches) — is obliged to conclude that the Policy:

"... is clearly unreasonable and leads directly to the limitation of the right conferred in section 15(2) of the Constitution to conduct religious observances at state or state-aided institutions. It is on the basis of this interpretation that the Policy proceeds to eliminate religious observances from public schools during school hours. Government policy in respect of religious observances in public schools therefore stands or falls on this interpretation."

It must be reiterated that section 15(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa

really means that the people in state and state-aided institutions, such as learners and educators in public schools, may at any time (in other words also during school hours), conduct religious observances, as long as the conditions of section 15(2) of the Constitution are met (RSA, 1996a). In short: section 15(1) and (2) of the Constitution expressly allows religious freedom in schools. Read together with section 9(3) (the state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on, amongst others, religious grounds) and section 18 of the Constitution (everyone has the right to freedom of association), South Africa's *Policy on Religion and Education* (2003) appears to be effectively unconstitutional. By restricting religious freedom to the extent that it does (and thus employing a *Strict Father Morality*), the Policy is not only morally unjustifiable; it may also be argued to be invalid, even if it is enforced upon schools (à la *Strict Father Morality*) — which, according to all available evidence (as one reviewer pointed out), seems to be the *de facto* situation.

Put differently: open, inter-religious dialogue between the adherents of the different faiths and religions represented in a school or a classroom becomes a virtual impossibility in a situation such as that in South Africa, where official policy (Department of Education of South Africa, 2003) only provides for (a) religion studies as an academic subject in which students (supposedly neutrally, formally and objectively) contrive to come to grips with the generics and commonalities of religion as a phenomenon, and for (b) the equitable observation of religious practices.

To be fair, this represents but one possible reading of the Policy. Another reading of the Policy and its implementation suggests that by adopting a co-operative model (unlike those models adopted elsewhere in the world) and by locating Religion Education within citizenship education in the Life Orientation curriculum (as is the case) an opportunity for a *Nurturant Parent* approach had, indeed, been created. Such a reading of the Policy furthermore suggests that Religion Education can (dependent on many factors such as the skill of the teacher, etc.) provide a safe place for inter and intra-religious dialogue to take place. An important proviso would perhaps be that teachers understand that they need to be so secure in their own beliefs that they can adopt an inter worldview approach that will not be perceived to be exclusionary. Within such a scenario, "...there will be space for promoting religious instruction (a confessional approach) at home and in the faith community, whilst promoting unity but not uniformity, and diversity but not divisiveness, in the classroom" (to quote a second reviewer).

One of the problems with this particular reading of the Policy is the fact that it does not quite seem to tally either with the content in, or the intent of the official documentation. So, for instance, has Religion Education been consigned to the status of one of many related sub-themes under two overarching topics in the final draft of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for Life Orientation in Grades 7-9, namely (a) "Constitutional rights and responsibilities" (Department of Basic Education, 2010:8,11,16,20,21) and (b) "Development of the Self in Society (Department of Basic Education, 2010:14,18). Another example is that neither this official policy document, nor the 2008 version of the *National Curriculum Statement Grades 10-12 (General). Learning Programme Guideline for Life Orientation*, accommodates religious education and confessional pluralism. It therefore seems fair to conclude that this South African policy *de facto* relegates religious education to the private sphere of the place of worship and the parental home and not the 'ecumenical setting' of the school (Dennett, 2007:267), thereby placing a ban on confessional pluralism.

Inter-religious dialogue seems to have been squelched to the point where inter-faith and inter-religious understanding and tolerance can no longer be appreciatively promoted in the

context of the school. This is reminiscent of *Strict Father Morality* in the sense that it represents a fairly unyielding, prescriptive approach that leaves no room for what a *Nurturant Parent* approach may have allowed for followers of different religions to practise their constitutional right to religious freedom.

