The changing landscape of contemporary spirituality: Implications for Catholic school Religious Education

Graham Rossiter
The TV is on, but behind the child’s back. The books of culture are available, including the religious ones; but they are closed. And she is exploring the world at her fingertips.
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FOREWORD

In my years as editor of the religious education journal *Word in Life* from 1975 to 1993, I welcomed and published a number of articles by Graham Rossiter, a dedicated secondary teacher and organiser of ‘retreat-like’ sessions with young people. Since that time, as an important professor of Australian Catholic University he has, with Marisa Crawford or by himself, contributed a number of important studies about young people and religious education including *Missionaries to a Teenage Culture* [Christian Brothers Province Resource Group, 1988], *Reasons for Living: Education and young people’s search for meaning, identity and spirituality. A handbook* [ACER 2006], *The secular spirituality of youth: Implications for religious education* [British Journal of Religious education, 1986] and most recently *Research for Retreats: The views of teachers and senior students about retreats in Australian Catholic secondary schools* [ACU, 2016].

Now we are privileged to have in one book of 12 chapters some carefully prepared long-term reflections across nearly 40 years as secondary school teacher and a busy academic life. If the author has not been directly involved with young people in recent years, he has had the benefit of working with teachers of religious education who have been following postgraduate studies with him at various campuses of the Australian Catholic University, and more recently at BBI The Australian Institute of Theological Education. They have brought their present day challenges to him and this book, as the author acknowledges, has been largely prompted by their present day concerns.

The 5th paragraph of the author’s Preface states succinctly:

*This book sets out to clarify the way educators think about religious education, and to simplify its language. It tries to put key concepts, research findings and interpretation of the contemporary spiritual and religious context into perspective. A good theory of religious education should be able to affirm the work of religion teachers while proposing a way forward for making it more beneficial for school students.*

What exactly does this book offer the reader? The author’s Preface sees it arguing the three main points that I have given in his own words or summarised:

1. That religious education needs to acknowledge and give more attention to the significant changes in the landscape of contemporary spirituality where most people are drawing more on popular culture than they are on traditional religion for constructing their meaning, purpose and values for life.
2. The discourse of Australian Catholic school religious education has become too dominated by ecclesiastical constructs… that incline students to see religious education as an ecclesiastical activity rather than primarily as education.
3. What does it mean to educate young Australians spiritually, morally and religiously for life in an increasingly challenge culture. Studying the Catholic tradition and other religions is essential: their importance and relevance are presumed but little attention is given to them in this volume.

To deal with such important ideas the book in three parts is divided as follows:

**Part A:** The changing landscape of contemporary spirituality – ‘a need to know’ for religious educators developed in separate chapters that include *Religion, Faith and Spirituality; How and why secularisation developed; The development of a relatively secular, individualistic spirituality; Secularisation as a different ‘religion’ called consumerist lifestyle; A pedagogy for religious education that decodes contemporary consumerist lifestyle; An example critique of some beliefs &
values of consumerist religion; Contrasts between children’s and adolescent spirituality – some questions for religious education at primary school level.

**Part B** considers the following issues for Catholic school religious Education: Continuing language problems for Catholic school Religious Education; The need for a critical, dialogical, inquiring pedagogy and issue-related content – re-orienting Catholic school religion curriculum; Perspective on the Catholic identity of Catholic schools, and educating young people in identity development.

**Part C: Leadership in demonstrating a spiritual and moral dimension to Australian school education.**

There are many reasons why this book needs to be read and studied. At the time our Australian “free, compulsory and secular “ State education acts were brought down towards the end of the 19th century before Federation, the inability to reconcile different opinions about the role of religion resulted in an historical compromise that led Catholics, Anglicans and other Christian groups to found and maintain their own separate schools for nearly 100 years. There is a certain irony in noting that countries of the European community that followed similar Enlightenment principles around the same period now have forms of general, cultural, historical religious education as a compulsory part of the curriculum. As I write, news from highly-secularised Sweden indicates their felt-need to include religious education within their overall curriculum, while the State of Queensland indicates record numbers of students not wishing to take part in any form of religious education.

The Introduction and the following chapters of **Part A** can each stand alone in terms of their clarity and the very rich bibliography of books and articles that inform and sustain the argument of each chapter. There is an important recognition of the historical growth of the term secular [in its root meaning “of the age”] and secularism and an emerging distinction between forms of religion and the use of the terms spiritual and spirituality. The detailed comparison tables showing these changes are deceptively simple, but they are based on a very broad reading of sources. With the rapidity of change and the decline of religion there develop new forms of cultural expression that culminate in our present day consumerist society with its own secular rituals and expressions. It is precisely this consumerist society that needs to be challenged at both primary and secondary levels through a pedagogy of religious education that rediscovers and reasserts valuable religiously-based societal practices that are in danger of being lost.

**Part B** has a particular relevance in that it is precisely here that young graduate religious education teachers following postgraduate courses have expressed their concerns about the way in which obviously important themes for the education of Catholic students run the danger of becoming ‘slogans’ that fail to communicate if they are imposed as starting points. The author in no way denies the importance of these concepts but insists that they have to be arrived at as an end-point through a teacher-student dialogue that starts from the reality of the students’ lives in today’s secularised society. The strong historical, and to a certain extent ‘separate’ Catholic communities that believed separate Catholic schools were necessary and for nearly a century supported them, “with the pennies of the poor” and the dedication of the religious congregations of women and men, no longer exists. Secondary school students (and their parents?) are shown not to be interested in following available religious education courses, even when in some Australian States, they have the same value for university entrance as other subjects. As the “Leuven project” continues its development in Victorian Catholic schools and elsewhere, there is growing evidence that such important terms as “faith formation”, “Catholic identity” and “new evangelisation” are better ‘discovered’ through dialogue than being seen as starting points in a curriculum.

**Part C** recognises the challenge of providing Leadership in demonstrating a spiritual and moral dimension to Australian school education. What is obvious is that the preparation of religious education teachers today certainly needs both good broadly-based academic courses and a training
in the most suitable pedagogy that is always respectful that faith is a gift, that as the Vatican II Declaration on Religious Liberty [par. 10] insists

…human beings should respond to the word of God freely, and that nobody is to be forced to embrace the faith against their will. The act of faith of its very nature is a free act.

My reading of this very rich book leaves me with three reflections.

First, the adage that “values and/or religion are better caught rather than taught” is its own reminder of how the example of parents and teachers can be highly educational. The phrase, however, has always to be balanced with the eunuch’s question to Philip in the Acts of the Apostles, “how can I understand this unless someone teaches me?” The phrase might remind us also that “values and religion are caught precisely because they are taught.” The argument of this book is that the pedagogy of discovery through dialogue has a particular strength in upholding the principle of “proposing rather than imposing” through a fundamental belief in the personal freedom of every person. In this regard, the traditional maxim that faith is received according to the ability of the person to receive it has its contemporary relevance when statistics indicate that many parents and teachers apparently do not offer an example of what children and young people in Catholic schools are invited to do.

My second reflection is that this principle is also valid in public schooling where some general study of religion could contribute to young people’s knowledge of the enduring role of religion and the religious traditions that are part of the richness and diversity of an Australian pluralist society. Australian media regularly includes material relating to the more obvious presence of Muslim dress and practices throughout Australia. Religious education can thus enhance the Australian community’s social capital through knowledge and understanding of the particular religious traditions that are represented in the country, and the value of the Australian Catholic school is precisely as an integral part of Australian society, acknowledging through its knowledge and respect for all religions, that there are values other than the material.

My third reflection is to commend the tone in which the arguments of this book are presented. Key terms are carefully defined, comparative tables showing the gradual changes of the understanding of key concepts are carefully presented through abundant references before conclusions are suggested. This approach is invitational, respectfully inviting the reader to consider the important questions raised about this important topic.

I commend this book to the attention of all who are interested in the important questions raised by this comprehensive study.

Dr Gerard Rummery fsc, De La Salle Community, Kensington NSW

January 2018
This book is about classroom religious education for those studying religious education for professional development or as a part of tertiary education. While it focuses on the teaching of religion in Australian Catholic schools, the issues considered have relevance to religious education in other contexts and in other countries.

"I want it all. And I want it now!" The iconic words of Freddie Mercury's 1989 song reflect the prominent existential focus in contemporary consumerist lifestyle. Similarly, the phrase "Life to the full" is a popular mantra for this lifestyle; but it is also central to St John's gospel (10:10) “I have come that they may have life – life to the full”, where the Christian faith offers the promise of a meaningful and fulfilling life. This phrase was chosen as the title and focal point for this book because it straddles both secular consumerist lifestyle and Christian faith.

In the same way, spirituality is central to this study because it is a construct that is used in both the religious and the secular spheres to talk about relationships between school education and personal development. Spirituality has strong etymological roots in Christianity; it is no longer just a synonym for religiosity. It has also been used to identify the way people who are not necessarily religious relate to spiritual and moral dimensions of life.

School religious education is considered to be a curriculum area that can be valuable for educating and resourcing young people’s spirituality, whether they are religious or not.

The specific context for religious education considered here is Australian Catholic schools. This specificity is needed to address a number of key issues peculiar to this context. Nevertheless, it is proposed that, apart from the material dealing with idiosyncratic Catholic issues, the discussion should be relevant to other contexts, including both religious schools and public schools where religious education (or religion studies) is a subject in the curriculum. On this point, my colleague Robert Jackson (Emeritus Professor of Religions and Education, the University of Warwick) commented.

The discussion in this book is highly relevant to debates about faith-schooling internationally, and especially contributes positive ideas about relationships between faith-based religious education, and inclusive and impartial approaches to religious education found in state education systems, such as in England and Sweden. It provides a basis for dialogue and collaboration of those engaged in the subject in different contexts and settings. It makes an important contribution to the literature on spiritual development in educational contexts.

As implied in its broad compass, this study claims that the best interests of a meaningful and effective Catholic school religious education will be promoted if its scope is more open and expansive, and less narrowly focused on ecclesiastical purposes like Catholic identity and faith formation.

Some academic books about religious education are practical in orientation, modelling classroom pedagogy and proposing how one should teach. This book is primarily about theory for religious education; but it has significant implications for practice. It sets out to clarify the way educators think about religious education, and to simplify its language. It tries to put key concepts, research findings, and interpretation of the contemporary spiritual and religious context into perspective. A good theory of religious education should be able to affirm the work of religion teachers while proposing a way forward for making it more beneficial for school students.

In my own years of teaching religion in secondary schools in the 1960s and 1970s, I was a pragmatic survivor. My best work was in youth ministry, voluntary commitment groups and retreats. This book is about classroom religious education and the formal school religion curriculum. This context is different from those of youth ministry and voluntary commitment groups; it has a different theoretical framework; it has different purposes, assumptions, processes and outcomes that are closely related to the natural parameters and educative possibilities that go with all learning areas in the school curriculum. It should not be conflated with, or confused with theory for youth ministry – even though there is a valuable
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complementarity between classroom religion curriculum and youth ministry as far as the personal development of young people is concerned.

This book was planned some years back, but it could only be written piecemeal, with some of the draft chapters first appearing as articles in religious education journals. Each chapter has a ‘stand-alone’ quality, while there is also a coherence to the whole which builds the argument about how religious education might best to respond to the diagnosis of the influence of contemporary culture. The response proposes a way of thinking and talking about religious education that will help make it more meaningful and relevant, as well as implications for content and pedagogy.

When looking back at the history of Australian Catholic school religious education in the 1960s and 1970s, it is possible to evaluate what was happening in a clear and incisive way. One can readily identify and judge the trial and error, and the enduring valuable insights and principles that emerged. Now we have the experience, the historical perspective and wisdom for such evaluation that did not appear to be available to religious educators at that time.

This book tries to evaluate contemporary theory and practice in the same clear and incisive way – now, rather than having to wait 50 years to see how things eventuate. Doing this is challenging because it entails questioning the assumptions, the thinking, language and practice; and identifying and appraising developments and trends. Inevitably, such questioning will not always please some Catholic education authorities. Nevertheless, I believe that this evaluative role is central to the work of academics working in the field of religious education. This is the arena where critical, informed debate is crucial for the healthy development of what is not only a key learning area for Catholic schools, but an important example of what a spiritual and moral dimension to Australian education might entail. With by far the major quantum of religion teachers in the country, Catholic schooling could well exercise a national leadership role in spiritual, moral and religious education.

The book seeks to promote a theory for Catholic school religious education that is both realistic and helpful for teachers, and which suggests the best trajectory to take in the future. In turn, it is hoped that this would enhance young people’s experience of religious education that gave them substantial access to the religious heritage of Catholicism, and which would also resource their spirituality in ways that helped them negotiate more meaningful life in an increasingly complex and challenging culture. The book follows up, further justifies and complements the arguments developed in Reasons for living: Education and young people’s search for meaning, identity and spirituality (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006)

I am particularly indebted to two Australian researchers for insights into youth spirituality and wellbeing. The work of social science researcher Richard Eckersley is referred to throughout the book, but especially with respect to understanding the changing cultural milieu that affects spirituality. Philip Hughes has for many years researched youth spirituality, as exemplified in Putting Life Together (2007) and Educating for Purposeful Living in a Post-Traditional Age (2017). His special interest in what it means “to educate for living” is congruent with the central theme in Life to the Full.

Not all religious educators will agree with the diagnoses and interpretations presented here. If readership were to be put on a normal curve, some would be in total agreement; at the other end of the curve, some would never agree; and in between, there would be others who are open to thinking about the issues raised and to forming their own conclusions about the interpretations and recommendations.

The book argues three main points.

1. That religious education needs to acknowledge and give more attention to the significant changes in the landscape of contemporary spirituality where most people are drawing more on popular culture than they are on religion for constructing their meaning, purpose and values for life.
2. The discourse of Australian Catholic school religious education has become too dominated by ecclesiastical constructs (for example: Catholic identity, faith formation and new evangelisation), that incline people, especially students, teachers and parents, to see religious education as an exclusively ecclesiastical activity rather than primarily as education.
3. One of the key implications for religious education is to focus more on what it means to educate young Australians spiritually, morally and religiously for life in an increasingly challenging culture. Studying the Catholic tradition and other religions is essential: the importance and relevance of these two areas of study is presumed and not in question (and little attention is given to them in this volume). But a stronger contribution is needed from content and pedagogy that reflect the following:-

* More issue-oriented content, including what people see as some of the principal spiritual and moral issues of the day;
* A critical, inquiring, research-oriented, dialogical, student centred pedagogy that can be used in all content areas;
* Critical evaluation of the shaping influence of culture on people’s thinking, spirituality and behaviour.

Some may react to what is presented and say: "Hey, this is mainly personal development and cultural analysis. Where is the Theology and Scripture?" This book is not about those theological dimensions. It presumes that their place in Catholic religious education remains central and not in question. But it argues that more of the personal development and cultural analysis is needed. If religious education does not deal directly with contemporary life in a systematic and challenging way, then the perception of students that it is nominal and irrelevant with increase even further. In today's secularised societies, if religion and religious education have little to say about life and if they do not engage with what people perceive as the big issues of the day, then many of them will not waste their time listening.

The principal reason for writing this book is keeping faith with the postgraduate students in religious education and religion teachers with whom I have worked for many years. Such work provided educators with an opportunity to identify and think through critically a wide range of issues related to the theory and practice of religious education. I was the principal learner from this dialogue. The interactions contributed significantly to my ongoing professional education through the responses, raising of issues, insights and inspiration of participants.

The sort of participant feedback that has been most important for me has been the judgment of teachers that the critical perspective taken on religious education has been realistic. The trajectory of my academic work and teaching has been to pursue a realistic interpretation of both the historical development and the contemporary thinking and practice in school religious education that resonates with the experience of teachers. This also included interpretations of the cultural influences on people's spirituality and identity. As a number of participants in my classes have observed, I have not really “told them anything new” – because it had for them the unmistakable ring of ‘reality’ in terms of their own professional experience. But what was important for them was having someone say this with conviction, in public, and in an informative way.

And this is what the book sets out to do. Graham Rossiter, January 2018.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Sofia Yarrow for the cover photograph It is even different for 3 year olds.
I am grateful to Br Gerard Rummery for his Foreword and for his collegial support that goes back to 1975 when he suggested that I could contribute something useful by specialising in religious education. I thank colleagues John Sullivan, Robert Jackson, Gloria Durka, Adrian-Mario Gellel and Trond Enger for looking at the manuscript and writing recommendations.
I acknowledge the many and often pivotal insights and comments of my colleague Marisa Crawford; as usual, they were invaluable. And I thank her for the encouragement to see this project through to completion.
I acknowledge the helpful professionalism of Heather and Arthur Heaps at Print2Day Printery.

COMMENTS ABOUT THE BOOK

This a challenging and affirming book. It challenges much of what educators take for granted in religious education, and affirms what todays teachers already know it really is a whole new world. Graham Rossiter is a serious scholar and focused writer who masterfully addresses theoretical and practical aspects of selected themes such as spirituality, religion, education, culture and socialisation. His cogent analyses and careful distinctions prick our pretence and break open the meaning of key religious and spiritual themes.

The author draws from his own rich teaching experience and grounds his interpretations and suggestions within a wide and vivid palette of research literature thus rendering his proposals for Catholic religious education reform all the more compelling. Readers are offered criteria for choosing between competing models of religious education while he argues that creative tension is to be prized. In chapter after chapter Rossiter probes, prods and critiques current religious education practice and suggests skills and information for more adequate and appropriate theory building and educational practice.

The text is embellished with summaries, charts, graphs, and lists which further enrich recognition of emerging portraits of young people’s identity.
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While the focus of this grand work is on Australian Catholic religious education of youth, most of the content can be appropriated easily by educators in other countries. Anyone studying the history and development of religious education in their own setting is sure to benefit from a close reading of this master work. I know I did.

For those looking to deepen their roots of understanding Catholic religious education, this volume is an essential resource. For those seeking a fresh look at Catholic religious education, this book delivers. And for both kinds of readers, this book is a gift...to them and to the profession they serve.

Gloria Durka, Professor of Religion and Religious Education, Fordham University, New York, USA.

Graham Rossiter draws on a lifetime of teaching experience, familiarity with relevant research, careful analysis of the empirical evidence of what works with students (and what does not), cogent argument, and a remarkable capacity to build bridges between a pluralist secular society (with its many presuppositions and prerequisites), a church increasingly uncertain of its direction, internally divided and unsure how best to invite others to participate in her living tradition, and the contemporary generation of youngsters who are critical, questioning and much more media-savvy than their elders. Rossiter offers historical perspective, conceptual clarity, a sound theology and practical proposals for RE in Catholic schools. Penetratingly insightful in its cultural analysis, and displaying great wisdom about how to engage students in realistic ways, here is a valuable and challenging diagnosis of where we are in RE and how best we might respond. Rossiter’s scrutiny of the field and his guidance for how to operate within it have significance and relevance for religious educators across the world.

John Sullivan, Emeritus Professor of Christian Education, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK

This book is a superb synthesis of forty years of work and insights in the area of Catholic Religious Education written with an eye on the future of the scholastic discipline. It promotes a Religious Education that responds to the signs of the times and is in dialogue with contemporary thought and society. By placing Spirituality at the centre of Religious Education, Rossiter steers this discipline away from ghettoization. This book is a must for those who wish to reflect on how Catholic Religious Education should develop and transform itself to be at the service of twenty-first century pupils. Although deeply rooted within the Australian setting, the reflections are applicable to most Western contexts.

Adrian-Mario Gellel, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, the University of Malta, Msida.

Rossiter is aware of the marginalisation of school subjects concerned more with the personal development of students. He argues that religious education should be an academic study, on a par with other curriculum subjects, tailored to different age ranges in primary and secondary education. Its focus should be on educating – rather than communicating or changing – personal faith. It should aim to produce informed, critical thinkers about religion as well as being a resource for spiritual development, giving students agency in relation to their own personal development. This challenges those who categorise faith-based religious education and inclusive religious education as incommensurable ‘paradigms’, providing a basis for dialogue and collaboration with those engaged in different contexts and settings. It also makes an important contribution to the literature on spiritual development in educational contexts.

Robert Jackson, Emeritus Professor of Religions and Education, University of Warwick, UK.

Life to the full is relevant and valuable far beyond the Australian Catholic Religious Education context. For all of us concerned with how to find connections between young people’s – and others’ – contemporary life and spiritual reality on the one side and the Biblical world and a Christian spirituality on the other side, Life to the full is a gold mine.

Rev. Trond Enger, Emeritus Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Østfold University College, Norway
Chapter 1

Introduction: Outlining a preferred view of the nature and purposes of Catholic school religious education

It might seem more logical to have begun this book with an exploration of the changing landscape of contemporary spirituality and then work towards implications for Catholic school religious education. The examination of issues in parts A and B works in this direction. But beginning with a concise statement about a preferred rationale for classroom religious education means that readers will not be left in any doubt about the stance taken which colours the interpretation of cultural issues, and explains why this is regarded as so important for contemporary religious education.