Political failure on the part of the government to follow a *Nurturant Parent* approach in drafting the Policy, has led to epistemological exclusion, which continues to obstruct the cause of social justice. The Policy provides no opportunity for accompanying learners to a deep understand of the nature and scope of religious differences that they in future will have to engage with as adult citizens. So, besides epistemological exclusion, the Policy effectively engineers a pedagogy of morally unjustifiable religious essentialism and the subsequent re-emergence of social intolerance. This begs the question how future generations may come to understand the notion that all people have equal rights and opportunities, and that everybody is entitled to the same rights and services as all other citizens (Heyns, 2007). As Wolhuter *et al.*, (2008:206) indicated, the current Policy on religion and education in South Africa has in effect banned all forms of religious dialogue from schools (*Strict Father*-like), in the process depriving the learners and their educators from valuable opportunities to explore the relationship between religion, morality and social justice from exchanges between adherents of different religions in controlled circumstances in the schools themselves. The Policy also does not take cognisance of the international experience with regard to students' identity building, the cultural-dynamic nature of religion and of moral experience.

Against this decor, it becomes difficult to anticipate a socially just society where every one will graciously be granted equal access to an even playing field and where everyone will have access to things that make it possible for them in any societal sector to be successful. Arguably, this is pedagogically unjustifiable, because future generations are effectively being denied epistemological access (Jansen, 2001:3) to religious knowledge (its various forms, how it is organised, its moral and value bases, it politics, and its power). The *Nurturant Parent* would have afforded space for this. As it is, they may now never experience proper access to knowledge about different faith-based social conventions; they may never gain satisfactory access to knowledge about the role of religious criticism in society and the ethical virtues of truthful dissent on moral grounds in a democracy. They may never experience the delight of knowledge about alternative ways of religious thinking and social living (Jansen, 2001:3). It is therefore also socially unjust, because it seems to be ridiculing the ideal of attaining peace, understanding and tolerance among South Africans which would have been the ideals of the *Nurturant Parent*. Finally, in line with the central theme of this paper, it is regarded as being morally unjustifiable, because it essentially prevents learners from defending their own visions of the good; of the higher ideals that govern human activities — including human religious activities (Alexander, 2006:215).

Conclusion and recommendations

The official *National Policy on Religion and Education* promulgated in 2003 by the South African government (Department of Education of South Africa, 2003) should have provided for inter-religious dialogue in the controlled conditions prevailing in schools. Provision should have been made for professional educators entrusted with the task of facilitating better interfaith understanding and tolerance by actually promoting inter-religious dialogue in their classes. By the same token, learners should have been officially allowed to speak freely about their personal religion and sacred values. Political failure to have done so, has led to episte-

mological exclusion, which obstructs the cause of social justice (refer Dennett, 2007:360,378). The Policy provides no opportunity for accompanying learners to a deep understand of the nature and scope of religious differences that they in future will have to engage with as adult citizens. So, besides epistemological exclusion, Government's refusal to opt for a model of confessional pluralism and its chosen standpoint of tolerance and religious value pluralism may, in fact, also be interpreted as the intentional establishment of a new state-preferred religion — one of secularism and neutralism (Colditz, 2003:32-37).

It is recommended that South Africa's Policy on religion and education be amended — when and wherever possible — to provide for a deeper understanding of the moral dimension of all religions as well as for confessional pluralism. All of this should, however, happen without creating or promoting social divisiveness and ghettoism, as warned against by Grayling (2010:316). In so doing, confessional pluralism can play a significant role in promoting understanding, tolerance and social justice. Policy that provides for meaningful engagement with both the moral roots and the singularities of the different religions will be more advantageous than attempts either to ban particular religions from schools (as is currently the *de facto* case in South Africa) or for religious education to concentrate as far as possible only on the generic or commonly shared aspects of religions (as is currently the case in public schools in South Africa, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Norway, for example).

An attempt should thus be made to convince the Government that religious tolerance, respect and compassion cannot be cultivated and national unity and peaceful co-existence ensured by educating students on different religions without at the same time respecting their constitutional right to religious freedom (refer Vermeer & Van der Ven, 2004:57), which includes affording them reasonable opportunities in school and during school hours to observe their religion (Malherbe, 2003:44). By focusing on the first element only, and by sending the inevitable signal through the proposed policy that it is not concerned about the second, the Government seems to be intolerant, assuming in many minds the role of religious oppressor and the bearer of religious intolerance (*ibid*.), thereby embodying the morality of the *Strict Father*.

Note
1.   A term used by the original authors, as quoted in the text.

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