Hopefully, as readers progress through the book, the reasons for the precise wording in describing classroom religious education in this chapter will become more evident. Hopefully too, this view of religious education will give coherence to the discussions of cultural and educational issues that follow.

Readers will have different estimates of what classroom religious education should achieve. Trying to get more consensus about the stance taken here is not the prime purpose of this book. Rather, its aim is to persuade readers that the issues deserve attention. What is presented may promote reflection and further informed debate about purposes, content and pedagogy in religious education.

In 2018, the Australian Catholic Bishops, through the National Catholic Education Commission, published the document Framing paper: Religious Education in Australian Catholic Schools. While this document naturally emphasises an ecclesiastical perspective, it is considered to be congruent with, and can accommodate, the views on religious education in this chapter (this is illustrated in quotations and comments later in chapter 9). The interpretations and recommendations in this book can be considered as one professional response to the bishops’ document.

Classroom religious education as part of the spiritual/religious dimension to Catholic schooling

The classroom religion curriculum is part of the overall spiritual/religious dimension to education in a Catholic school. That dimension also includes prayer and liturgy according to the Catholic tradition, various activities that might be generally described as youth ministry, and a Catholic ethos where core gospel values should help shape the organisation and cultural life of the school.

The intention and practices related to the school as a type of Christian community are also integral to the school’s religious dimension. In basic terms, this is about how Christ-like are the personal and professional relationships and interactions between staff, and between staff and students and parents. The school sets out to embody the qualities of respect, care, kindness, justice, empathy, mercy etc. because these are the gospel values that any Catholic institution would want to exhibit.

The nature and purposes of classroom religious education

Classroom religious education is about educating young people spiritually, ethically and religiously. It is not primarily a religious experience, but it is essentially teaching young people about religion, and about spiritual and moral issues, from a Catholic viewpoint.

Catholicism: The religion curriculum should help give young people systematic access to the Catholic religious tradition. An education in Catholic religious culture can be valuable for young people’s spiritual education, no matter what their
religious affiliation or level of religious practice. Students should be able to develop knowledge and understanding of the Bible, of Catholic theology, liturgy and morality.

Other religious traditions: In addition, religious education should acquaint young people with some of the other religious traditions that are present in the Australian community and elsewhere. Such knowledge of various religions is a part of what it means to be a well-educated young Australian.

Critical evaluation of culture: Culture refers here to the resources in terms of values, beliefs, religions, ideologies, traditions, ideas, lifestyles, material goods, media, literature, music etc. that people draw on for making sense of life, living their lives, forming their values, and for developing and expressing a sense of personal identity. Religious education, complementing what might be done elsewhere in the curriculum, should help students learn how to identify, interpret and evaluate spiritual and moral issues in contemporary culture. This could help them become more discerning about the ways in which cultural meanings can have a shaping influence on people's thinking, beliefs, values and behaviour. They need to learn about how culture can have a conditioning effect on people's lifestyle and imaginations of what life should be like.

Academic study: Religious education should be an academic study in the same way as the regular learning areas or subjects in the school curriculum. This needs to apply across the school from years K – 12, with the understanding that the meaning of what is entailed in ‘academic’ study changes according to students’ age and level of intellectual maturity. In short, this means that content and pedagogy in religion lessons should be as challenging as students experience anywhere else in the curriculum. Whatever the standard curriculum protocols for learning outcomes, academic work, assessment and reporting, these should naturally apply to religious education.

Where an examinable and fully accredited state course in Religion Studies (or Studies of Religion) is available for Years 11 – 12, this should be offered and student participation encouraged. This reinforces the educational value of religious education in the school and helps enhance its academic credibility.

It is acknowledged that despite efforts to build and sustain such credibility for religious education, it inevitably suffers because it is not regarded favourably like the subjects that ‘really count’. Given the general low level of interest of the Australian community in religion, and given the competitiveness for good academic results in the final years of schooling, it is not surprising that religion studies / religious education has low status in Catholic schools. This is a problem that will not go away and which cannot easily be remedied. It is discussed in detail elsewhere under the heading: School structures and the ‘psychology of the learning environment’ – how the value of personal subjects in the curriculum like religious education can be subverted (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, ch. 14).

Pedagogy: The religion curriculum sets out to help young people become informed, critical thinkers about religion. A variety of pedagogies should be used as might be used in other curriculum areas, especially pertinent would be pedagogies used in English and History. Pedagogy should promote an open, inquiring, student-centred, research-oriented study.

Promoting the spiritual, moral and religious development of students: Spiritual, moral and religious development in students means changes in their beliefs, in their sense of personal relationship with God, and in their personal values and moral code. Religious education of itself cannot bring about such personal change. To be authentic, such change must come freely from within the individuals themselves. The proper domain of religious education is not about ‘changing’ young people personally, but about ‘educating’ them so that their capacity for authoring their own personal development is enhanced – especially through the development of knowledge, understanding and cognitive skills. Religious education cannot communicate or change personal faith – but it can educate young people’s faith, especially with respect to their theological understandings, their appreciation of spirituality, their experience of spiritual and religious practices, and their awareness of the complexities in modern life. In this way, religious education can resource the spirituality of young people, no matter what their level of religiosity.

The context and identity of Catholic school religious education

The Catholic school: A semi-state school with government funding: Today, Australian Catholic schools are founded on a cooperative partnership between the Catholic Church, the governments and the parents who choose to send their children to the schools. The identity of Catholic schools ought reflect this partnership. In 2016 for example, in the state of New South Wales alone, the 545 Catholic systemic schools (not including those which are funded as independent Catholic schools) received approximately $2.4 billion in combined Federal and State government funding for the education of around 230,000 students by 16,000 school staff (Snow, 2017).

Catholic schools are Church-owned, civically funded institutions with a responsibility for educating young Australians, with an accountability to all three of the partners – the Church, parents and the wider Australian community represented by the funding governments. The Catholic sponsorship of the schools justifies the principle of maintaining a spiritual/moral dimension to the school curriculum with a special emphasis on the Catholic religious tradition.
Catholic identity: As with Catholic hospitals, family services, aged care and services for the homeless, Catholic schools are expected to exhibit a Catholic identity that co-exists harmoniously with their Australian civic community identity. They contribute to national community educational needs as well as to the mission of the Catholic Church. The Catholic school is not an exclusively ecclesiastical institution like a ‘mini-seminary’ and this needs to be reflected in the articulation of its Catholic and its educational identity. Disproportionate attention to either a Catholic ecclesiastical view of the school or to its state-funded school status can be problematic. Unrealistic ecclesiastical expectations tend to see religious education too exclusively in terms of a church recruitment process and for increasing pupils’ mass attendance rates. By contrast, over-emphasising the state school status could compromise the important place of religious education in the school curriculum.

The contribution to Australian education and the personal development of young Australian citizens: Because of the accountability deriving from state funding, Catholic school religious education needs to be able to explain its value to the Australian community in educational terms. Religious education helps educate young people within their own religious faith tradition – a principle that is a valuable for children of any particular religious identification. This principle is also valid in public schooling where some general study of religion could contribute to young people’s knowledge of the enduring role of religion and their own religious traditions. Religious education can thus enhance the Australian community’s social capital through knowledge and understanding of the particular religious traditions that are represented in the country.

Catholic school religious education also attempts to help young people identify spiritual and moral issues in the culture and to learn skills for interpreting and evaluating these issues. It can help their understanding of morality and moral decision-making. Religious education can thus make some contribution to the development of life skills.

Student statistics for Australian Catholic schools and the religious disposition of students

A snapshot of the student statistics for Australian Catholic schools is important for the appreciation of both their Catholic and semi-state characteristics. This is also relevant to acknowledging the religious disposition of the students who are participating in religious education as a requirement of attendance at a Catholic school.

In 2012 there was a total of 734,000 students in 1706 Australian Catholic schools. Of these, 522,000 were Catholic (71%) and 212,000 (29%) not Catholic (NCEC, 2012). Using Bureau of Statistics data and National Church Life surveys (Dixon et al., 2013), it is evident that if about 7% of Catholics (aged 14-25) are church going (or will be soon after they leave school). So, even if a figure of 10% was used, this would mean that 52,000 of those pupils were regular mass attenders. Therefore, non church-going Catholics and non-Catholics made up 682,000 of the 735,000 students. Figure 1 shows changes in enrolments over the period 2006-2012.

Figure 1.1 Change in Catholic and non-Catholic enrolments, 2006-2012, Australian Catholic schools

During this period, the net change for Catholic students was +1,266. The corresponding increase in non-Catholic students was +46,519
Secularisation: In 1911, the year of the first Australian census, the number who indicated they had no religion was 0.4% In the 2016 census for the same question on religious affiliation, 30.1% indicated “no religion” and a further 9.6% did not answer this census question (total of 39.7%).

In the United Kingdom, the decline in religious affiliation is even more marked. The UK National Social Research found in 2016 that 53% of the population identified as having no religion. For the 25-34 years age cohort, the figure was 61% and for the 18-24 years cohort it was 71% (Sky News Report, August 2017).

Australian young people, including those in Catholic schools, are reflecting the growing secularisation that has characterised Westernised countries.

One can conclude that this trend is irreversible in both the short and long terms. Also it is evident from research that no program or activity (E.g. Catholic schools, religious education, youth ministry etc.) is likely to be able to reverse such change to any significant degree. Religious education for purposes of church maintenance, recruitment, and improving Sunday mass attendance as a performance indicator will not work. Religious educators need to acknowledge the reality that the large majority of students in Catholic schools and their parents are not regular church goers; and they should avoid any potential discrimination against non-religious parents and pupils. Catholic schools can educate young people religiously quite effectively; but they cannot ensure that this will make them churchgoing Catholics.

Conclusion about the discourse of Catholic school religious education: Acknowledging this situation, and taking into account the religious ‘starting points’ of students, require a rationale and purposes for religious education that can explain its value both for religious and non-religious young people – as proposed above. In other words, the Catholic Church can offer a valuable religious education for all its school students no matter what their religious affiliation or level of religiosity. Given that the large majority of them are or will not be religious, it becomes evident that the rationale for religious education should give more emphasis to ‘education for life’ rather than ‘education for the Catholic Church’s mission’. A critical question then is what self-evident educational value can the religion curriculum offer to the non-religious.

Currently, many of the Australian Catholic school religion curricula are framed almost exclusively in ecclesiastical and devotional terms. They stress the mission of the church and give the impression of presuming that all students either were, or should be, regular mass attenders. Where this perspective dominates the way schools and teachers talk about religious education, the lack of congruence with the real religious situation reinforces the perceptions of many students and teachers alike that religious education is just a nominal aspect of Catholic schooling and it is largely irrelevant. Similarly, it inhibits giving attention to the one thing that religious education can do well: helping educate young people spiritually, ethically and religiously for life in today’s confusing world.

That Catholic schooling might dispose young people towards ongoing engagement with Catholic parishes remains a valid hope. This hope is best fostered by an open, inquiring religious education that is valuable for students no matter what their religiosity. This can also serve as a good starting point for those who are religious and who will pursue a study of Catholic theology and religious culture in depth after they leave school.

Catholic religious education needs to be able to show that its content and pedagogy are educationally and personally valuable to all its students – Catholic and non-Catholic, church going and non church-going. Having exclusively Catholic content would cause problems in this regard. This is where attention to other religious traditions and to critical evaluation of culture are such important dimensions to religious education.

Catholic Church expectations of Catholic school religious education

Understandably, because Catholic bishops and clergy are especially concerned about, and committed to, the continuation of the Catholic Church, they tend to be more interested in the possibility that Catholic schools and their religious education can increase engagement with the Catholic Church and arrest the growing tide of secularisation in the culture. They naturally emphasise the conservative functions of school and religious education, in the good sense of ‘conserving’ the religious tradition. Their view of school religious education curricula reflects something similar to theological syllabuses at seminaries. In addition, they tend to stress the idea that Catholic schools exist to fulfil the mission of the church (neglecting their civic mission to educate young Australians) – and to improving mass attendance rates. Religious education practitioners may consider that the clergy do not share their more realistic, educational expectations of religious education, or their first hand appreciation of the spiritual and religious starting points of their pupils.

Creative tension between ecclesiastical expectations and religious educators’ commitment to promoting the personal development of pupils: In the 1970s, when there were still many religious order personnel teaching religion, few if any of them would ever have thought that religious education was primarily about getting students to go to Sunday Mass. While they always hoped that their work in Catholic schools would promote an interest in the Catholic Church (the Church to which they had committed their lives), they were also concerned with the personal development of their students in helping them do well academically and professionally, and in helping them develop a spirituality for life whether or not they became practising Catholics. In other words, there was a creative tension between ecclesiastical interests and the student personal development concerns of the teachers.
Accompanying the decrease in numbers of religious teachers and the rise of diocesan Catholic education systems, there has been greater ecclesiastical control exercised over both religious education curricula and the discourse of Catholic school religious education. And the creative tension between ecclesiastical and broader student personal development purposes declined. It is proposed that this creative tension needs to be restored and maintained. And it needs to be reflected in the discourse for Catholic religious education which should not be dominated by ecclesiastical terms. This same creative tension should also be maintained in professional development programs for religion teachers. In the long run, it is considered that such a development would be in the best interests of the church and clergy, as well as for Catholic school religious education.

The relevance of religious education is different from the relevance of the Church: What Catholic school religious education can do effectively is educate young people in the Catholic tradition. When critiques of religious education are based on the view that improving mass attendance is its principal purpose, this tends to stop them from trying to answer the question that is often at the heart of their concerns: “Why are so many Catholics not going to mass and not engaging with parishes?” Religious educators can try to make the classroom study of religion as meaningful and as personally relevant to students as possible. But this cannot make the church itself more meaningful and relevant to Catholics. Only the church can do this. The question of the relevance of the Catholic Church is one that is important for Catholics. But the agenda for addressing that question has little or nothing to do with Catholic school religious education.

Overall, the evidence suggests that Catholic schools do a good job in their general education of students and in religious education. So, no matter what the eventual religious identification and practice of pupils, the hope is that when they leave Catholic schools, they will be well educated in their faith tradition and well educated in skills for the identification and evaluation of personal and social issues in their lives, and in the contemporary culture.

Catholic school religious education makes a valuable contribution to the spiritual education of young Australian citizens: Catholic school religious education is helping educate young Australians spiritually and religiously. Such purposes align well with the generic aims for Australian education endorsed by the Australian Education Council comprising all education ministers (E.g. MYCEETYA, 2008) – the aims documents endorse purposes such as:- spiritual and moral values; character development; knowledge of religious diversity; evaluation of the development of culture and its influence on people. Australian Catholic schools, with such a large commitment of personnel and resources to religious education, should exercise a leadership role in Australian schooling in showing what a spiritual and moral dimension to the school curriculum can entail in practice.

Articulating the contribution of Religious Education in educational terms beneficial to Australian citizens is consistent with the semi-state school character of Australian Catholic schools and it is consistent with the philosophy and policy for state funding of these schools. This consistency is jeopardised where the discourse for both Catholic schooling and its religious education are narrowly ecclesiastical and not accessible within the wider Australian conversation about education.

References


* * * * * * * *
Part A

The changing landscape of contemporary spirituality – a 'need to know' for Religious Educators

The chapters here investigate how and why there has been such significant change in the landscape of spirituality. Understanding what secularisation is in terms of the historical and cultural forces that have shaped it is important for religious educators. They need to understand how many people today construct meaning, purpose and values for life without much if any reference to organised religion. And they need to see how this development has historical roots that go back to the Renaissance. In addition, they need to have a realistic perspective on secularisation to be able to see that much of secularisation is not the ‘enemy’ – to be opposed at all costs. It is part of far-reaching changes that have affected all aspects of life and culture, not just the ways in which people drew on religion for meaning in life.

As a prelude to the study of secularisation, chapter 2 looks briefly at three principal terms – religion, faith and spirituality. While not a detailed theological discussion, it summarises the core ideas in the Christian understanding of faith – the term that is most prominent in the discourse of Catholic school religious education. And it argues the case for making spirituality a focal point of this study. This discussion is fundamental to considering what it means to educate young people in religion, faith and spirituality.

The approach in this part is neither an apologia for, nor an attack against, secularisation. Rather, it tries to develop perspective on how things have changed so much from one historical spirituality marker (traditional Medieval Christian spirituality) to another (contemporary, relatively secular spirituality). Not only does this help educators understand secularisation, but it provides content that can be used for the study of such significant cultural change – both by educators and school students.

This comparison of spiritualities is taken a step further in the investigation of how contemporary consumerist lifestyle can be interpreted as functioning psychologically like a religion. In other words, the current situation may not necessarily mean that people are less religious – they may be even more religious than was the case in earlier generations – but they are living out of a new religion: consumerist lifestyle, which is fuelled by ‘media-orchestrated imaginations’ of what life should be like.

The material in this part should provide religious educators with content and ideas that will not only enhance their understanding the changed landscape of spirituality, but also as a resource when it comes to teaching about spirituality.

The last chapter in the section looks briefly at some issues in interpreting children’s spirituality, contrasting the apparently religiously enthusiastic children in Catholic primary schools with the apparent lack of interest in religious education shown by adolescents.
Chapter 2

Three key terms: Religion, Faith and Spirituality – as related to religious education

The term religion has long been, and will remain, the central area of study in religious education. With the extensive secularisation in Westernised countries, while there remain many people who are committed to a religious view of life, there is now a majority who pay little if any attention to religious traditions in the way they construct their operational meaning and purpose in life. In the Catholic school sector, it is the word faith that is officially given most attention in the normative discourse of religious education. But if secularised young people are the main recipients of Catholic school religious education, then one can propose that the construct spirituality is increasingly becoming more useful for a relevant religious education – and it should figure more prominently in purposes and content. It can help address a spiritual and moral dimension to life that applies to people whether or not they are formally religious.

Since the early 1970s, faith became the central religious construct and one of the main focal points for the purposes of Catholic school religious education. In 1970, in the Australian Catholic bishops’ document, the Renewal of the Education of Faith, the discourse of religious education focused on the idea of ‘educating people’s personal faith’ and ‘educating in the Catholic faith tradition’. This followed the special emphasis on education in the second Vatican Council’s 1965 document, The Declaration on Christian education.

But since that time, the emphasis on ‘educating’ faith was superseded by the use of the ecclesiastical historical term catechesis, and by constructs like ‘faith development’, ‘faith formation’ and ‘Catholic identity’. In diocesan documents and in academic writing about religious education, where these terms were used, what was being presumed about the nature of faith was not usually explained in any detail; and similarly, little attention was given to explaining how faith itself might ‘change’, or to how educational processes might be psychologically linked to ‘changing’ personal faith. James Fowler’s (1981) theory of ‘human faith development’ did look into changes in the psychological processes that operated when people believed and constructed meaning; but this was more about psychological maturity for constructing meaning and purpose in life than it was specifically about personal Christian religious faith.

Hence this chapter initially sets out to review briefly the constructs religion and faith. Only brief attention will be given to the construct religion as a focal point for religious education. There is no need here to review ideas in the extensive literature about religion and the study of religion at school. Much of the writing about religion as a concept agrees that it is a distinctive form of thought and experience that manifests itself visually, though music, art and literature, and ritual practices.

The chapter then gives special attention to Christian theological views of faith. It does not present as a sophisticated treatise on faith, but more as a summary to highlight key points that are significant for religious education. Also considered are some questions about how faith might be understood in the present, westernised culture which is so individualistic and self-reliant, and where there is not much interest in a formally religious dimension to living. Some clarification of Christian religious faith is essential before one can understand what it means when words like ‘development’ and ‘formation’ are applied to faith. And it is also fundamental to working out what the processes ‘educating faith’ and ‘education in the faith’ mean.
Finally, the chapter will propose that, while not discounting the importance of educating personal faith, the term spirituality is becoming very useful in the contemporary discourse of religious education. It is broader in scope than religious faith, with which it readily harmonises. And it can be helpful in interpreting and addressing educationally the secularisation of culture that has been so prominent in the last 60 years.

Studying Religion as a focal point for religious education: A brief summary

While this book will give special attention to the contract spirituality in both the purposes for religious education and as an area of content for critical exploration, it is not suggesting that religion is being eclipsed. Religion is, and should remain as, the focal point of the content of school religious education. It is primarily about educating young people with respect to their own religion as well as to other religious traditions. But the majority of people in westernised, secularised countries like Australia – and this includes the majority of the students, parents and even the teachers in Catholic schools – are relatively secularised to various degrees. Hence, just focusing on religion, and especially if this means exclusive attention to Catholicism, will be largely incongruent with the religious disposition of the majority of those for whom Catholic school religious education is being provided.

In 1970, when an ‘educational identity’ rather than a ‘denominational Christian identity’ was being worked out for religious education taught by departmental teachers in public schools in the UK, the ideas of the philosopher of education Paul Hirst were used. He considered that religion was one of the basic forms or areas of human thought and experience (like Mathematics, Science, Language, History etc.), and that public education would be deficient if it did not include a study of religion. Religion has coloured most aspects of cultures – music, art, literature, architecture, the law, history etc.; and it has affected, and still affects, debates about freedom, human rights, politics, racism, equality, the environment and other issues. To be an ‘educated citizen’ one needed basic knowledge of the religions that are represented in the community. Similarly, it was argued that a basic education should study how religions have influenced culture and in turn how they have been affected by culture; and this includes acknowledgment of how religion can have a shaping influence on people’s view of life, and on their values and behaviour.

In turn, these ideas were the basis for the development of religion studies (studies of religion) courses in Australian public education. And they remain relevant even if there is an ever increasing identification as having ‘no religion’ in the Australian census.

These arguments are part of a larger discourse about a valid place for studying religion within public education. They are just as pertinent to religious schools, even if one could expect that the religious school would want to give special attention to the sponsoring church or religion; as such, these arguments highlight the educational dimension to religious education in Catholic schools. Also, they justify both the place for, and the high uptake of, state-based religion studies programs in Australian Catholic schools in years 11-12.

This educational view of religious education, complementing the purposes that are more ecclesiastical, proposes that, whether they are formally religious or not, young people have a need for, as well as a right to, a school religious education. This includes familiarisation with their own cultural religious heritage, as well a competent knowledge of other denominations and religions. These arguments propose how religious education naturally goes beyond the purpose of fostering practising Catholic believers. It is a fundamental part of their education that helps them understand the complex culture within which they are living. Given the current world situation, some would argue that this should necessarily include a knowledge and understanding of Islam. Later in Part A, it will be argued that this also needs to include looking at the way that the culture of consumerist lifestyle is in many ways functioning psychologically like a religion for many people.

Within the literature on studying religions, attention has been given to inter-religious dialogue. However, such dialogue presumes that participants are working out of an established base in a religious tradition and who have a sense of distinctive religious identity. Because many of today’s secularised young people and adults may not have much identification with their religion, such a starting point for meaningful inter-religious dialogue between committed believers from different traditions may not be a relevant or useful one. Hence, to aim at inter-religious dialogue is unrealistic for the study of world religions in school religious education – even though students will no doubt benefit from better knowledge and understanding of other religious traditions. Teachers have noted that looking at other traditions may often prompt students to be more appreciative of their own. Similarly, it may be too much to expect significant Christian ecumenical activity within school religious education. But what can be done to help students become well informed about their own and other traditions can be valuable first steps in the direction of inter-religious dialogue and ecumenism for those who eventually choose to engage in such activities.

In keeping with the critical, inquiring, research-oriented pedagogy discussed later in the book, it is proposed that the study of world religions in Catholic school religious education should cover the basics of religious beliefs and practices.
in the early to mid-secondary years. Then in Years 11-12, a more ‘issue-oriented’ world religions content should be in place.

**An introductory summary of some Christian understandings of religious faith**

The word faith ranges in meaning from being a description of a general religious attitude, through to a committed personal relationship, to specific beliefs, as well as to a general term for a religion.

The idea of religious faith was not present in Greek or Roman culture. Its direct and single origin was in the Hebrew scriptures. Faith comes from a Hebrew root word that has to do with firmness, fidelity, reliability, and trustworthiness. Essentially these were the characteristics ascribed to the God of Israel. God revealed himself to the Hebrew people as one who was powerful, and loving, but above all, faithful to his covenant. The same Hebrew word has given rise to the affirmation Amen. Hence to be a person of faith was to be God like – whose fidelity would never waver.

The religious faith of individuals was about the way in which the human response to God's promises should mirror the same qualities in God, especially fidelity and truthfulness. In addition, the notion of faith in the Hebrew scriptures included being a creative force that constantly moved people to commitments and bold action in the light of an unshakeable conviction that God was utterly faithful.

In the Christian scriptures, one of the principal qualities ascribed to Jesus was his godlike fidelity to his commitments both to God as father and to the little people. Above all Jesus was a person of fidelity.

The initial emphasis in personal Christian faith was on a response to the trustworthiness of God. Then followed the development of the idea that it was through faith that the individual is saved by Jesus. This was an interpretation in the teaching of St Paul. The early Church Fathers began to draw distinctions between human knowledge and faith. They did not see them as antagonistic. But essential to faith, in their view, was God's self-revelation which could not be known by the power of human reason on its own. The idea of faith as a free gift from God developed particularly during the Middle Ages. St Thomas Aquinas defined faith as one of the three core virtues (along with hope and charity). Thomas said:

> The virtue of faith causes the mind to assent to a truth which, transcending human understanding, is held in divine knowledge. Men [people] accept God's knowledge by faith and are thereby joined to him. Faith's principal object is God himself; other things are subsidiary and dependent. ([*De Veritate* XIV, 8])

**The Reformation** emphasised scripture as the grounds for the credibility of faith. For the early reformers, faith was first and foremost confidence in God. They also considered that there was an intellectual content in faith to be believed. Also prominent was the notion of *justification by faith* and the Calvinist notion of predestination.

**Philosophers** like John Locke highlighted the distinction between reason and faith.

Faith is the assent to any proposition, not made up by deductions of reason, but upon the credit of the proposer, as coming from God in some extraordinary way of communication. (from *An essay concerning human understanding*).

The **Second Vatican Council** emphasised the dynamic nature of faith as a continuing personal relationship with God. It also stressed that having faith required obedience and submission to God.

The obedience of faith must be given to God who reveals, and obedience by which man entrusts his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals. (From *Dei Verbum*, the Constitution on Divine Revelation, Second Vatican Council, 1965)

**The Catechism of the Catholic Church** emphasised the following:

> Faith is the theological virtue by which we believe in God and all that he has revealed to us and that the Church proposes for our belief because God is Truth itself. By faith the human person freely commits himself to God. Therefore, the believer seeks to know and do the will of God because faith works through charity. ([*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, #1814])

**Some of the key points in Christian understanding of faith are:**

- A gift from God; an invitation from God to believe in him.
- Sustained by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.
- Requires a free decision and personal response from the individual.
- Faith can be lost.
- Faith has a strong relational dimension; just as for human faith in another human person, religious faith involves a personal relationship with God.
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- Faith involves trust in God; at times, an individual retains faith even when there are doubts and uncertainty; some believe and trust without question; others believe with lots of questions.
- Faith has a commitment dimension – that is, it motivates individuals to take a stand on particular beliefs and values and to follow through on those beliefs and commitments even when this is difficult. Fidelity is a key dimension to faith. That is, the faithfulness with which the individual keeps the commitments of faith. The faithful person does not waver even in time of adversity.
- Faith has a content – beliefs which are usually articulated in theological statements.

Some questions that arise about the meaning and psychological function of religious faith

When thinking about and studying religious faith, a number of questions arise about what it means and how it functions today, especially in a secularised society. Only brief, ‘signposting’ attention will be given to raising these questions here.

The difference between belief in some one (a relationship with a commitment dimension) and belief that (spiritual knowledge in the form of a proposition or statement) has already been noted. Having beliefs is not necessarily sufficient for the ideal of a healthy or mature faith which requires belief in someone and commitments flowing from that belief. As one Christian writer said “Even the devil believes in God. Is that faith?” It is the response that makes the difference. And the Christian scriptures note that “Faith without works is dead”. (James, 2:14-16).

While faith is regarded as not contrary to reason, it transcends reason. Some theologians think that if beliefs are contradicted by reason and common sense, then there is probably something wrong in the faith (E.g. immature, not responsible etc.). The notion of blind faith, which was popularised to some extent by spiritual writers, has never been endorsed officially by the Catholic Church. It is open to delusion and also to manipulation by others and by religious authorities. What is proposed in the Christian view of the ‘obedience to God’ in faith needs clarification with respect to the specific context. Here, the authority and common sense of the community of faith needs to be taken into account where there is the possibility that individuals may stray into the unconventional and unrealistic, and in this sense heretical, beliefs. The community of faith needs to articulate what it proposes to be a ‘healthy’ and ‘mature’ faith to guide its members. This is pertinent to instances where literalist and fundamentalist theological interpretations are being followed. Here the beliefs need to be questioned. Some literalist and fundamentalist beliefs also give excessive attention to miracles and the miraculous.

Serious problems can arise where individuals believe that god is calling them to a particular action or belief. How do they come to this judgment? How can they be sure? What are the criteria they may (or may not) follow in their judgment? What are the possibilities for delusion in such an interpretation of faith? Examples like the followers of David Koresh and James Jones illustrate this problem in the extreme, as do the Muslims who are religiously motivated to act as suicide bombers, which they interpret as ‘self-martyrdom’.

On the other hand, there can be concerns about how the obedience aspect of faith in God should be carried over into obedience to the church. This concerns individuals in situations where they feel that their faith in God is in direct opposition to what the church requires. The Second Vatican Council attested to the primacy of personal conscience. But what constitutes a healthy and informed conscience in relation to church authority remains a difficult question. Some interpret this question in terms of the relationship between ‘organised religion’ and ‘personal faith’ – with the latter regarded as having primacy.

A question about faith that has important implications for religious education is: How does one describe or characterise the quality of faith? People may use adjectives like ‘deep’, ‘strong’, ‘committed’ etc. But the meanings are rarely clear. And this raises the further question, if religious education is intentionally concerned with changing pupils’ faith, then determining the desired direction of change becomes very important. The words ‘development’ and ‘growth’ may be connected with faith to describe the purposes of religious education. But this creates difficulties. Firstly, if the Christian view of faith sees it primarily as a free personal relationship of trust in God, then trying to ‘track’ its development would be problematic; and trying to measure ‘growth’ could even be regarded as not ethical because faith is such a complex, mysterious personal activity. It is understandable that those who use the term faith development as a desired outcome for religious education rarely specify what they mean. There is safety in its remaining vague and undefined.

The psychologist James Fowler was interested in the notion of developing ‘human’ faith’ or a basic, genetic, human capacity to construct meaning and purpose in life; he focused on faith as a verb – that is, the psychological operations that were going on during the believing process (Fowler, 1981); and he tried to map changes in the level of maturity that people showed in the profile of operations and level of operational activity that appeared to occur in individuals across the life cycle. To evaluate Fowler’s psychological theory is beyond the scope of this chapter. A particular problem is that people readily think of personal, religious, Christian faith when they refer to Fowler’s use of ‘human faith development’.

Another avenue for exploring Christian faith is to see how it might compare and contrast with faith as it applies in other religious traditions. Earlier, mention was made of the origins of the work in the Hebrew scriptures. How it relates to faith and beliefs in the Muslim tradition merits attention. This avenue also raises theological questions about the Christian view of the uniqueness of Christ in the economy of human salvation.
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Some further questions about faith that have implications for religious education

*How does faith function in contemporary secularised culture?*

*How does faith deal with the uncertainty in spiritual knowledge proposed by cultural postmodernity?*

These are important questions for an understanding of Christian faith in a secularised Western culture, and in particular within the context of what has been called cultural postmodernity. In addition, there is the question that perhaps while the object of Christian faith – God – remains the same, the way that faith works psychologically may change according to the prevalent culture.

The term cultural postmodernity has been used to describe the disposition of questioning all metanarratives or principal stories, like the narratives of the world’s religions. It regards meaning in life as contextual – meaning is dependent on contexts and it is subjective and individualistic. Cultural postmodernity tends to be agnostic about the idea of truth in life and it proposes that there is a natural level of uncertainty in personal knowledge.

Religious educators setting out to hand on a 2000 year-old religious tradition can readily see how postmodernity conflicts with their purposes. They can try to attack and discredit postmodernity, asserting that the church has the ‘truth’ about life. This is not regarded as an adequate solution to the problem. The high level of questioning in cultural postmodernity needs to be scrutinised and appraised. Of course there are natural levels of uncertainty in all spiritual knowledge: but this is a normal part of such knowledge and it is not inconsistent with having a trustworthy faith, and more importantly a fidelity to ones beliefs and values. Life lasting commitments are not incompatible with some life-lasting uncertainty in spiritual knowledge.

Contemporary Christian theologians have proposed how Christian hope can help people live a committed spiritual life while accepting the uncertainties in spiritual knowledge (Horell, 2004). But this means, as the Australian social researcher Eckersley (2005) pointed out, that while most people today retain some form of religious belief, this is not nearly as absolute and binding as it once was. Many more people are now themselves deciding in the light of their own experience and wisdom what they will regard as authentic meaning for life. Rather than defer to God and religion, they may well become their own touchstone for what is ‘truth’. Rapid social change has resulted in much more uncertainty about life and the future. Some get used to the levels of uncertainty about life, and can feel reasonably comfortable with a degree of uncertainty in their beliefs. Others react differently to the perceptions of uncertainty in the culture: they may not be able to cope with uncertainty in their beliefs and personal meaning, and they seek communities where meanings are more black and white, and authoritarian.

Australian youth researcher Philip Hughes’ considered that for many young people, religion has lost its earlier relatively unquestionated authoritative role in giving a religious meaning to life. And instead it has become like an optional, spiritual resource that you can use if you are inclined: but it has now assumed an advisory rather than an authoritative role (Hughes, 2007). And this changes the way personal faith in God operates. This sounds abstract. Two prayers can exemplify:

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<th>Hi God, I am not sure if you can hear me. I am not sure if you are there. But I could do with a bit of help right now. I’m told Jesus is the Son of God. But I’m not sure what that means. Perhaps Jesus is the most divine a person could be – so he is worth following. I’m putting my cards with him. By a young person, 2007.</th>
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<td>Prayer though it accomplishes nothing material, constitutes something spiritual. It will not bring rain, but until rain comes, it may cultivate hope and resignation, and may prepare the heart for any issue, opening up a vista in which human prosperity will appear in its conditioned existence, and conditional value. A candle wasting itself before an image will prevent no misfortune, but it may bear witness to some silent hope or relieve some sorrow by expressing it. It may soften a little the bitter sense of impotence which would consume a mind aware of physical dependence but not of spiritual dominion. George Santayana, philosopher and poet (1863-1962)</td>
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The idea that knowledge, including personal and religious knowledge, is socially constructed is not a new idea (as illustrated in the writings of Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Berger, 1973). But as illustrated above, acknowledging and accepting this reality is much more widespread today – even for five-year-olds. For example: When one religion teacher told her Year 1 class that “Mary is the mother of God”, a student responded “But how can you know that?”

In the 1960s, the Catholic film scholar in the United States William Kuhns (1969) considered the influence of new media on religious faith. He thought that a media/entertainment driven society would generate an increased but natural level of uncertainty in faith. He noted:
The entertainment milieu has transformed the ways in which we believe and are capable of believing. An absolute kind of belief, as well as a belief in absolutes, becomes increasingly difficult as the entertainment milieu trains people to believe tentatively and with elasticity. .

A total belief in God must be rooted in a total belief in something tangible, but in a world of plastic furniture and television commercials, the tangible realities are cause more for disbelief than belief. .

In the future a total belief may be virtually impossible (and similarly undesirable): perhaps the only viable belief in God will be riddled with doubt, and constantly shifting with the fluctuations of the reality-fantasy ratios created by the entertainment milieu.5

Kuhn's showed both an astute diagnosis of culture in his own time as well as a prophetic insight into the developments that would unfold into the 21st century. He hoped that the church would have a helpful critical role in educating people with respect to the influence of media.

As the [electronic media] become increasingly potent in shaping society, someone should be capable of maintaining the critical distance necessary for judging the moral and aesthetic directions which people take as a result . . . [The church could be] a vital force in society for creating a critical awareness of the entertainment milieu. . . . “[The church should] be a community, but not a highly structured authoritarian organisation. Its key concerns would not be proselytising and converting others, but educating people to the languages and techniques by which their lives are being shaped. ... Church authority would emerge from the social concern which the community exerts, the depth with which they care about the present and the future.

In 1984, the Anglican priest Richard MacKenna talked about uncertainty as a natural part of faith. He proposed that growth towards maturity in meaning in life and in religious faith involved giving away false certainties and replacing these with true uncertainties. This meant learning how to cope with the natural complexity and uncertainty in life and in faith, and learning how to live and believe with the valuable partial meanings that individuals can construct in connection with community life; and it included valuing traditional meanings as reinterpreted anew from generation to generation.

Following up on MacKenna's ideas, two issues need to be addressed:-

Can there be trustworthy spiritual meaning for life when there is so much questioning, uncertainty and relativism?

What does truth mean in a constantly changing landscape of meanings?

Many people today feel a heightened sense of uncertainty and anxiety because they are puzzled about what is happening in the world; they cannot make sense of it; they are not sure of where things are going. Traditional beliefs and values do not appear to some to provide the security and direction they gave formerly. There is a need to understand how and why culture is moving from a period of apparent security and certainty in religious meanings towards one where there is more uncertainty and less security.

It is not just that a lot of new uncertainties have been introduced but that the incipient uncertainties that were always there in the past, just beneath the surface, have become more visible. This is disconcerting for a greater number of people. No longer is it a matter of finding meaning within an accepted religious framework; cultural postmodernity tends to call frameworks into question. Where the questioning of meaning becomes excessive, there is a danger that people will become increasingly self-centred and will channel most of their energies into satisfying present needs in an individualistic and narcissistic way, with disdain for both the support and the responsibilities associated with communities of meaning.

A first step in addressing this crisis of meaning and in faith is to acknowledge and articulate the naturally high levels of complexity and uncertainty in life across many domains that have resulted from cultural and technological progress – although the meaning of what constitutes 'progress' is part of the problem. Hence it may be unrealistic to expect that meaning in life should be absolutely certain or true, and that it should be totally secure; this is not the nature of human meanings or of religious faith today. There always has been some measure of inbuilt uncertainty, even though people may have been unwilling ever to acknowledge it; human meaning and faith always involved interpretation. In other words, there may be access to absolute truths outside the individual, but this access will always be partial as far as the individual is concerned.

Uncertainty within faith is not about being unable to know absolute truth. But it is about acknowledging that one cannot know all of the absolute truth, because it is too large and complex. This is not relativism, classic agnosticism or a pragmatic functionalism. Constructive, functional faith does not have to be perfect or absolute. Fidelity in commitments can be maintained while admitting natural uncertainties in the personal knowing and meaning-making processes as well as in personal faith.

From this point of view, maturity in faith involves learning how to cope with a natural level of complexity and live with the valuable partial meanings that individuals can construct in connection with community life; and it includes valuing traditional meanings and re-contextualising them to address new situations and new needs. This approach to faith and to meaning-making applies to those who are religious believers as well as to those who are not. Admittedly, it is the sort of maturity that might be expected of adults. Also, it can be more suited to some personalities than others; some find it difficult to live with too many 'loose ends', especially as regards their faith and ultimate meanings. Inevitably, some will
reject this view as relativism of a sort because it admits to a level of uncertainty in personal knowledge that they are not prepared to accept.

This interpretation has implications for religious faith: for example, acknowledging a degree of uncertainty in the physical or historical details related to religious beliefs and accepting this as a normal part of faith, as well as accepting that religious doctrines are socially constructed and have usually evolved over time. Some, however, would want a stronger place for historicity and unchanging doctrine. And this is often associated with literalist and fundamentalist interpretations of Scripture.

The differences in epistemology implied in the above discussion need to be acknowledged: this is significant in the public debate about what might be entailed in educating people’s faith. It is likely that there will never be full community consensus about the issues. But it is still possible to work at clarifying what can be done about these questions in religious education.

A capacity to live with some uncertainty in faith has probably always been a part of the makeup of mature religious people. It is just that in contemporary Westernised societies there is a greater need for such a capacity just for psychic survival and mental health. Substituting ‘personal meaning and purpose in life’ for faith suggests that even for those whose meaning does not rest on religious faith, this issue is still pertinent to their lives. Those who favour a more absolute and certain meaning system will be in for a harder time, even if they are supported and reassured by a strong group of the like-minded.

It is too much to expect that this sort of adult maturity in personal meaning and faith can be realistically achieved by children and adolescents. Nevertheless, if it is an appropriate ideal, it should have implications for school religious education in terms of being a long term goal.

To focus more on Christian religious faith it is appropriate here to ask what level of uncertainty is going to be ‘natural’ to Christian faith. Or does it have to be ‘absolutely certain’? The common sense answer for Christians has always been “If you do not have some doubt and uncertainty, you don't really know what faith is about”. In other words, faith is not incompatible with doubt and hesitancy, and even with asking challenging questions about faith itself.

Recent comments from Pope Francis I are relevant. It is also interesting to see where he published these ideas – not in an official encyclical or even in Osservatore Romano, but in an interview for the Italian Catholic journal La Civiltà Cattolica.

The Pope suggested that trying to go back towards a more traditional, more absolute, authoritative faith and spirituality is not a useful response to the contemporary situation. He advised people to avoid getting locked up in small things, in small minded rules… If the Christian is a restorationist, a legalist, if he wants everything clear and safe, then he will find nothing. Tradition and memory of the past must help us to have the courage to open up new areas to God. Those who today always look for disciplinary solutions, those who long for an exaggerated doctrinal ‘security,’ those who stubbornly try to recover a past that no longer exists – they have a static and inward-directed view of things. In this way, faith becomes an ideology among other ideologies. (Pope Francis I, 2013, pp. 8, 11).

He went on to note that there is a natural level of uncertainty in any authentic faith:

In this quest to seek and find God in all things there is still an area of uncertainty. There must be. If a person says that he met God with total certainty and is not touched by a margin of uncertainty, then this is not good. For me, this is an important key. If one has the answers to all the questions — that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself. The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt. You must leave room for the Lord, not for our certainties; we must be humble. Uncertainty is in every true discernment. Our life is not given to us like an opera libretto, in which all is written down; but it means going, walking, doing, searching, seeing.... We must enter into the adventure of the quest for meeting God.

Faith, theology and religious education

The philosopher and theologian St Anselm, in the late 11th century, talked about theology as the fides quaerens intellectum (faith seeking understanding). While there is not scope here for exploring the meaning of theology, it remains important to have a clear understanding of the relationships between faith, theology and religious education. One of the most useful and concise contributions on this topic came from Richard McBrien in the chapter of his book Catholicism published in 1976. The chapter was titled “Faith, theology and beliefs” – it developed further the ideas he proposed earlier in 1974 in the journal Commonweal.
Summary of relationships between faith, beliefs, theology and religious education in key phrases extracted from McBrien’s book Catholicism

Faith: Faith is a stance, a posture, a fundamental attitude. It infers the reality of God from reality itself. But like all inferences, the evidence is circumstantial. Faith involves risk taking. The closer we approach God, the more deafening the silence. Faith is that precognitive, pre-reflective, pre-scientific perception of God in the midst of life.

Faith is not theology, but neither does faith exist apart from, or independent of, theology. Theology is that process by which we bring our presumed perception of God to the level of expression. Theology is the verbalising, in a more or less systematic manner, of the experience of God within the human experience.

Theology is not belief: Theology is a process; belief is one of its several products. The products include sacred Scripture (this is exceedingly important to remember lest one mistakenly conclude that theology is reflection on the biblical message; it is entirely the other way around: the biblical message is itself a product of theological reflection), doctrines (beliefs elevated to the level of official approbation), dogmas (doctrines that carry the highest level of official approbation, the denial of which normally separates us from the community of faith), liturgies (lex orandi, lex credendi - the perception of God in ritualised form), artistic works (churches, statues, paintings, music, dance, and so forth).

Faith is not belief: There are many beliefs but only one faith. Over the centuries of Christian history, there have been literally thousands of beliefs held and transmitted at one time or another. Some of these beliefs endured the test of time. The sorting out process is never finished. We are faced constantly with the problem of evaluating and re-evaluating our beliefs in the light of our ongoing experience and fundamental (theological) interpretation of that experience, and these in turn are judged against that instinct of faith which somehow gives the whole Church its inner coherence and its radical identity and continuity.

Religious education: Religious educators, bishops, preachers, and the Church at large do not transmit “the faith.” They transmit particular interpretations or understanding of faith. They transmit theologies. The faith exists always and only in some theological form.

Unity in diversity. Diversity and pluralism is a fact of life in the Church today. It was the fact of life in the Church of yesterday, in biblical times and post-biblical times alike. And it will remain a fact of life in the Church until the end of history. We Christians may differ in the way we express our perception of God in Jesus Christ and in the way we formulate these perceptions officially, but we are one in the conviction that the God of our theology and of our belief is truly present in Jesus of Nazareth.

The construct personal faith became the focal point of official Catholic Church writings about catechesis and religious education. But if the principal role of schools is to hand on the intellectual traditions of culture, and if most classroom studies are primarily concerned with the development of knowledge, cognitive skills and critical thinking, then one might suggest that the personal faith of individuals and the living out of a religious life would be the long-term goals for religious education and that the more direct and immediate focus should be on theology.

McBrien’s comments are congruent with this view that religious education is more directly concerned with theology than with religious faith. This would be theology in the service of faith. It suggests that the content of religious education is more about theological questions than about trying to change the personal faith of the students. This is not ruling out the place of faith in the purposes of religious education, but it proposes a more appropriate and realistic view of where personal faith relates to the school educational process.

It appears that in the discourse of Catholic religious education, excessive attention to personal faith – either ‘developing’ it or ‘forming’ it – remains a major problem that has yet to be seriously considered by Catholic education authorities. Faith-related purposes have been so prominent and so dominant for such a long time that they are taken for granted and rarely looked at critically. This issue in the language for Catholic school religious education is taken up in one of the chapters in Part B.
What it means to educate young people's faith

Faith is the Christian virtue concerned particularly with the trust, fidelity and commitment in the personal relationship between the individual and God; and it affects the religious life of individuals. One might wonder why the other two core Christian virtues ‘hope’ and ‘love’ have not been given equal attention in the history of the discourse of religious education. The Gospels make it clear that the primary virtue is love.

Faith is not best thought of as an outcome of religious education. It is really a ‘long term’ or ‘over the horizon’ hope for religious education. So too is the young person’s religious life. In keeping with general educational practice related to the word outcomes, religious education outcomes should be the more immediate, identifiable and even measurable results of education. Enhancing faith is a hope not an outcome. An individual’s faith cannot be changed or developed by the intention or action of an educator – or by anybody else for that matter. But it can be educated. It is particularly the theological and belief dimensions to faith that can be educated. This means a more comprehensive knowledge and understanding of Christian theology – both in its history and in its contemporary forms. It also means familiarity with the Scriptures and skills in critical interpretation. In addition, young people can be educated with respect to Christian morality and in skills for moral discernment and moral decision-making. They can learn much about prayer and liturgy and the way in which religious beliefs can inform personal life. Religious education purposes also includes knowledge and understanding of other religious traditions, as well as a capacity to evaluate contemporary spiritual and moral issues.

It is proposed here that the discourse of Catholic school religious education would be more meaningful and helpful for both teachers and students, and for the Catholic educational community generally, if it concentrated on these more immediate and achievable educational purposes and stepped away from an unrealistic preoccupation with changing individuals’ faith and religious life. There is no doubt that a good religious education enhances people’s personal faith. But if excessive attention is always focused on faith, it creates inappropriate expectations of what religious education can achieve and it creates ambiguities about the classroom educative processes. Comparisons do not always work, but the problem can be illustrated by referring to other areas of curriculum. For example:- if the purposes of mathematics education focused exclusively on producing good Australian citizens; or if education in English was always formulated in terms of how virtuous it would make the students. These examples illustrate valid ‘over the horizon’ hopes; but they are confusing when they eclipse the more immediate educational purposes and outcomes.

I think that it would be healthy for the discourse of Catholic school religious education to put a moratorium on the use of faith as its main purpose and instead talk about theology, scripture, religions, morality, spirituality and critical interpretation of culture. Not giving excessive attention to faith as the principal purpose does not mean eliminating or lessening the place of religious faith as key content for religious education. Just the opposite – faith should be prominent area of study. This chapter could provide a checklist for ensuring that these aspects of faith are addressed appropriately across the religion curriculum.

But when it comes to interpreting the spiritual and religious aspects of contemporary culture, it is suggested that the word spirituality will be a more useful construct than religious faith. In a secularised society, only a minority of people now make significant reference to organised religion in their thinking, values and in the way they live out their lives. People may be unsure as to whether the word faith is the best word for describing their approach to the spiritual and moral dimensions of life. Many who claim not to be religious would yet still be spiritual – in the sense that spirituality is implied in the particular values that individuals hold and all demonstrate in their lives.

What follows is a brief exploration of what spirituality means together with reasons why this is a useful term for interpreting contemporary culture. In turn it has significant implications for religious education.

**Spirituality:** Why it is a useful construct for interpreting the spiritual and moral dimensions to culture, and also why it is useful for religious education

**Definition of spirituality**
Table 2.1 shows brief definitions of the terms spiritual, spirituality, religious and religiosity.

**Table 2.1 Summary of relationships between the constructs spiritual, religious, spirituality and religiosity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual</th>
<th>Religious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The spiritual is the natural dimension to life that includes: thinking and feelings about transcendence; ideas about a creator or creative force in the cosmos; human values; sense of meaning and purpose to life; love and care for self and others; sense of stewardship for the earth and its flora and fauna; the aesthetic.</td>
<td>Being religious means being spiritual in a particular way as informed by the beliefs, practices and traditions of a religious group. It usually includes a sense of personal relationship with God, belief in an afterlife and identification with, and participation in a local faith community. The religious is usually informed by a theology; its morality is religiously motivated; and it participates in ritual life and prayer, as well as relating to religious scriptures, symbols, art and music.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Spirituality

Spirituality is the way in which a spiritual/moral dimension enters into, or is implied in, the thinking and behaviour of individuals. People have a genetic capacity for spirituality; and all have some level of *Basic Human Spirituality* by virtue of their values and behaviour, even if this is not articulated.

### Religiosity (or religious spirituality)

Religiosity is a religious spirituality with engagement in religious activities and thinking: personal and communal prayer and participation in religious rituals in a community of faith are prominent. Religiosity is a spirituality that is clearly referenced to religion. A religious spirituality is where a basic human spirituality is informed and motivated by religious beliefs and commitments. The purpose of religion could be interpreted as trying to enhance people's basic human spirituality.

Spirituality is defined here as the natural genetic capacity of human beings to acknowledge either consciously or by implication in their words and actions, a spiritual and moral dimension to human life and culture. What is called the *basic human spirituality* of individuals is implied in the values that show through in their actions, words and thinking.

The spiritual and the religious are closely related. Being religious is where one’s basic human spirituality is informed by, motivated by, and expressed through an *overlay of cultural religious meanings*. These religious meanings can motivate, inspire, and enhance basic human spirituality – but it may be difficult for individuals to discern the precise level of influence that religion has on them. Religious people can report that spirituality is the driving force in their lives; but in some instances, one can observe individuals who maintain they are religious, but their religion appears to be relatively nominal and superficial because other human motivations seem to dominate their behaviour. The focus here is not on trying to unravel the mysterious relationship between psychological and religious influences on individuals; but it tries to highlight the prominence of cultural meanings in spirituality – it will be religious or not depending on what cultural meanings serve as the dominant reference points. How cultural meanings can be identified and studied then becomes a central component of religious education. A healthy spirituality (whether religious or not) may depend on which cultural meanings inform people’s thoughts and actions; hence these meanings need to be evaluated in the light of community values to get some indication of how they might enhance or harm the quality of people’s lives (such evaluation of spirituality is taken up later in chapter 4).

The schema above implies a simplification that masks the complexity and mystery in people’s spirituality, but nevertheless is useful educationally because it focuses on the way that people draw on cultural meanings for the construction and expression of their own personal meaning in life – even if this is not consciously articulated. Individuals who in no way are religious still draw on various secular meanings in the culture that contribute to the way they imagine what life should be like for them.

Education becomes an important part of personal and spiritual development precisely because it can enhance people’s capacity for interpreting and evaluating the cultural meanings that may be having a shaping influence on their values and lifestyle.

This analytical scheme is also useful for interpreting secularisation. The culture (words, ideas, beliefs, traditions, history, religions, ideologies, art, music, literature, architecture, sport etc.) carries an almost unlimited array of imaginations about life. And how people select and appropriate these cultural meanings within their own idiosyncratic, personal meaning and purpose in life makes them and their lifestyle distinctive. For example: The conservative religious person focuses on one set of religious imaginations, and the liberal religious person on a different more liberal set. The non-religious person would not pay much attention to either of these religious meanings, but inevitably it would be possible by observation to see which cultural meanings were congruent with their way of thinking about life. For both religious and non-religious people, there are cultural references that help clarify who they think they are.

Generally, a religious spirituality consciously draws on elements of religion for the articulation, expression and enhancement of people's basic human spirituality. ‘Practising’ religious individuals usually indicate that the core of their spirituality is in a personal relationship with God – hence for them the word faith is often the principal signifier of their religious spirituality. And they consciously spend time trying to enhance, express, develop and ‘practice’ their spirituality – hence their attention to understandings of scripture and theology, and their engagement in prayer and religious rituals.

The word spirituality originated in European Catholic circles some centuries back. And for a long time, it was synonymous with religiosity. Being spiritual meant being religious. But during the second half of the 20th century, a more secular dimension to the word spiritual emerged – in keeping with the general definition given above. Some people implied that they were ‘spiritual but not religious’. Some used both words to illustrate religious and non-religious elements to their spirituality. Others used spirituality precisely to distance themselves from religion – for them religion was the antithesis to being spiritual. Spirituality is thus an ambiguous term; it is hard to define coherently in a way that suits all of the diverse range of people who use it. For young people, the word spiritual has more meaning than spirituality – which some still see as synonymous with religion.
Some people think that a lot of contemporary writing about spirituality is vague and 'wishy washy' because it covers such a wide range of ideas all the way from traditional religiosity through to thinking like New Age, which can be proposed as an alternative to religion. At times this judgment is warranted. But spirituality is a construct worth fighting for, especially because of its strategic location overlapping both secular and religious spheres, and because of its utility for education generally, and for religious education in particular.

These days the word 'secular spirituality' has been used more frequently to suggest that for most people in secularised societies they still have a spirituality, but it is not referenced specifically to religion. And the term is also pertinent to many who have a nominal connection with religion. This is probably now typical of most of the people in Westernised countries – including most of the teachers and students in Australian Catholic schools.

One might ask: would young people make sense of this differentiation between the spiritual and the religious? If they are not formally religious, young people tend to think they have no spirituality at all; for many, the religious and the spiritual are much the same. This view is often held by religious people who use the word ‘unchurched’ to describe such youth. This apparent identification of the spiritual and the religious remains common even though, as noted above, there is a growing interest in the notion of a spirituality not necessarily connected with religion. From the analytical perspective taken here, many young people are spiritual but not religious as they retain a spiritual dimension in their values. But this needs to be distinguished from the way the term ‘spiritual but not religious’ is used by researchers like Smith & Denton (2005) and Fuller (2001), where it described individuals who were active ‘spiritual seekers’, trying to purposefully construct a spirituality that was independent of religion. Most young people are not like this; they just appear disinterested in religion; what they are interested in is feel-good experience and lifestyle.

**Spirituality as a central bridging construct between religious and secular thinking about what it means to educate for personal development**

In the past, discussion of what it meant to educate young people to promote their development as persons was often framed in religious terminology. This was almost always the case where the discussion was coming from a religious perspective. However, in secular liberal democracies, where there were many religions as well as people without religious identification, it was no longer appropriate or meaningful to rely on mainly Christian religious constructs for such discussion. Hence, when they were considering links between education and personal development, there was a need for governments and the wider community to find and use secular psychological and sociological constructs that had something to say about what it means to develop as a person.

Figure 2.1 on the next page below shows both religious and secular constructs that have been used for talking about education aimed at promoting personal, spiritual and moral development. The top half lists examples of Christian (especially Catholic) constructs, while the bottom half lists secular ones. Precisely because it has ‘roots in both camps’ the construct spirituality is useful for discourse about personal development education – and by implication religious education.

An understandable reaction to this analysis is puzzlement at the large number of constructs that have been used to talk about personal development education and religious education. In a later chapter, problems related to the number of ecclesiastical constructs used for describing Catholic religious education will be discussed. But it can be noted here that there is a parallel problem with the use of too many secular psychological terms for interpreting personal development. The problem arises when theorising about personal development education, educators (both religious and secular) tend to make a ‘wish list’ of all the qualities they would like to enhance in young people. Terms are used to spell out the desired personal changes that educators hope to promote. And the list becomes a problem both because of the numbers of different terms used and because there is usually a lack of attention to the fundamental question: **What are the possibilities and limitations of any classroom process for bringing about personal change in pupils** (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006).

The large sets of secular and religious constructs indicate that personal/spiritual/moral development is very complex. And each generates hopes that people think education can promote. But where they are not acknowledged as hopes with all the uncertainty that naturally goes with them, and where they appear in educational discourse as if they were the more immediate objectives and outcomes, the end result is unrealistic expectations for bringing about personal change through schooling. And in turn, what gets compromised is a realistic understanding and expectations of the actual operational links between classroom teaching/learning processes and personal change. This problem tends to occur with any curriculum area concerned specifically with personal development. It does not happen in subject areas like English, Maths and Science where influence on personal life is not the principal focus. The other problem with both the secular and the religious personal development constructs in educational discourse is where they become just more jargon terms that are bandied about without referencing them realistically to classroom teaching and learning.
Figure 2.1  The pivotal place of spirituality as a personal development construct for education as related to both religious and secular constructs

One of the advantages of the word spirituality in educational discourse is that it can be used to cover both religious and secular purposes in a complementary fashion. It relates in some way to each of the other religious and secular constructs. Despite ambiguities in definitions of spirituality, it can function like a mediating central construct in interpreting the spiritual/moral dimensions to religious life (in various religions), as well as in interpreting lives that do not engage with religion. Spirituality is like a ‘meeting place’ for those interested in the spiritual dimension of the religious sphere, and for those concerned with the spiritual dimension to the secular sphere – hopefully to promote mutual interest in both spheres. This mediating function is becoming increasingly evident in contemporary writing on spirituality and education.

In *Educating for Purposeful Living in a Post-Traditional Age* (2017), Philip Hughes focused on the constructs ‘purpose’ and ‘purposeful living’. He also shows briefly how he sees these related to other constructs such as values, resilience, willpower, satisfaction and social behaviour.

For religious educators in church schools, there is a need to become literate in the secular personal development constructs. They help explore the emergence and function of non-religious spiritualities, which now characterise the majority of students in religious schools. They also provide a common community language for re-interpreting and applying traditional religious wisdoms and theology that may have lost their currency with many people today. This is the task described by the theologian Lieven Boeve (2007, 2011) as recontextualising the religious tradition, seeking to make it relevant to contemporary needs and issues.

Conclusion

Following this introductory treatment of the terms religion, faith and spirituality, the next chapters will explore how and why there has been such significant change in the spiritual/religious landscape, especially in Westernised countries. The extent and repercussions of such secularisation do not appear to sufficiently acknowledged by authorities in Catholic religious education as far as the evidence in normative curriculum documents is concerned. If religious education is to
enhance the basic human spirituality of young people, as well as educate them in their religious faith tradition, then religious educators need to begin with an understanding of the changing landscape of spirituality.

References


See also the summary in https://faculty.nipissingu.ca/alfredg/EDUC_1526_Religious_Education_RC_Schools_Ontario/Session_Resources_files/Faith%20Theology%20and%20Belief.pdf Accessed 16/03/2017

*          *          *          *          *          *          *          *
Chapter 3

The new challenge: Understanding how and why secularisation developed – traditional Medieval spirituality as the initial historical marker

In 1944, writing from his prison in Nazi Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggested that to understand secularisation there was a need to trace it back to origins in the 13th century.

The secular movement which I think had begun in the 13th century has in our time reached a certain completion. People have learnt to cope with all the questions of importance without recourse to God as a working hypothesis. In questions concerning science, art and even ethics this has become an understood thing which one scarcely dares to tilt at anymore (published in 1966).

Why is it relevant and important for 21st century religious educators to understand the historical trajectory of secularisation?

Quite a number of sociological constructs like secularisation, privatisation of religion, de-traditionalisation etc. have been used to interpret the significant change in the spirituality over the last 60 years from a more traditional religious spirituality to something that is more secular, eclectic and individualistic. To some extent, this change has been acknowledged with reference to students in Catholic schools; but this is not usually reflected in the religion curricula.

An interpretation of change in spirituality in terms of change in cultural meanings has been developed for the purpose of understanding contemporary spiritualities in other than a deficit model. Such an interpretation may be more persuasive in getting religious educators and authorities firstly to accept, rather than condemn or ignore, the significant change in contemporary spirituality; and then secondly, take steps to address this change positively and constructively in the Catholic school religion curriculum – that means pedagogy and content that may help enhance and resource the basic human spirituality of young people, whether or not they become active members of a local community of faith.

In keeping with Bonhoeffer’s view, this chapter will look at a portrait of traditional Medieval Christian spirituality showing how at that time the church in Europe had something like an absolute control over the spiritual lives of Christians. With this as a starting point, various cultural change factors that contributed to growing secularisation will be examined in the following chapter.

Change in cultural meanings: A scheme for interpreting how and why spirituality has changed

A range of constructs can be used for interpreting change in spirituality. All of them have some explanatory power; but none by themselves seem to provide an adequate interpretation because change in spirituality is multidimensional. The change is mediated by a complex tapestry of influences that plays out differently for individuals. Table 3.1 lists a range of sociological constructs that have been used to interpret social change and which in turn can be applied to spirituality. Note: This table can appear intimidating and unnecessarily complex – it is both. It is not intended for
Ch. 3 Changing landscape of spirituality

detailed scrutiny. Its purpose is ‘impressionistic’, to show some of the complexity in interpretations that this chapter is trying to avoid by pursuing a relatively simple system for looking at change in spirituality that can be useful educationally.

The table signposts the different constructs without attempting to analyse them in any detail. Only a few references are noted as examples; and a number of them touch on the application of the construct to spirituality.

Table 3.1 Range of sociological constructs that can be used for interpreting change in spirituality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociological construct</th>
<th>Notes on the focus of the constructs</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constructs related to religion &amp; change</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>Measure of religious behaviour such as attendance at church/synagogue etc., frequency of prayer, engagement in a local community of faith.</td>
<td>Glock &amp; Stark, (1965); Flynn (1985, 1993); Smith &amp; Denton (2005).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secularisation</td>
<td>Decline in the prominence of religion in personal, social and political life; less reference to the idea of god in spirituality.</td>
<td>Mascall (1965); Bonhoeffer (1966); Fenn (2001); Norman (2002); Wright (2004); Crawford &amp; Rossiter (1996, 2006).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social reality of religion</td>
<td>People construct a view of what they think religion is; religious knowledge is socially constructed.</td>
<td>Berger and Luckmann (1966), Berger, (1969, 1973)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World views</td>
<td>A scheme of meaning through which people make sense of the world and life. A collective world view may function like a religion.</td>
<td>Jackson (1997); Olthius (1985); Naugle (2002).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constructs related to social change</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural postmodernity</td>
<td>The cultural situation characterised by:- uncertainty about personal knowledge, which is socially constructed and contextual; disbelief in meta-narratives; extreme individualism; scepticism; existentialism,</td>
<td>Bauman (1997); Bridger (2001); Crawford &amp; Rossiter (2006).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relativism</td>
<td>Arises from the capacity to make multiple comparisons. Tendency to see religions and world views as much the same in principle; hence a decline in sense of religious uniqueness and in religious authority.</td>
<td>Baum (1987, 2007); Crawford &amp; Rossiter (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>The value basis to a particular way of thinking, or of a cultural group. The set of values that motivates and drives particular political groups. Ideology may be somewhat covert.</td>
<td>Darder et al (2003); de Botton (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociological construct</td>
<td>Notes on the focus of the constructs</td>
<td>References</td>
</tr>
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<td>------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inter-cultural communication</td>
<td>The process of promoting mutual understanding and conversation between cultural groups. Learning from different cultures.</td>
<td>Gallagher (1992); English (1998).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructs related to institutional change</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social psychological constructs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning and purpose</td>
<td>The thinking that helps individuals interpret their experience and the world. It helps justify and motivate behaviour. It can help give coherence to one’s explanations of what is happening in the world. Inner resources that are developed through interaction with cultural meanings.</td>
<td>Baumeister (1993); Crawford &amp; Rossiter (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>How individuals draw on both cultural and inner resources for their self-understanding and self-expression. May be multidimensional including moral, spiritual, religious, cultural, identity elements.</td>
<td>Taylor (1989); Crawford &amp; Rossiter (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellbeing</td>
<td>The general feeling of wholesomeness in the individual’s self understanding and life. Includes physical, social, spiritual and economic dimensions.</td>
<td>Eckersley et al (2005, 2006); Fisher (2000, 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>The moral ‘fibre’ of the individual. The set of virtues that gives the individual moral integrity. The values and commitments that help make a healthy, contributing citizen.</td>
<td>Bohlin (2005); Nucci &amp; Narvaez (2008).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtues</td>
<td>The moral qualities that are embedded in the individual like ‘habits’ of mind and good behaviour. Has a long history within thinking about religious virtues.</td>
<td>Swanton (2003); Koertge (2005).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Cultural meanings:* The construct or conceptual scheme that will be used here is change in cultural meanings. Cultural meanings are understood as the sets of socially constructed ideas, values, assumptions and emotions that inform people’s thinking and behaviour. Cultural meanings are distinctive of particular social and ethnic groups and religions; but they also operate across the social context from family to nation state, and increasingly at a global level. While there are many cultural meanings in a society, it is possible to identify the sets of meanings with which individuals or groups identify. They are like the background ideas about life (thinking and assumptions) that people draw on to explain or justify their behaviour. They condition the way people think about their lives. Trying to identify the active cultural meanings for individuals helps in interpreting their ‘self interpretations’.

Cultural meanings are often a blend of social, cultural, religious, spiritual and political ideas that are in turn meshed with feelings and values that reinforce the ideas. People draw on and interact with these cultural meanings when forming their own personal ideas about life. It is like the ‘atmosphere of meaning’ that people are continuously ‘breathing in’; and it is like the immediate ‘thinking/feeling environment’ they inhabit which affects how they interpret reality and what they do. These meanings are associated with various sources – family, social and cultural groups, religion, nation state and the wider popular culture. Individuals may draw on particular sources or reference groups while shunning others, and they may also draw from a wide range of meanings in an eclectic fashion. There will be a diversity of responses to the same perceived cultural meanings; for example, what is ‘liberal’ to some will be regarded as ‘harmful’ and ‘deviant’ by others. *Whatever the idiosyncratic personal meaning they construct, it cannot be fully understood apart from the particular landscape of meaning within which it developed.* Some will be both conscious and articulate about the cultural meanings they have adopted; others may be relatively unaware of their social conditioning – as if it was just ‘natural reality’ which is not usually questioned.

Religion can be prominent and influential in people’s accepted cultural meanings. Others can identify with religion nominally while their behaviour suggests that they are really operating more out of the common cultural meanings in their society. Still others would see their key meanings, and hence their spirituality, as unrelated to religion.
The notion of cultural meanings is a composite scheme that draws on a number of the constructs listed in table 3.1 – especially Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) understanding of social reality where people’s knowledge and behaviour are interpreted as closely related to what they construe to be reality, together with the recognition that social reality is constructed by individuals and groups; also there is some similarity with symbolic interactionist theory (Blumer, 1969). Investigating cultural meanings tries to identify and evaluate what appear to be the important, driving ideas and assumptions behind people’s thinking and behaviour. It is essentially interpretive and hypothetical in process; it acknowledges that individuals may or may not advert to the cultural meanings that affect their behaviour, because these meanings can be taken for granted parts of their social world that do not need articulation, let alone evaluation. If cultural meanings are not brought into the open for appraisal, they can remain deviously influential because they are then regarded as a natural, but hidden part of the normal fabric of life (c/f the work of sociologist Raymond Williams as discussed in Warren (1992)). Williams proposed that by starting with the identification and appraisal of cultural meanings, individuals can take up cultural agency, where they can avoid being just passive ‘consumers’ of culture by actively contributing to the creation of cultural meanings within their own sphere of influence.

Cultural meanings serve as communal frames of reference that are available to people in the working out of their own personal frame of reference or personal meaning. They usually act in ways that are more or less consistent with their personal meanings. Both personal frame of reference (difficult to characterise) and cultural meanings (more easily identified) are keys to interpreting behaviour. Hence, identifying cultural meanings and showing how they have changed is a useful way of interpreting change in spirituality.

It is difficult to estimate with accuracy the way in which cultural meanings affect individuals. It seems to be a natural part of the human condition to have difficulty in determining the extent to which various cultural meanings affect us. It is often easier to see how they may have affected others – even though such interpretations may be incomplete. But by identifying the range of factors that influence people’s cultural and personal frames of reference, we are in a better position to understand personal and social change as it is manifested in spirituality. And in turn, this interpretation can be useful educationally for helping people look more critically at the cultural meanings that have had a shaping influence on them. These factors can be life enhancing as well as life inhibiting. They can extend freedom just as they can limit it. The educational hope is that individuals become better educated with respect to the social forces that may have a conditioning influence on the way they live their lives. By interrogating the cultural meanings that affect society and individuals, people are in a better position to make informed choices and to address contemporary spiritual and moral issues (Hill, 1993). This provides a potentially valuable contribution to religious education (and education generally) both in content and pedagogy: students could be engaged in a research-oriented process of appraising cultural meanings; at a personal level, they would have the opportunity to reflect on where their personal frame of reference related, if at all, to the cultural meanings being evaluated.

*Change in cultural meanings and change in personal meaning*: If one looks at world religions, it is evident that cultural meanings can persist for thousands of years, giving believers a frame of reference for life. Similarly, distinctive social and ethnic meanings that resource a sense of identity can endure for centuries. Over time, there is both persistence of core meanings as well as some natural evolution in response to political and cultural changes. The situation of human meanings is never completely static. New meanings also emerge and get disseminated. And often there is competition between different meaning systems for people’s allegiance.

Individuals may change the cultural meanings to which they are subscribing; they switch their allegiance to new meanings available in the culture; this change may be gradual and sometimes almost imperceptible. At other times the change can be sudden.

Individuals and groups are forever inventing and disseminating cultural meanings – new ways of interpreting life. Sometimes the ‘new’ meanings are really ‘recycled’ ‘old’ meanings. It could be expected that very traditional, monocular societies would have less variety in cultural meanings than pluralistic, multi-cultural societies. Being able to make multiple comparisons between diverse religions, worldviews and lifestyles could also be expected to be a catalyst for people to change their cultural meanings; dissatisfaction with old meanings and the allure of the new could prompt change. However, if individuals were secure in their reference group, and if they felt it had a strong identity and self-sufficient plausibility, then they could be unmoved by the variety of meaning systems on offer; they could feel relatively impervious to inroads from competing meanings, particularly those that might call their own system into question.

Some who are anxious about the multiplicity of competitive meaning systems, retreat defensively into the security of their own reference group. This helps explain why some will feel more secure and at home within a relatively conservative, and more authoritarian, group within their own denomination. Further, it is also a factor that leads some into fundamentalist groups; and it can also incline some to join sects and cults. For minority groups, particularly when oppressed, their meaning system is important in group identity and perhaps even for cultural survival; it provided inner strength.

A variety of life experiences could trigger change in the personal meanings of individuals – including education. The new personal meanings usually resulted from a shift in their favoured cultural meanings. It is not that they created new meanings as such, but they moved towards meanings that made more sense of their experience and with which they felt
more comfortable. It may have been a response to perceived dissonance – where their experience was increasingly being felt to be inconsistent with the explanations offered by their old meaning system.

If the old reference group appeared to be losing its plausibility – where its value was no longer self-evident – individuals tended to look elsewhere for more meaningful ideas to motivate and explain their lives. This prompts a migration in reference groups. During this process, individuals may pay more attention to the critiques of their old reference group which were available in the wider community. The credibility of the old system declines; its meanings appear to lose their relevance and explanatory power, and consequently their capacity to retain people’s allegiance fails. Sometimes the change is led by action; individuals behave in new ways; they may change the emphases in their lifestyle; then because they feel comfortable with this new behaviour, they eventually make adjustments to their personal meaning system – they change their ‘subscription’ to new cultural meanings that better accommodate their behaviour and interests. It may have been a relatively imperceptible drift into new ways of thinking.

Change in cultural meanings is inevitably connected with how they are constructed and communicated. Human history shows that story-telling and its preservation in writing have been important in the handing on of cultural meanings from generation to generation; stories are meaning-embedded narratives. New media for communication have helped maintain and conserve cultural meanings, as well promote the spread of new meanings. Print, telephony, radio, film and television have contributed, and now there are emails, texting, the internet and social media, and individual blogging.

Change in spirituality is not only affected by theological development within religion but also by changes in the background cultural meanings about life and identity (Taylor, 1989). An Australian example would be the changes in Australian Catholicism moving on from its original, and perhaps tribal, Irish-related identity.

A portrait of the cultural meanings in a traditional religious spirituality – in Medieval Christianity in Europe

The change in cultural meanings system for interpreting change in spirituality will now be applied to try to understand how and why modern secularisation away from religion has occurred. Following the lead in the quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer at the beginning of this chapter, this analysis will look firstly at the cultural meanings that underpinned Medieval Christian spirituality in Europe. Then it will consider the socio-cultural changes that gradually enlarged people’s spectrum of meanings about life and provided people with the raw material for constructing personal meaning that became less and less dependent on traditional religious sources of meaning. Taking such an early starting point and taking a panoramic perspective are necessary for understanding how complex and how pervasive secularisation has been.

Consider the situation of people in 12th and 13th century Christian Europe. For an illiterate peasant leaving his small wooden or mud house, with no windows, and entering a massive cathedral – for example, in Ely, Salisbury, Firenze or Chartres – the contrast would have been awe inspiring; the physical ‘house of God’ reflected a sense of the divine on earth. The size and height of the vaulting, the stained glass windows and the frescoes and paintings would have helped communicate a sense of the transcendence and power of god who presided over the world. Apart from the castles and houses of the nobles, the cathedrals would have dominated the city skyline, symbolic of the dominance of god and religion. In the small villages, this was replicated in miniature with the local church spire often the most prominent landmark. The dominance of Christian cultural meanings in 12th century France was evident in one estimate that there was one ecclesiastical structure of some kind for about every 200 people. A comparable situation exists today in some places – for example, across the hundreds of square kilometres of villages along the Nile near Luxor in Egypt; the spires of the local mosques are particularly prominent at night because they are lit with blue fluorescent lights; they dot the landscape about every kilometre or two from horizon to horizon. This religious domination of the landscape was symbolic of the overwhelming dominance of cultural religious meanings that regulated the lives of people in such contexts.

The authority of god, the spiritual/moral power of the church (religion) and the political power were usually amalgamated into a single network of cultural religious meanings. It covered all aspects of life and was relatively inescapable. It gave people a sense of their own ‘station in life’ within a system that was usually accepted without question; it gave them meaning and purpose and a sense of personal dignity; and it regulated their activity in minute detail. Within this system, it would be difficult to find meanings and practices that did not have a religious overlay. And all of this helped ensure (and enforce?) social stability. It would have been difficult to contemplate cultural meanings outside the prevailing system – there appeared to be few if any alternatives; if there were other religious groups present, they would have been in a minority and not likely to challenge the status quo. Born into this system, individuals simply absorbed its meanings as reality – there was no sense that it was socially constructed; any questioning of the system was likely to be judged as a deficiency in faith.

Inscribed above the entrance to the cathedral in Citadella in northern Italy are the words “Domus Dei et coeli porta”. This summed up the role of the church – it was the “House of God and the gate of heaven”. It was through the church that one had access to God. And this was the ultimate source of the church’s great power over Medieval Christians.

Six key meanings permeated the common spirituality in this context:-
• The centrality of god who was perceived as the creator and end of the human race as well as its judge.
• Life and religion were focused on heaven as the ‘true’ life for which life on earth was a preparation; this tended to make religious meanings the compelling spiritual and moral reference points for thinking and behaviour.
• The power of the church (religion) over individuals, usually in concert with political power, was absolute; authorities were supreme; deviants or heretics could be put to death; many religious cultural rituals set the pattern for daily life in an annual cycle.
• Obedience was a prominent aspect of most human interactions. Obedience to god was aligned with obedience to the church (religion). Authorities, both religious and political, were respected without much question.
• Fear was a strong motivating factor; fear of god merged into fear of religious and political authorities; the idea of reward for the good and punishment of evil was a prominent moral motivation; the ultimate fear was of eternal punishment in hell.
• Evil in the world was personalised in the form of the devil; the devil – the ‘tempter’ – was held responsible for much of went wrong in personal and social life.

There was a strong feeling of tight control over people’s lives and spirituality. The meanings underpinning their spirituality were a mix of belief, theology, opinion, fears and superstition. One could speculate that the extent to which this profile varied for individuals was limited, even though it may have been likely to be different for the ruling class, clergy and the educated.

The unquestioning acceptance of religious meanings as reality reinforced a literal interpretation of sacred writings. The Genesis and Gospel stories were historicised.

Conclusion

The material here goes hand in hand with chapter 4 where the development of a contemporary secular spirituality is contrasted with what was described here as traditional Medieval Christian spirituality.

Bibliography

Most of the references relate to Table 3.1


* * * * * * * * * *
Chapter 4

The contrasts: Change factors that influenced the development of a relatively secular, individualistic spirituality

Tracing secularisation back to the Middle Ages should help religious educators see that secularisation has been a long historical process involving many significant developments in human culture. It is not necessarily the ‘enemy’. Secularisation is not the anti-religious ideology which is secularism. Contemporary secularisation is just a very different world from that of medieval spirituality; and much of it has resulted from valuable social and cultural change – where somewhat inevitably, the church does not have the same power and control over people that it once had. Secular spirituality has its own complexities and problems including the ways in which it might engage with religions. And all of this is not only pertinent to the professional education of religion teachers, it is also relevant as content for school religious education, especially for senior students.

The first part of this chapter looks in a brief summary fashion at some of the most influential change factors that have advanced secularisation since the Middle Ages. Then, rather than draw up a list of the characteristics of a contemporary, relatively secular and individualistic spirituality, they will be summarised in tabular form showing the contrasts with what prevailed in traditional religious spirituality. This is helpful because many people do not fit neatly or exclusively into either camp. Rather, their spirituality is often a complex idiosyncratic mixture of the traditional and the secular.

It is evident that most young people today are not interested in what they think of as ‘organised religion’. But they are very interested in life, particularly what means for them individually. If their school religious education does not address life directly, then it will have nothing to say to these young people. If its concerns are perceived as almost exclusively Catholic and not more ‘outwards’ oriented, then they will be mentally placed in the ‘irrelevant’ basket. It is argued that religion and Catholicism should be essentially concerned with life and so a greater focus on life issues is not inconsistent or inappropriate for religious education. A much stronger focus on Catholic culture and theology as content is appropriate for a seminary course or for adult religious education. But for the open, public forum of the classroom in Catholic school religious education such a focus will end up being counter-productive.

The contrasts drawn here between Medieval and contemporary secular spirituality will be taken up again in the next three chapters which show interesting parallels in the way that the dominant iconography and imagery of the times informed the way people constructed meaning and purpose in life.

Changes away from a traditional religious spirituality understood in terms of change in cultural meanings

This section will consider only some of the change factors that have contributed to a move away from traditional spirituality. The pattern of change since the Middle ages needs to be identified even in broad outline because it not only describes historical, cultural change in spirituality, but also because a similar pattern is often evident at a psychological level in individuals when their traditional spirituality morphs into something that is more secular and individualistic.
A change from traditional religious spirituality was particularly evident in three areas of cultural meanings:

1. Understanding of god and of the creator’s role of the universe.
2. The power that religious authorities had over the lives and thinking of individuals; less fear of religious authorities.
3. Decline in the prominence of religious ritual and religious references in social life.

The following, among many factors, contributed to the secularisation of spirituality in Europe (and later in the Americas) since the middle ages.

Movement of people into the developing cities. There was, and still is the case to some extent, more stability, sameness and less variety to life in villages. Large scale movement to the cities exposed people to a greater variety of occupations, interests and lifestyle components. While there may still have been limited opportunities in the city, it expanded their thinking about life – even though the industrial revolution often resulted in a new form of domination of people’s lives by work. They could make comparisons between their lives and what others thought and did. The cities were the breeding grounds for the notion of a popular, common culture that gradually differentiated from the official religious-political monoculture; these were the first signs that there was scope for thinking differently about life.

Separation of church (religion) and state. In the various formats with relative separation of church and state and various levels of democracy, there was some breakdown in the total dominance that the previous religious-political monoculture had exercised over people’s thinking. Eventually, people could not be legally executed for supposed heresy and witchcraft. Fear of religion, and an accompanying fear of god and the devil, declined. This supported the development of a more widespread sense of freedom, autonomy and individuality, even if people did not have unlimited scope to change their station in life.

Change away from the predominantly religious subject matter of art and literature. Previously, most art was on traditional religious topics. While the subject matter of art was not so much a change factor in itself, it was an indicator of changing cultural meanings; and since the Renaissance, there was much more humanistic and less religious art. This was one of the first signposts of the rise of secularisation.

Such indicators of change were also evident just as strongly in literature – for example, as in the enduring Tristan and Isolde, and Eloise and Abelard themes in western literature down to Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

The rise of science, scientific thought and the enlightenment. While the rise of scientific thought and enlightenment rationalism may have affected the educated more than the uneducated, in the emerging common or popular cultural meanings, it further eroded the plausibility and power of the previously unquestioned religious authority. There were new ways of thinking about the cosmos and about human origins and purposes; and reason could provide a rationale for living alongside a religious interpretation. Some integrated these ideas within their spirituality and theology while others did not. For example, evolutionary theory resulted in a polarisation of meanings between those who accepted it and those who retained a creationist account – while for some it was a reason for abandoning religious beliefs altogether.

Interpretation of human behaviour through the human sciences: Psychology and sociology provided new relatively scientific ways of interpreting and explaining human behaviour. In turn, these meanings led to different, not necessarily religious ways of understanding personal development. On the fringes of the human sciences, various self-help programs and para-psychological movements also appeared.

Education: Since the origins of compulsory schooling, school education has not only increased the general level of public knowledge in numeracy and literacy, it has affected people’s critical thinking. It has helped them to become more discerning, and more independent and self-confident because they are better informed about social issues and more confident in their own judgment. Hence, school education in Westernised countries has been important in advancing the agenda of individualism. By contrast, schooling within authoritarian regimes has often been characterised by propaganda, cult of the leader etc. which set out to engender and reinforce the prevailing political ideology in children from an early age.

Technologies for the communication of cultural meanings. As noted earlier, technologies that ‘extended’ the written and spoken word provided increased opportunities for exposure to different cultural meanings. Traditional reference points like home, ethnicity, religion, school and nation might be expected to be basic sources for images of life and values; other no less significant sources can be peers, social and recreational groups. But in modern times these influences are superseded by the ‘storying’ role of film and television with their meaning-embedded narratives about life that can eclipse the stories that have traditionally informed spiritual development and identity. Gerbner (1992) drew attention to the significant change in traditional patterns of storytelling that was enabled by film and television: “We have moved away from the historic experience of humankind. Children used to grow up in a home where parents told most of the stories. Today television tells most of the stories to most of the people most of the time.” Similarly, Australian scholars Eckersley et. al. (2006, p. 35) considered that “when a community abdicates the role of storytelling to the mass media, particularly commercial media, a focus on wellbeing or the good life is diminished to stories about
feeling good. These stories can have a very individual focus.” This suggests that the media and advertising industries create a social reality that for many people has become their major moral and spiritual reference point. The rise of social media over the past decade has greatly magnified the capacity of people to ‘tune in’ to an immense variety of cultural meanings about life. While social media have expanded most people’s capacity for communication and the dissemination of personal views, for some young people, maintaining their projected image in social media has become an enduring cause of low level anxiety.

All these examples of change factors worked in favour of the emergence of two new cultural meanings that would drive the rise of secular individualistic spiritualities.

Firstly, there was the sense of an alternative set of popular cultural meanings about life that was more or less independent of the traditional religious view; individuals could now compare what was expected formerly by the religious system with what was encouraged, allowed or tolerated within the popular culture. There were options for thinking about life that were not there before. Whereas there had been one pervasive, monocultural, religious system that dominated cultural meanings, people were now becoming accustomed to multiple frames of reference for life’s meaning.

Secondly, more attention and power were being given to the individual’s own autonomous, personal frame of reference for providing the ultimate criteria for judging spiritual/moral matters. The traditional cultural reference point in religion and religious authorities declined in plausibility and power; it was being perceived as having more of an ‘advisory’ role than a ‘normative’ one. While many would be inclined towards this more individualistic approach, others remained attached to the external authority as their prime frame of reference. And people could mix and match, claiming to be religious while being mainly motivated by other non-religious meanings.

Cultural meanings associated with a relatively secular, eclectic, individualistic spirituality

It is beyond the scope of this book to examine secularisation in great detail. What is believed to be helpful for educators is a tabular summary of the characteristics of contemporary secular spirituality highlighting its differences with the traditional. It contrasts the different cultural meanings that informed both traditional and contemporary spiritualities.

In secularised, Westernised societies, the dominant cultural theme is consumerist and capitalist and this has become the principal shaping influence on people’s thinking about life – and therefore on their spirituality. The term secular spirituality has been used by scholars to describe the situation. However, many secular people would be unlikely to characterise their thinking as a form of ‘spirituality’, particularly in the sense of the conscious cultivation of ‘reflectiveness’; the more relevant concern for them would be ‘lifestyle’. But because all lifestyles have embedded values, one could still use the term secular spirituality by default. This usage is helpful for drawing comparisons with religious spirituality.

The comparisons in Table 4.1 show how significant polarities developed in the way people constructed the meanings informing their lives. In particular, they show how religion is referred to in different ways – from being the traditional, authoritative source of meaning to one of a number of possible resources that one can draw from as ‘advisory’ rather than normative. While not all individuals will fit comfortably within these descriptions, the contrasting indicators provide a useful picture of the polarities that emerged in the cultural change process. This summary has been drawn principally and directly from the work of Eckersley (2005, pp. 2-15), and to a much lesser extent on Crawford & Rossiter (2006) and Schweitzer (2004, 2007).

Table 4.1. Contrasts between the cultural meanings underpinning traditional religious and contemporary secular spiritualities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trends in cultural meanings in a relatively traditional society, and to some extent in individuals with a traditional religious spirituality</th>
<th>Trends in cultural meanings in contemporary Westernised societies, and in individuals with a secular, individualistic spirituality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal meaning</strong> was usually a social given. A religious meaning system was received like a set package; it was ‘taken-for-granted’ and internalised.</td>
<td><strong>Meaning in life</strong> was now less a social given and more a matter of personal choice: personal meaning was ‘constructed’ by individuals for themselves, or chosen from a proliferation of options.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- There was security in having a relatively ‘black and white’ meaning system and moral code.</td>
<td>- There was a challenge to individuals in constructing their own DIY (Do It Yourself) spirituality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Individuals did not have to ‘search’ for meaning; they had a ready-made package.</td>
<td>- ‘Searching’ for meaning and taking responsibility for developing one’s own personal meaning system could be stressful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The religious meaning system may have been experienced as somewhat harsh and oppressive.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Religious belief:** Beyond the mortal realm, people had a religious faith that not only provided them with a road map for life, but it gave them a sense of place in the cosmic scheme of things. While many retained some form of religious belief, this was not nearly as absolute and binding as it once was. The individual’s own experience tended to become the touchstone for authenticity, and even for what was regarded as the ‘truth’. While nominally linked with religion, some see a clear distinction between their own personal faith and the faith taught by traditional religious institutions.

**Religious authority:** Religious spirituality (in the West) was sustained and validated by church authority. Its plausibility depended on high regard for the church; the notion of the authority of god underpinned church authority. Authority of the individual: The plausibility of religious authorities tended to be low. Increasingly, individuals became their own spiritual authority, deciding for themselves on the basis of their own judgment about particular aspects of spirituality. “People assumed that their lives are not predetermined by birth and social origin, and that everyone has the right and also the responsibility to shape his or her life according to their own wishes and life plans.”(Schweitzer, 2007, p.90) It is taken for granted that everyone has the right to choose their own faith and that no-one should interfere with their choices.

**The existence and image of God:** There was a strong belief in the existence of god. The image of god included the notions of: creator, all-powerful, benevolent, loving and caring for each individual, judge of good and bad, rewarder of the good and punisher of the evil, listens to people’s prayers and requests for help. A natural uncertainty about the existence of god became more prevalent. Belief in a benevolent god was attractive and comforting, but not something that many individuals counted on or thought much about. If there was a god and life after death, then this would be a pleasant ‘bonus’.

**Family and community ties:** Children usually grew up in a close network of family and community relationships that largely defined their world – their values, beliefs, identity and station in life. Family and community ties were loosened. Consequently individuals appeared more open to various life options available in the wider culture, together with more individualism in their choices.

**The world outside:** Most people knew relatively little of what lay outside their world, and of other ways of living (in pre-television times). People know much more of the rest of the world and how differently others lived and thought. Information about what was happening around the world was available instantaneously.

**Social change and the predictability of life:** Much of life was predictable and what was not was explained in terms of the supernatural and religious belief. Rapid social change resulted in much more uncertainty about life and the future. Many accommodated to the uncertainty as ‘natural’. (Others could not cope with the uncertainty so well, and identified with communities where meanings were more definite and authoritarian – a move back towards a more traditional setting).

As a secularised view of life became established more as the norm for most people in Westernised societies, people saw the developments as ‘progress’; old certainties gave way to exciting possibilities through economic growth, social reform, science and technology.
While acknowledging the progress, Richard Eckersley went on to draw attention to the following challenges that accompanied it.

**Table 4.2 Richard Eckersley’s reflections on cultural ‘progress’**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Over the past few decades this faith in material progress has given way to growing doubt. We now live in ‘postmodern’ times, marked by the end of the dream of creating a perfect social order and the realisation that some of our problems may be unsolvable.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The result is a world characterised by ambivalence, ambiguity, relativism, pluralism, fragmentation and contingency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The openness and complexity of life today can make finding meaning and the qualities that contribute to it – autonomy, competence, purpose, direction, balance, identity and belonging - extremely hard, especially for young people, for whom these are the destinations of the developmental journeys they are undertaking. Another vital quality, hope, is also easily lost if life is episodic, and lacks coherence and predictability. Faced with a bewildering array of options and opportunities, we can become immobilised – or propelled into trying to have them all. Pulling together the threads of our postmodern lives isn’t easy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While loosening social ties can be liberating for individuals, and create more dynamic, diverse and tolerant societies, too much cultural flexibility can have the effect of trivialising the convictions and commitments that we need to find meaning and to control our own lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyond the risks of excessive choice and freedom is the evidence that these can be, in any case, illusory. Social constraints remain, and in some cases are increasing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western societies present a façade of virtually unlimited autonomy that disguises a powerful preference. We may have abundant choices as consumers, but to choose not to consume requires real will power. We are told, as part of the new pluralism, that traditional values have passed their use-by date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have altered profoundly our notions of the ‘self’, of what it is to be human. We have created ‘the empty self’, stripped of community, tradition and shared meaning. Our era, he says, has constructed a self that is, fundamentally, a disappointment to itself, and must be soothed and made cohesive by being constantly ‘filled up’ with consumer products, celebrity news, and the quest for self-improvement and personal growth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacking quality we seek quantity; in the absence of commitment and certainty we pursue diversity and variety. We see growth at the extremes of self and meaning, a loss of balance: pathological self-preoccupation at one end, the total subjugation or surrender of the individual self at the other. A vast consumer economy has grown to minister to the needs of ‘the empty self’; and religious cults and fundamentalist movements flourish as people struggle to find what society no longer offers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some significant issues emerging from Eckersley’s analysis are:

It is evident that many people do not neatly fit into either of the two sides of the diagram – traditional or secular. They may find themselves spread across the two in a complex idiosyncratic way. And the pattern in their personal spirituality may change with age and life experience. Nevertheless, it is suggested that the contrasts are a particularly useful way of understanding what secularisation is all about. It gives some idea of the scope and intensity of the changes since medieval times. In particular, it is proposed that such and analysis is fundamentally important for a religious education which tries to maintain a creative tension between handing on the religious tradition and resourcing the spirituality of students – especially because the majority of them would sit much more in the right hand column.

People can readily see that there are problems with both spiritualities. They would not feel comfortable being exclusively within either as they are described here (this also applies later to figures 4.1 and 4.2). So there is an evident need for scrutinising one’s spirituality, whether it be religious or secular. A healthy spirituality needs critical evaluation. And if this is to be done, one needs to decide what criteria might be used for evaluating their spirituality. A key value assumption here would be the belief that spirituality should not be static and unchanging, but rather continually developing. After the following summary section, the chapter will conclude with a proposal for criteria for the evaluation of spiritualities.
Philip Hughes’ take on the changed landscape of spirituality is congruent with the Eckersley interpretation above.

... the plurality of options for life became evident to many people, traditions were challenged, and the expectations developed that the individual would find his or her own purpose through the fulfilment of his or her inner passions and potential.

In this new post-traditional context, purpose is developed by the individual in a context where there is a general expectation of a good life revolving around family, friends, fun and good feelings. It is a context in which few people look to traditions or religion to provide an overview and a basis for purpose although a few find individual purpose through new forms of charismatic religion which focus on the place of the individual. Many people have some sense that life is spiritual, which they approach either from an eclectic or environmental perspective, which contributes to the sense of purpose. (Hughes, 2017, p. 1)

Summary: Contrasting portraits of traditional religious and secular spirituality

Two diagrams have been constructed to summarise the discussion of traditional religious and secular spiritualities. Inevitably, diagrams over simplify. Nevertheless, they bring some key points of difference into sharp focus. Also, in the discussion of secular spirituality, more specific attention is given to its expression in young people.

Picture of a traditional Medieval Christian spirituality

Figure 4.1 serves as an historical marker of Medieval Christian spirituality that could be said to be ‘traditional’ in 1950s Australian Catholicism. Vestiges of this outlook on spirituality still remain for some, even if their number is few. This overlaps to some extent with the description of medieval spirituality in the previous chapter.

For a traditional Medieval Christian spirituality everything began and ended with God (Top left of Figure 4.1). God and then the church, Bible and a comprehensive supporting religious culture constituted the overarching authority in all matters spiritual. People believed with a sense of certainty about divine revelation and God’s authority; it was as ‘true’ and as ‘solid’ as the ground beneath their feet. The Christian view of life was a grand metanarrative that made sense of it all: the individual as a child of God had a cosmic significance and an inalienable value. Being spiritual/religious was then a matter of worshipping and obeying God. Of many images of God, the picture of God as judge, rewarder of the good and the punisher of evil was prominent. It was understandable that the Christian life was sometimes perceived as a warfare (following up images from St Paul) and that fear of becoming a sinner and the danger of ultimate damnation in hell were prominent; this was encapsulated in the notion of ‘saving your soul’.

In Figure 4.1, the psychological dynamics of the individual are pictured in terms of three closely interrelated constructs: meanings, spirituality and identity. The authoritative cultural religious meanings proposed by the church were internalised, becoming personal religious meanings, including beliefs which are also regarded as a component of religious faith. In addition, a principal element in faith was a personal relationship with God. You were committed to God and God was committed to you.

Usually the whole package of religious doctrines was accepted without question on the authority of the church and God – even if some of them were difficult to understand and hard to apply to one’s life. With a strong sense of supportive religious culture from the local and wider church, it was relatively easy to identify oneself as being religious and an integral part of a community of similar faith. Those who questioned or doubted were readily marginalised and made to feel like outsiders or defectors.

The enveloping religious culture, even when a religious group may have been a minority in the larger society, strongly supported a personal spirituality. For Christians, their spirituality centred on religious practices – especially worship, prayer, and reading the Bible. Individuals not only had a clearly identified religious reference group, they had personal access to God through prayer. Christian meaning and purpose in life also had some reinforcing cultural parallels where the Christian history of Europe left its mark on civil society, art, literature and music. Religious holidays also were some indicator of the relevance of Christian culture.

The individual’s experience, behaviour and moral values were informed by their personal religious meanings and sense of personal religious identity. As we know only too well, having religious beliefs and professing religious values does not always result in morally impeccable behaviour – that is the human condition. But at least the figure shows the Christian purpose for life.

Also prominent in traditional Christian spirituality was the firm belief that one’s true home was with God. This present life was said to be not the ‘real’ life, but just a ‘preparation’ for life eternal with God. In this sense, Christian spirituality was ‘other worldly’ in focus.
A common form of contemporary spirituality is individualistic (rather than communal), eclectic in the way it pieces together various elements from different sources (often little may be drawn from the religious tradition), subjective in that it is private and personal without much communal identification, and secular in that it has little or no overlay of religious cultural meanings.

But what seems to be more radical is that the basis for validating spirituality, as well as for judging about most aspects of life, has devolved from attention to pertinent authorities (like God and the church) to be embedded in individuals themselves – the individual has become his/her own ultimate touchstone for authenticity in beliefs and values.

Addressing specifically the United States context, Smith & Denton (2005, p.141) considered that:

American youth, like American adults are nearly without exception profoundly individualistic, instinctively presuming autonomous, individual self-direction to be a universal human norm and life goal. Thoroughgoing individualism is not a contested orthodoxy for teenagers. It is an invisible and pervasive doxa, that is, an unrecognised, unquestioned, invisible premise or presupposition. US teenagers’ profound individualism informs a number of issues related to religion.

Schweitzer (2007) painted a similar picture for German youth. It is evident that the situation is the same with Australian youth.

Individuals themselves have become the supreme authorities for judging what is relevant to them, even what is right and true. Cultural postmodernity has questioned the previously held certainty and authority attributed to spiritual, religious knowledge and it casts doubts about the value of metanarratives. In this cultural atmosphere of scepticism, the truth and reliability of personal knowledge and knowledge of the spiritual seem to deteriorate: what is now certain is that there is a natural uncertainty to this type of knowledge. Hence it becomes very relative, and it is then up to the individual to decide what to believe. Spirituality now becomes personal, subjective and DIY (Do It Yourself) rather than both personal and communal as in traditional Christian spirituality.
This relatively secular spirituality is hard to identify. Formerly, it was easy to see an overt religiosity in prayer and religious practices. Now that the cultural religious overlay is hardly evident, what spirituality remains is implied in values, rather than in overt practice — it is like a basic human spirituality referred to in previous chapters. There are some, referred to in the research literature as 'spiritual but not religious', who actively seek out spiritual ideas and practices in constructing a spirituality that consciously excludes religion (Fuller, 2001). However, very few young people are in this category. Rather, most of them, while not being anti-religious are just too concerned with lifestyle and other related issues to have any time to consider religion — which in any case is not regarded as of much relevance to them.

People with this sort of secular spirituality still have personal meanings and a sense of identity; but they are not coloured strongly by cultural religious meanings as formerly. Their values, hopes and aims for life are indeed strongly coloured by other non-religious cultural meanings; however, they are not usually willing to admit to this because they feel that they alone are authors of their own attitudes, values and behaviour — uninfluenced by any cultural meanings. For US young people, Smith & Denton (2005, p. 144) described the situation as follows:

Most [young people] are at least somewhat allergic to anything they view as trying to influence them. They generally view themselves as autonomous mediators or arbitrators of all outside influences; it is they themselves who finally influence their own lives. Other people and institutions provide information that youth see themselves as filtering, processing, and assimilating. Based on this information, they then make their own decisions for themselves. Or so the story goes.

Figure 4.2 suggests that deeply embedded cultural meanings in Westernised societies are all about: lifestyle; getting ahead; being wealthy, attractive and happy; and in constant search of new ‘authentic’ experience. The feelings of being free and being individual are of paramount importance. If these cultural meanings are taken-for-granted, they are relatively invisible but therefore potentially more influential precisely because they are not identified and open to critical appraisal. In particular, the complex of marketing/advertising/media constantly offer orchestrated imaginations of what life should be like that are very influential in shaping people’s spirituality.

Figure 4.2. Schema highlighting aspects of a contemporary, individualistic, secular spirituality
ongoing task for young people; it is as if they are born with a ‘congenital identity deficiency’ and must work continuously to maintain a distinctive individual identity. At the same time, consumer industries exploit people’s identity vulnerability by proposing that they can achieve their identity by buying the ‘right stuff’, often identified because it has a ‘cool brand’. Hence people may be acquiring a ‘retail identity’ with a dependence on purchasing consumer products (‘external’ identity resources) and on the status or cachet they these goods seem to convey, while neglecting an authentic identity that gives more attention to ‘internal’, spiritual identity resources like values and principles. An important ingredient in catering to the consumer identity mentality is the need for constant self-affirmation and salving of apparent identity needs. Hence people’s need to quest for new ‘buzz’ experiences (with an ever higher ‘voltage threshold’). Feel-good experience, excitement and risk behaviours become the psychological mechanisms through which consumer industries keep people’s identity related spending on the boil.

People’s basic human spirituality is implicit in their lifestyle, and their identity is expressed in what they do with their time and money. But because this is not overt like a religious spirituality, its spiritual and moral dimensions need to be uncovered, identified, and most important of all subject to critical appraisal by people themselves.

The sort of meanings, spirituality and identity noted in the figure inform morality and behaviour. However, the figure, because of its simplicity, is biased in the way it identifies only potential problems without balancing this with the positive, noble and altruistic meanings and identity resources that can also be appropriated by individuals. How ‘good’ an individual’s moral behaviour will be according to accepted community values will then depend on the ultimate blend of meanings and values that operate in their lives.

Figure 4.2 suggests that few people today would seriously consider that this life is only a preparation for the next. The purpose of getting to heaven while avoiding hell is not likely to be a serious motivation for many Australian Christians today – while still believing in God and an afterlife. Hence, there is the added inclination for people to be very existential and to live for the here and now. And a consumer oriented society plays this tune well. ‘Why wait when you can have consumer heaven here and now – visit your local mall!’

While problematic in their limited scope, the two figures do highlight key issues for spirituality related to fundamental changes in the basis for judgment about ultimate epistemological and truth questions (from God to the individual self) and in the changing role for religion (from dominant, authoritative source of cultural meanings about the purpose of life to an optional resource from which one can pick and choose according to perceived value). Also foregrounded in the diagrams is the change from a cultural/institutionalised religion and religiosity to a much more individualised and privatised spirituality, where there is considerable variation in the contribution that formal religion might contribute to personal meanings and identity. In addition, the role of cultural meanings in shaping the thinking and values of people is made very prominent. This has important implications for religious education where studying the origins and communication of cultural meanings becomes a central task.

It is considered that neither of the figures represents a desirable, healthy, religion-related spirituality. The difficulties they point towards need to be scrutinised when educating in spirituality.

**Healthy spirituality: Criteria for the identification and evaluation of spirituality**

This section follows up earlier comments about the need for evaluating one’s spirituality to see how ‘healthy’ it is. Judging what is a healthy and desirable spirituality would always takes place within a specific context where there are presumed values and beliefs, whether these are religious or not. Here a starting list of evaluative criteria is proposed that can be further developed. The schema can also be used pedagogically for identifying, analysing and judging the strengths or weaknesses of what is being offered as spirituality. The list is generic and applicable to both religious and non-religious spiritualities; it needs to be contextualised with the articulated beliefs and values of the particular group engaged in evaluation; it may also be useful for individuals in the personal appraisal of their own spirituality.

**Table 4.3 Evaluative criteria for the identification and appraisal of spiritualities** (drawn from Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, Chapter 8)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial list of evaluative criteria for the identification and evaluation of spirituality</th>
<th>Evaluative questions and issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transcendence</td>
<td>The particular understanding of transcendence:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is it a human transcendence or does it include a notion of God or a higher power?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is this higher power personal or a non-personal creative life force?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In what ways does this spirituality relate to religion?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Frame of reference: the individual, as well as something larger than the individual

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The frame of reference for spirituality needs to respect the uniqueness of the individual; however, if the frame of reference is no larger than the immediate personal needs and interests of the individual, there is a danger of self-centredness and narcissism. To what extent does the frame of reference for this spirituality take into account community at both local and wider levels? (human or social environment). What historical traditions in spirituality give perspective to contemporary concerns, and a balanced interpretation of existential needs? Is there a custodial concern for the physical and animal environments?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### Personal reflection

|---|---|

### Confidence in human knowing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A healthy spirituality needs to come to terms with uncertainties about meaning and value that go with postmodern characteristics of contemporary Western society. This includes confidence in personal knowing, while recognising the natural limitations to socially constructed knowledge. Personal knowing may be imperfect and in need of ongoing evaluation; however, it can provide an authentic basis for human meaning and can inform constructive decision-making and commitments.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### Inputs that inform and challenge spiritual understandings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A healthy spirituality is presumed to be not static. It includes openness to activities (reading, education, new experience) that prompt reflection and continued development of spirituality. It encourages openness to learning from other spiritualities. This view of spirituality presumes that it is not enough to claim to be spiritual in a nominal way: there needs to be some activity that challenges and enhances spirituality, or that shows spirituality in ‘action’.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### Spiritually motivated values and commitments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Spirituality that informs and inspires values and commitments, and a sense of social justice. Spirituality that affects personal action and action on behalf of others.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### Gender equality

| | Authentic spirituality is available for both men and women without prejudice. It is not paternalistic and is accessible to all. From this perspective, questions can be raised about the role of women in religions. |

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Criteria such as these (with amendments and additions) imply a value position about what constitutes spiritual health and a ‘healthy’ spirituality. The list is based on a particular view of the human person. Here are three of its principal concerns:

1. There is no doubt that a healthy spirituality should enhance the personal and social life of individuals. However, if the personal needs and interests of the individual are the exclusive frame of reference for spirituality, this can more easily move into self-centredness and narcissism. A balance is needed so that the personal meaning of the individual embraces something larger than the self. This is needed for both religious and non-religious spiritualities. Fundamental to this view is the belief that individuals are born human but they become persons through social interaction. In other words, being both a contributing and a receiving member of human community is central to human nature. When applied to spirituality, this means that authentic spirituality has to be community-related: you cannot be fully spiritual on your own. This thinking proposes that the frame of reference for spirituality needs to include family, local community and the wider human community. In addition, it considers that responsible stewardship for the environment should also be part of the value base of spirituality.

2. A healthy spirituality should not be static and not just ‘implied’ in the way people live a particular lifestyle; it needs to be sustained and developed by reflection, education (in the broadest sense) and habits of spiritual activity. For example, it is considered not enough to claim that ‘I have beliefs and values’, ‘I believe in God’ or ‘Spirituality is implied in my lifestyle’. An authentic spirituality is one that motivates behaviour and leads to personal and social action. Healthy spirituality continually challenges the individual to practise, extend and deepen spiritual insights. Healthy spirituality is ‘cultivated’.
3. A healthy spirituality needs confidence in the personal knowing process. The postmodern strand in contemporary Western culture calls absolutes and meta-narratives into question, and its emphasis on the uncertainties and ambiguities in socially constructed human knowledge have led to excessive subjectivism, contextualism, existentialism and relativism. While it is unrealistic to claim full knowledge of absolute truth, it is both realistic and pragmatic to believe that one can know part of absolute truth with confidence, and act on this with integrity. Given that the uncertainties in personal knowing are natural to the human condition, and if this is accepted, it is both possible and reasonable to claim that one can construct a spirituality that is authentically human with respect to self and others. This spirituality will not be perfect; it will advert to spiritual traditions, but it will not be constrained by them; it will make mistakes; it should be open to revision and enhancement. But it can help people chart a meaningful and hopeful life in uncertain times – times that seem to have unprecedented opportunities for human life and wealth, while at the same time having pressures, gross inequities and threatening uncertainties that affect basic human meanings and quality of life. Such a spirituality can turn the contemporary emphasis on being ‘critical’ to advantage by engaging in the critical interpretation of culture to discern the influences on people’s thinking and behaviour, and to evaluate their significance.

The evaluative criteria proposed here need to be developed and further refined, and the process of discernment needs to be informed by the beliefs and values of the particular groups seeking to enhance the spirituality of youth.

Conclusion: A starting point for considering implications for Catholic school religious education

Many religion teachers in Catholic schools in Australia have more personal affinity with thinking in the right column than the left in table 4.2. But in religious education, they may feel their normative curriculum context sits mainly within the meanings in the left column, while most of their students are at home in the meanings in the other column (even if the description of a traditional spirituality today does not fit neatly within the left column). And if their prescribed purpose in religious education is understood primarily as persuading young people that they need to engage with the church, this can be perceived by their students as wanting to shift their thinking and spirituality towards that of the left column; and the students, and most of their teachers, know that there is no ready educational (or any other) formula that will make this happen.

Hence, it is proposed that the starting point for a more relevant religious education is to accept that a relatively secular spirituality is the norm for most young people. If this was taken into account more seriously in Catholic religious education documents, it could help change the focus from trying to eliminate and replace contemporary secular spirituality towards trying to diagnose and address its needs constructively – responding to the opportunity to enhance young people’s spirituality whether it is religious or not. And while access to the traditional religious heritage remains a valuable part of education in spirituality for secular youth, more specific attention needs to be given to content and pedagogy that take into account the healthy possibilities as well as the problems within the cultural meanings described in the right hand column.

Understanding how spirituality has changed over time in conjunction with social and cultural change can also provide valuable content for classroom religious education in spirituality; it can help in the ‘diagnosis’ and appraisal of new developments and cultural contexts, which inevitably have both healthy and unhealthy aspects.

Bibliography


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Chapter 5

Secularisation? Or a new religion called consumerist lifestyle?—The research literature

This chapter, together with chapters 6 and 7, venture to offer a different perspective on secularisation. It may not be the most insightful word for interpreting the contemporary situation. Perhaps people today are just as religious, or possibly even more religious than they were in a traditional religious society. But their new religion is a consumerist lifestyle. And this new religion is fuelled by the complex of media, business, marketing and advertising which creates media-orchestrated images of what life should be like that condition people’s thinking and behaviour. And they live with the same sort of beliefs and fervour about lifestyle that one would usually ascribe to being religious. Even people who are religious in the traditional sense of the word may still live as if consumerism was their principal religion.

This approach does not attempt to supersede other ways of understanding secularisation. What it does do is offer a new line of interpretation that can be usefully followed in religious education both by teachers and school students, or perhaps elsewhere in the school curriculum. If consumerist lifestyle can be interpreted as functioning like a religion, then should it not be studied along with other world religions? If consumerism is the dominant world religion, what then do secularisation and agnosticism mean within this frame of reference?

The special focus of these chapters is the visual imagery and iconography of consumerism that dominate the media in an overwhelming way. Because the visual imagery of medieval Christianity was so powerful in mediating and reinforcing the faith of Christians, the possibility of comparing it with contemporary ‘consumerist spirituality’ is a logical follow up to, and is congruent with, the approach to secularisation in the previous chapters. There the medieval and contemporary secular spiritualities were contrasted as historical markers to illustrate the strength and pervasiveness of secularisation.

Comparing the visual imagery of medieval Christianity with contemporary consumerist imagery may appear to be an unusual starting point for studying secularisation – hence the need to explain why it can be useful. The film and drama studies construct mise-en-scène, while normally not applied as an analytical construct relevant to spirituality, is used here to expand an understanding of contemporary secular spirituality – particularly in the way it is expressed through visual imagery. The comparisons drawn between consumerist spirituality and medieval Christian spirituality are justified as follows: While in two very different cultures at distinct periods of history, both have been dominated by a universal visual iconography that mediated powerful cultural sources of meaning and values; these were like the pillars that structured a unified social reality for the people of the time, shaping their views of meaning and purpose to life. The dominant cultural imagery in both situations conditioned the perceived underlying narrative or mise-en-scène for life.

In addition to providing educators with a way of interpreting contemporary spirituality, the approach illustrates a research pedagogy for exploring spiritual and moral dimensions to
contemporary living in contrast with the way life was interpreted in the past from an almost exclusively religious perspective.

This first of three chapters concentrates on explaining the central construct mise-en-scène and on illustrating the ideas in the research literature on religion, the media and advertising that have evolved over the last 70 years suggesting how consumerist lifestyle has come to function like a religion.

The next chapter sets out to decode the mise-en-scène of both traditional medieval Christian spirituality and contemporary consumerist spirituality showing how each had a shaping influence on people’s meaning in life and on their ‘religious’ behaviour.

Because these chapters give special attention to the role of the visual in mediating and shaping spirituality, the discussion really needs a strong visual component to illustrate the argument. Audiovisual materials have been developed for this purpose. They will be readily made available for download and viewing by readers who contact the author. Email: g.rossiter@bigpond.com

“The first act of freedom is to become aware of this necessity”
Jacques Ellul, 1954

The context, appraising the values underpinning contemporary consumerist lifestyle

To begin, it is necessary to recall earlier comments in chapter 4 made about the use of the words secular spirituality. The term suggests that even if few secular people might choose to use it in self-description, it can still be used as a default term when talking about spirituality generally because spiritual values are always implied in the way people live – whether they be formally religious or not (Ashley, 2000; Martin, 2005). Similarly, one can use the term consumerist spirituality by default to illustrate the consumerist value stance that may dominate the lives of people to various degrees. Both of these terms have been used here with respect to a principal religious education pedagogy – the critical interpretation and evaluation of the way that culture has a shaping influence on people’s lives. As pointed out in the previous chapter, spiritualities need to be evaluated; and it would be a mistake not to evaluate consumerist spirituality.

Use of the term mise-en-scène as an analytical construct

The term ‘mise-en-scène’ is used in film and drama studies to interpret the meaning of the story being told (Bordwell & Thompson, 2003). It is the framework or subtext that helps make sense of the actions of the characters – like the ‘fabric’ or ‘trajectory’ of the story (Monaco, 2009). It is a commentary on what is happening in their lives, an interpretation of why they are responding to their situation in the way they do. In particular, it is about the way people respond to the cultural visual cues and clues that condition the way they think and feel about life. The mise-en-scène involves a dynamic interplay between story, clues that give meaning to the actions in the story, and presumptions about social reality that underpin the story.

Three briefly described examples illustrate the complex notion of mise-en-scène:-

Picasso: If one looks around a gallery of Picasso paintings and drawings, you do not fully appreciate the angular distortions, exaggerations and disjunctions in the artist’s language unless you understand the underlying mise-en-scène out of which he operated. Life in Spain and elsewhere in the world in the 1930s was becoming increasingly fraught. Picasso felt unable to paint in a naturalistic way because for him such naturalism would not reflect the anxieties, problems and tensions that he and others were experiencing. He was trying to say something about what lay beneath the surface depiction of life.

Film cut in half: Try viewing a film with a reasonably complex story line which you have never seen before by first watching just the last third of the film (E.g. Excelsior 2012, with Bradley Cooper, Jennifer Lawrence and Robert di Niro, or the Bourne legacy, 2012, with Jeremy Renner and Rachel Weisz). Then go back and watch the whole film from start to finish. It is only when you follow the story from the start that you realise you miss so much of the meaning in the final parts of the film when you have not picked up on the earlier visual clues that are essential for interpreting the complexity and larger meaning of the unfolding story. You do not have the earlier developed full set of clues and presumptions about the situation and behaviour of the actors that are necessary to make sense of the story. The mise-en-scène is that grasp of the trajectory of the story where much of the meaning is communicated through visual cues and clues and not just words.
The presumed values and ideas behind advertising commercials: Each short television advertisement is often a complete mini-story in itself. But to make sense of the story, the viewer has to pick up from visual cues the ‘background’ of ideas or mise-en-scène that are presumed and not stated. As explained later in the chapter with reference to some particular commercials such as those for Jeep, their purpose is to entice viewers to tune in almost subconsciously to the Jeep mise-en-scène because this is primarily what the commercial is trying to achieve – to promote an emotional attachment between the viewer and the background thinking that endorses the product. If you become attuned to the lifestyle mythology of having a Jeep, you are more inclined to go ahead and buy one.

The characteristics of mise-en-scène that will be used here are summarised as:

- The subliminal background, unwritten story-line, the myths that need to be acknowledged before one can understand the story being portrayed.
- The visual clues and cues that call up the assumptions needed to follow the story.
- The unarticulated values and perspective that need to be in place to make sense of the story.
- Subtly, what can be the real focus of a media story/advertisement is to get viewers to assimilate, and possibly commit to, the projected mise-en-scène.

This brief explanation of mise-en-scène would not satisfy film studies academics; but it is sufficient for the investigation undertaken here.

Shifting the focus of the term from film/media studies to trying to identify and read the mise-en-scène of media productions and contrasting these with the mise-en-scène of people’s everyday lives can help with the interpretation of contemporary secular spirituality. It identifies the framework or story line within which they search for and articulate goals and aspirations for life. This approach illustrates the ways people refer to, and interact with, cultural meanings that end up having a shaping influence on what they think about life and how they behave. Mise-en-scène can be a useful analytical lens for investigating spirituality.

While the principal concern here is contemporary, relatively non-religious, secular spirituality, mise-en-scène will be used historically to contrast with traditional, medieval Christian religious spirituality in the next chapter, highlighting how and why spirituality has changed so much. The reasons for the comparison are threefold: firstly, the visual plays a prominent role in each; and secondly, many people have a complex mixture of the traditional and the contemporary in their spirituality. How this analysis might apply to other religions like Judaism, Islam, Hinduism etc. will not be considered.

While there have been fundamental changes in Christian spirituality since the middle ages, but especially over the last 60 years, basically, human beings are the same across history, drawing on culture to help them make sense of the world they live in and of their own experience. They need some sort of meaning to serve as a moral compass and to help them articulate their goals and aspirations for life. In their own ways they work out practical answers to the questions posed in Paul Gauguin’s painting entitled D’où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous? 1897 – Where have we come from? What are we? Where are we going? There is a fundamental, genetic human need and aspiration to construct a mise-en-scène about life – even if this is not articulated as such by the people themselves, because some values stance is always implied in human behaviour and lifestyle; and even if the meaning that some despairingly choose is that there is ‘no meaning’ to life.

Why start with medieval spirituality?

The reason for the surprising starting point of the analysis with medieval Christian spirituality needs to be explained – as well as the need to show how this might help elucidate contemporary secular spirituality. In medieval times and today, visual imagery made/makes a significant impact on people’s mise-en-scène for life. Medieval Christians, most of whom were illiterate, learned their beliefs from stories at home and in homilies and through liturgy, and in cultural productions like morality plays. But what was enduringly prominent was the visual depiction of their faith in the architecture and religious art of their churches. Through the geographical dominance of the spires of village churches and city cathedrals, the awe inspiring structure of these edifices, and the church frescoes, statues, paintings and relics, their beliefs and aspirations for life were taught, assimilated and continually validated and reinforced. Their churches were like the first ‘picture theatres’ and their art like the first ‘powerpoints’. Here, visual elements were fundamental in shaping and sustaining their religious mise-en-scène. For many, this may have been the only visual imagery they were ever exposed to.

Today, the visual remains important for the construction of meaning and purpose in life for both religious and non-religious people. But in Westernised countries, the culture is saturated with visual imagery. People have instant digital access to exponentially large volumes of imagery that can affect their imagination of what life should be like. Just as medieval Christians could not escape the dominance of the religious mise-en-scène of their time, people today cannot really avoid the atmospheric presence of the consumer lifestyle complex attested to by media imagery; they have to take it into account as they chart their way through life. Some will go along with the cultural flow in a passive way; hopefully, education can persuade others to take a more discerning stance.
Contrasting the ways people in these two periods related to the visual aspects of their culture will show up significant differences in the focus, emphasis, beliefs, values and presumptions about life and the spiritual dimension. It will show how the different ‘iconographies’ generated very different estimates of what the ‘good life’ means. It will be argued that the centrality of the visual imagery in both contexts justifies the comparisons; and the results suggest that in many ways, contemporary consumerist lifestyle functions like a ‘religion’, one which projects a coherent, global social reality, and which holds a dominant sway on the way people think about life and a powerful conditioning influence on their values and behaviour.

So special attention will be given to ‘decoding’ the ways personal meaning is mediated by the visual. This can also be described as ‘decoding the iconography’, showing how visual elements have meaning-making symbolism, and which propose values and beliefs. This involves critical interpretation of the meaning of imagery. It borrows from the generic use of the term iconography in the visual arts where it is a study of how artists use visual elements as references and allusions that generate meaning (Panofsky, 1983; Van Straten, 1994). Also, the word has a secondary specific meaning referring to the production of religious icons in the Byzantine and Orthodox Christian traditions (Cormack, 1985; Kenna, 1985). Both of these usages are pertinent here because artefacts in both the Eastern and Western Christian traditions have long been regarded as icons which were considered to connect believers with the religious world and the realities of salvation history (Schiller, 1971); they made salvation history present again and they drew the believer into that realm promoting reflection, devotion and prayer. This still happens for religious people today. But for many, even those who identify themselves as religious, the images in popular culture that dominate their mise-en-scène are very different.

The pervading Christian world view encapsulated in their art helped medieval Christians interpret their world. Today people also have a pervading visual imagery about life; they have to reference their personal meaning to the globalised, intimate visual culture that is everywhere around them and to which they can have instant access. In the contrasting situations, there are significant differences in the types of visual items and how people relate to them, and in how they communicate meaning. Understanding these differences is not only important for comprehending the evolution of secular spirituality, and how people can have various mixtures of religious and secular elements in their spirituality, but, as noted above, it can also be used fruitfully as a pedagogy in religious education.

**What the research literature in religion, the media and advertising has to say about the possible ‘religious’ function of consumerist lifestyle**

This section fills in some of the background and provides a framework for the contrast being drawn between traditional mediaeval Christian spirituality and contemporary lifestyle. While there is no need here to review the extensive research literature on media and communications, only some representative references will be noted to signpost developments and provide some historical and philosophical context. Strate (2004) published a detailed review of media and communications research under the heading *A media ecology review* that is helpful in giving some panoramic perspective.

**Studies on the relationships between media, culture and religion**

McLuhan and media studies: From the 1950s, Marshall McLuhan impacted media studies through his view that the new electronic media were like ‘extensions’ of the human being or like new languages that opened up fresh possibilities for interaction (McLuhan, 1959, 1962, 1967; McLuhan & Fiore, 1967).

> The medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology. (McLuhan, ND 2013A)


He tended to regard the developments as inevitable and positive. Rather than talk about the ways in which media might influence people personally in both healthy and unhealthy ways, he described how they would learn, communicate and act through the media. For McLuhan, electronic media (especially television) became the “great educator” (McLuhan, 1956, 1970; Beale, 1987). He discounted formal education: “The school system, custodian of print culture, has no place for the rugged individual. It is, indeed, the homogenizing hopper into which we toss our integral tots for processing.” (McLuhan, ND 2013C)

McLuhan, and other media researchers from the 1960s onwards established beyond doubt that the new electronic media would have a shaping influence on how people got information, how they communicated and how they were entertained, as well as on what they thought about life – this affected the ways in which they constructed personal meaning, and ultimately this would flow over into beliefs, values and behaviour. “Television seduces us from the literate and private point of view to the complex and inclusive world of the group icon. Instead of presenting a private argument it offers a way of life that is for everybody.” (McLuhan, 1967, p. 245).
Implications for religious education (Babin): The French scholar Pierre Babin quickly responded to McLuhan’s ideas applying them to religious education (Babin, 1970). He conducted two national programs for Catholic religious educators in Australia in the 1970s. He introduced Photolanguage (1969) which was used for many years in Australia in school retreats and adult professional development programs.

There were two principal elements to his approach. Firstly he proposed a fundamental need to understand what he called "audiovisual man" (sic); in other words, education needed to take into account the changed ways in which individuals construct meaning and values as influenced by new media, especially television. Secondly he proposed that an understanding of how media work should inform pedagogy. His practical work with students usually involved the development of the "audiovisual montage", which used colour slides, music and commentary. He proposed that the best in audiovisual techniques and content should be used in the service of educating in the faith tradition. More recently, he reflected on what this meant in an internet age. (Babin & Zukowski, 2002).

The semi-religious functions of film and television (Kuhns): The U.S. film studies scholar William Kuhns followed up the work of McLuhan and other media researchers, looking into the way that television appeared to be taking over sociological and psychological functions that were formerly performed by religion – especially as regards myth, ritual, magic and priesthood etc. (Kuhns, 1969A). He situated his analysis within a broader study of the social influence of new communications technology. (Kuhns, 1969B, 1971).

He considered that both religion and the entertainment media acted in society and in people’s lives as an environment or milieu – to the extent that each provided an enveloping web of meanings within which people could make sense of their experience. For religion it was oriented towards a spiritual/religious way of ordaining and living one’s life. For film/television it was more existentially focused on the pleasant experience of entertainment. His comparison of ‘religious milieu’ with ‘entertainment milieu’ showed elements that seemed to function in the same way. There were significant functional links between religion and entertainment.

Kuhns saw fantasy/myth as central to the entertainment experience: “It is a kind of temporary redemption from the tensions of daily existence in a technological culture. … There is indeed a direct ratio between the growth of technology and the intensification of fantasies.” (Kuhns, 1969A, p. 155). While the fantasy/myths of religion were intended to be instrumental in conveying lasting truths about the purpose and meaning of life, those of film/television were ends in themselves, for entertainment and not about trying to communicate values or purposes for life. But because of the dominant theme of narrative in film/television, meanings and values were always embedded parts of the story; and the widespread and free availability of these meanings/values made them readily accessible to people even at a relatively unconscious level. Hence it is not implausible that film/television could serve a religious function for people to varying degrees. For example: In a sense, the talk-show hosts had become the new priests, presiding over people’s review of persona life. Morality was presented but usually in a simplistic good-evil polarity with the middle ground missing, the very place where in real life most moral decisions are made. The celebrities and TV personalities had become the new ‘saints’.

Kuhns felt that humour had a prominent psychological function in TV entertainment:

Humour runs deep in the veins of entertainment, and the presence of humour affects everything else. Whereas the religious milieu tends to make man aware of his guilt and failures, the entertainment milieu encourages a less serious, more relaxed attitude towards life. Of course, one of the objects of entertainment is to lighten, not increase, the load; nonetheless it is safe to say that [TV] can make us feel more relaxed with ourselves and our environment than the spectres of highly ascetic saints could in the middle ages. (Kuhns, 1969A, p. 158.).

Kuhns’s ideas from the 1960s about the personal influence of film/television and how the Christian church might understand and relate to the electronic media showed both an astute diagnosis of culture in his own time as well as a prophetic insight into the developments that would unfold into the 21st century. For example he addressed each of the following issues:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues identified</th>
<th>Comments by Kuhns, 1969A</th>
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| Best role for the church in relation to the entertainment media | “[the church could be] a vital force in society for creating a critical awareness of the entertainment milieu.”

“using the media themselves to comment on the nature and meaning of the media; .analysis of themes and techniques.” (p. 163).

“[The church should] be a community, but not a highly structured authoritarian organisation. Its key concerns would not be proselytising and converting others, but educating people to the languages and techniques by which their lives are being shaped. ... church authority would emerge from the social concern which the community exerts, the depth with which they care about the present and the future.” (p. 164).
Williams and the critical evaluation of media – educational implications: The Welsh sociologist Raymond Williams differed from McLuhan primarily in the way he considered that the media needed to be appraised within a broader cultural framework including the economy – media studies needed to be part of wider cultural studies. Secondly, whereas McLuhan saw the personal influence of media as inevitable, Williams singled media out as a social construction that needed to be evaluated critically (Williams, 1974, 1976, 1980). He pointed out that if cultural meanings were taken-for-granted as ‘reality’ rather than as ‘socially constructed’, they would remain invisible and not open to critique and evaluation. Precisely because culture (including media) was socially constructed, it should therefore not be treated as something that is a given and inevitable, and whose consequences and implications had to be accepted relatively unquestioningly. He proposed cultural agency: that rather than being ‘passive consumers’ of culture, people should become ‘active constructors’ of culture (Williams, 1980, 1995). This meant the critical interpretation and evaluation of cultural meanings, and consequent action flowing from this evaluation, even if this was just within the boundaries of individuals’ own small life worlds. They had the capacity to change and develop their own attitudes and values. They did not have to just drift along blindly accepting what the popular culture was proposing in terms of ideals, imaginations, beliefs and values.

Taking elements of culture as givens in an uncritical way was simply giving in to the power of those who were principally involved in shaping the main contours of contemporary consumerist culture. The cultural critique proposed by Williams resonated with the thinking of the critical theorists dating back from the 1930s, and of those who applied critical theory to adult education, and to a lesser extent school education are, as evident in writings in The critical pedagogy reader (Darder et al., 2003).

Williams’ treatise on television from 1974 was remarkably prescient in that it remains pertinent today in the issues it identified, some of which could even be applied to contemporary internet social networking (Williams, 1974).

US scholar Michael Warren used cultural agency in his theory for religious education and church ministry, suggesting that educators should help young people scrutinise the imaginations of life that were being orchestrated for them through the complex of film, television, marketing, advertising and consumer industries – and since then the internet and social networks (Warren, 1992). Both Williams and Warren considered that it was not just the media that required critical evaluation, but the web of interrelated cultural and economic activity that permeated the media – this network will here be called for convenience the consumerist lifestyle complex. Their concern was larger than McLuhan-like media studies; it was the interpretation and evaluation of contemporary culture.

Postman’s focus on television, entertainment and education: Concerned about the potential personal influence of media, the U.S. scholar Neil Postman, at New York University, was another voice like that of Williams proposing that the relativelyrosy picture of media/technology painted by McLuhan was naïve; it needed systematic cultural critique.

One of the significant differences between McLuhan and Postman was in their views of the role of school education with respect to the mass media. Aware of the potentially negative influence of mass media, McLuhan predicted that “Education will one day become civil defence against media fallout” (McLuhan, 1967, p.326). But generally he felt approvingly that television was the ‘great educator’, that its educative influence was inevitable and that schools were too wedded to an outmoded book-literacy culture (McLuhan, 1956, 1970). His contemporaries noted his dismissive view of education that included the well-known phrases: School education is “marching backward into the future” and “children interrupt their education each day to attend school.” (Collins, 1971; Benedetti & DeHart, 1997).

Postman was conscious of this influential educational role of television which in a sense had its ‘own curriculum’ which revolved almost exclusively around living for the moment, on entertainment and on being immediately and intrinsically gratifying. In his book Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in an age of show business (1985), he argued that television was skewing people’s perceptions of life through its dominant orientation towards entertainment: “Whether we are experiencing the world through the lens of speech or the printed word or the television camera, our media metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, colour it, argue a case for what the world is like.” (Postman, 1985, p. 10.). Because it shapes people’s conditioned expectations for entertainment, television tends to have a trivialising effect on politics, education, religion, journalism etc. That courtroom trials could become public entertainment is an example. Wolf (1999) wrote about the ‘entertainment economy’ and how media conglomerates were conditioning people’s life expectations. The genre of reality television and the social media are developments that illustrate Postman’s argument more forcefully.

Postman considered that television was young people’s ‘First curriculum’ with school coming in second. TV was (at that time) the main component of an information environment which resulted in a culture ‘overdosed’ on change. While the prominent co-author of the famous book Teaching as a subversive activity (1969) which highlighted the critical role of education, Postman felt that the evaluative role of education needed to be complemented with a conserving role.

One may call it ‘future shock’, ‘culture shock’, ‘technology shock’ or whatever. The plain fact is that too much change too fast for too long has the effect of making social institutions useless and individuals perpetually unfit to live amid the conditions of their own culture ... we have reached the point where the problem of conservation, not growth, must now be solved. We know very well how to change but have lost the arts of preservation. Without at least a reminiscence of continuity and tradition, without a place to stand from which to observe change, without a counter-argument to the overwhelming thesis of change, we can easily be swept away – in fact are being swept away. (Postman, 1979, p. 21.)

This concern about the potentially damaging aspects of rapid technological change (Postman, 1993) was the basis of Postman’s (1979, 1996) ‘thermostatic’ view of education. It meant that school education should help counter-balance the current biases of the culture. When the culture tended to be tradition-bound, promoting innovation was a valuable educational contribution: conversely, when the rest of the cultural environment is changing rapidly through technology and electronic communications, it is important for education to help conserve tradition. An appreciative, historical perspective on cultural traditions is not necessarily contrary to being critical: rather, it can provide an informed diagnostic view on how best to adapt to change, and it can help people understand the cultural forces and events that have a subtle shaping effect on their personal development.

In a culture of high volatility and casual regard for its past, such a responsibility [for cultural conservation and perspective] becomes the school’s most essential service. The school stands as the only mass medium capable of putting forward the case for what is not happening in the culture. (Postman, 1979, p. 21-22)

Referring to the critical perspective that hopefully schools might engender in young people, he claimed that “What has the most relevance to students is that which the information environment least provides them.” (Postman, 1979, p. 131). This was consistent with his earlier colourful statement that all children were born with “inbuilt crap detectors” and that a key role for teachers was to help refine this instrument (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. 16).

Jonah Sachs and ‘winning the story wars’: In 2012, Jonah Sachs published Winning the Story Wars: Why those who tell – and live – the best stories will rule the future. Sachs, claimed that successful marketing/advertising taps into fundamental myths/imaginations about life that are currently powerful in the culture. What he wrote was congruent with the interpretation of stories and scriptures as values-embedded narratives. Story-telling as a primal means of passing on beliefs and values from one generation to the next is as old as human history itself.

Sachs saw marketers as principally concerned with myth making. It was the quality and appeal of the myths to which consumer products were linked which often determined how successful marketing and advertising campaigns were. Savvy marketers were able to tap into the most powerful current myths in popular culture and ‘hitch’ their product to the myth for a financially productive ride. From the perspective taken in this chapter, one could add that marketing is
often about creating and propagating an attractive mise-en-scène for a product. And advertising uses visuals to ‘cue’ in viewers, insinuating the mise-en-scène which makes the product so desirable that they ought to buy it. At the larger level, the omnipresent world of advertising insinuates the larger mise-en-scène that conspicuous, identity-defining consumption is what human life is all about.

Sachs considered that in secularised cultures there was a level of ‘mythic deficiency/inadequacy’. Where the speed and intensity of life in most societies today erode the plausibility and power of traditional cultural, ethnic and religious myths, there results a sort of mythic vacuum. And here the myth-rich global consumerism had a wealth of ‘stories about the meaning of life’ that could readily step in and sate people’s needs. The result was a vulnerability to consumerism. It is easy to see how this looks like the consumerist complex taking on a mythic/religious function for many people.

Sachs saw marketing/advertising – as well as politics and ideologies – engaged in what might be called the ‘story wars’. Consumer interest groups competed with each other in ‘combat’ through their marketing myths. In other words, there was a sort of ‘mythic warfare’ going on as the myths of competitors struggled for traction to gain hold over people's consumerist interests.

Illustrating the power of mise-en-scène in advertisements: Three examples are given here which illustrate the points made above. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, access to the audiovisual materials related to this discussion makes a quantum difference to appreciating the argument.

Louis Bernays and the smoking advertisements, Easter 1929.

Edward Louis Bernays (1891-1995) is acknowledged as one of the founding fathers of modern marketing and advertising. Born in Austria, he was the grandson of Sigmund Freud – son of Anna Freud-Bernays, Freud’s daughter. He migrated to the United States where amongst a range of interests he worked in marketing. He appeared to be one of the first to understand the issues noted above by Sachs. His task was to find a way of getting women in the United States to buy and smoke cigarettes. At the time, the culture frowned on the image of women smoking in public. To do so in some places was a legal offence – but only for women. Also at the time, there was the growing momentum of a women’s movement even if it was not so named. The suffragette movement was still in active memory and more and more women were speaking out about the need for equality.

Bernays sought to link women’s smoking with this powerful cultural current of early feminism and equality. So at the Easter Parade in New York in April 1929, he staged an event for which the newspaper photographers and reporters had been primed. A pre-arranged group of well-dressed young women stopped at the appropriate spot during the parade and make a public spectacle of lighting up cigarettes in a sort of protest for women’s rights. Along with catchy, and now historic, photographs, the New York Times reported the event under this heading: “Group of Girls Puff at Cigarettes as a ‘Gesture of ‘Freedom’’” (1/4/1929). It is interesting to note that the word used for cigarettes in this instance was ‘Torches of Freedom’. Through this the marketer was proposing a mise-en-scène about women’s freedom and rights such that every time a woman lit up a cigarette it symbolised a ritual act of defiance. Playing to this same tune, Philip Morris and Lucky Strike, for example, (two cigarette brands which became popular with women) used ideas like ‘believe in yourself’ and ‘true woman’ etc. in their poster advertisements. There is little doubt that this advertising had a significant impact on women’s smoking in the United States, and elsewhere. It was interesting to note that somewhat comparable advertising was used some years back to increase the number of Chinese women smokers. The men were already ‘hooked’, but there was a great market to be exploited in getting the women as well.

Later in life, Bernays opposed the smoking lobby.

The mise-en-scène in the Jeep advertisements in Australia

From around 2014, there was a string of catchy advertisements for Jeep vehicles, especially SUVs. The thinkers behind the marketing campaign had a challenging task. They wanted to break away to some extent from the traditional World War II image of the jeep as a rugged ‘go anywhere’ basic vehicle. They wanted to project a more attractive and compelling image in the ‘new generation’ of jeeps. The traditional ruggedness was not eschewed, but the marketers wanted to add other more saleable characteristics to the image such as:- comfort, family friendly, eco-friendly, adventure, freedom and contemporary chic.

What was so skilful in the advertisements was the subtle way in which this mise-en-scène was propagated successfully through a long string of advertisements, resulting in increased Jeep sales. The advertisements did not apply any of the desired characteristics to their product directly. Rather, they depicted stories where the principal actor quickly saw that particular people were demonstrating all of those characteristics – free, adventurous, sensitive, family-oriented, etc. – and their conclusion was “They must have bought a Jeep”. This punch line became the hallmark identifier of the advertisements – buying a Jeep was an assured ticket for joining this elite group of happy people, the Jeep owners, whose slogan was “Jeep – don’t hold back”.

Ch. 5 Consumerist ‘religion’ – the research literature
To illustrate: In one advertisement a grandmother puts a postcard from her grandson on the kitchen wall – a wall covered with about a hundred other reminders that this ‘new generation’, sensitive young man who sends cards to his grandmother, lives a bold, adventurous much travelled life. The cars quickly cue in the desirable mise-en-scène for the grandmother’s friend and as she takes in the panorama of postcards on the wall she exclaims “He must have bought a Jeep” – as if everyone knows that Jeep ownership is associated with that sort of lifestyle.

In another advertisement, a primary school girl, in a show and tell class activity, held up a cowrie shell, saying that she got it on a trip to a distant and not very accessible, exotic coast. At the back of the class, one young classmate leans over to his friend and gives the obvious explanation “They must have bought a Jeep”.

Even grandmothers and young children (along with all the other categories) knew about the Jeep mythology. Propagating this mise-en-scène for Jeeps was a key to priming potential vehicle buyers to think favourably about the cachet and self-image that were readily acknowledged as being associated with Jeep ownership. What could be interpreted as a counter advertisement came from Ford. Here the visuals implied that superficial, image conscious, pretentious people bought showy cars (Mercedes Benz, Jeep, Volvo, BMW etc.) but the ‘real’ Australians bought a Ford.

The mise-en-scène of congenital bodily deficiency

There are numerous advertisements, especially for cosmetics and deodorants etc. which rely on mise-en-scène of congenital bodily deficiency. That is, you are born with a natural disability that affects your desirability and popularity; you will never have the natural good looks of the movie stars. But if you use this deodorant or that brand of cosmetics your chances will improve. Hence, the storyline in many advertisements shows how sexual attractiveness is enhanced in a quantum leap through use of particular products.

Studies in advertising and marketing: What are they saying about religion, culture and the media?

Above, the example studies looked at were concerned with relationships between the media, culture and religion. They showed an interesting pattern of development from McLuhan’s naively positive view of television as prime educator through to greater recognition of the need for critical evaluation of the shaping influence of media on people’s thinking as proposed by scholars like Williams and Postman.

Below, a few examples of writings from the field of advertising and marketing will be examined to see what they are saying about relationships between religion and the consumerist lifestyle complex.

Recent thinking about the way consumer culture functions like a religion – especially in ‘branding’: The title of chapter 4 of Cooke’s (2012) book, Unique: Telling your story in the age of brands and social media, is "A new religion?" Cooke considered that commercial branding functioned like a religion; it created a receptive ‘resonance’ in consumers by propagating the following feelings: sense of belonging; being part of a select community; experiencing collective rituals; and, having a shared belief system. These are characteristics of religions, and hence Cooke considered that branding was "becoming a type of religious experience in America." (p.64). He added that there were "some intriguing parallels that are difficult to ignore. In many ways, corporate America is subtly attempting to replace religion with branding, at least in the West.” The parallels can be identified: but the claim that business corporations are part of a conspiracy to replace religion seems unrealistic. The religious function of consumerist advertising is more an unintended consequence.

Cooke’s interest in this question stemmed from his work as a media consultant to religious and not-for-profit organisations. His view of branding was not as strongly focused on the problems with commercial/consumer branding as was the case with writers like Klein (2000). These issues are discussed in the next chapter. He regarded branding as a broader phenomenon that operated across many sectors including the national, political, sports, religious, and volunteer etc. For him it meant using the media and advertising with integrity to ‘tell the story’ of a particular organisation, person, service or product in a compelling way. In a world where there was both hyper-connectedness and hyper-distractedness, he sought ways of helping organisations to get their unique message across where the message was not always held in high regard by the popular culture. In short, he was working for a better branded Christian church.

Cooke’s argument is as follows:

Today, brands are the tool for defining our place in the culture, and they have given our capitalist society markers for determining who we are, where we belong and our status in relation to others. Branding helps us express ourselves to the greater community of believers.

Brand communicates ideas, values and standards. What was expressed a generation ago through religious affiliation is now communicated through what we wear, the car we drive and the pen that sits in our pockets. To a secular culture brands and religion have merged.
. . . savvy marketers and advertisers have tapped into our global human aspirations for a sense of belonging, value, meaning and worship, and have turned ordinary, everyday products into brands – and eventually brands into religions.

In a secular society, brands are worshipped as gods. We value them, express loyalty to them and associate with others of like-minded belief. (Cooke, 2012, p. 66).

Beaudoin, in his book *Consuming faith: Integrating who we are with what we buy* (2003), claimed that the 'brand economy' could give people some sense of meaningfulness to life in the same way that religion did in the past. His interest was in encouraging Christians to take a more discerning stance in their engagement with consumerism.

Hanlon (2003) was also interested in the way that consumer brands functioned like belief systems. In his book *Primal branding*, he proposed a "Primal code" in which he identified seven key areas where he felt that consumer branding intersected with religion:-

1. **Creation stories.** Successful brands need a distinctive aetiological myth – the story of their origins that mythologised their history, uniqueness and popular status.
2. **Creeds.** Top brands need iconic belief statements, like the Nike "Just do it". These short creeds encapsulate their cachet and values; they are universally recognised; and people can readily identify with them, reinforcing their consumer faith.
3. **Icons.** Instantly recognisable logos function like religious symbols for successful brands. Words are unnecessary; consumer logos are invested with symbolic meaning that can even become part of individuals' sense of personal identity (see Montoya & Vandehey, 2003, *The brand called you.*)
4. **Rituals.** While shopping either in-store or online has become ritualised, this is intensified in branding where marketing, advertising and the purchasing experience itself seek to engage consumers in living out their consumer faith in a regular patterned way.
   - Also related in some way to the shopping rituals, and to the natural human need for rituals, are the celebratory ceremonials that headline the start of major sporting events – E.g. the Super Bowl, Olympic games, football grand finals, cricket Test matches etc. They appear to show how people need rituals that function like religious events.
5. **Pagans and non-believers.** These are the people who do not use a particular branded product or who follow the belief system of a rival. Belief polarities are therefore common: Coke vs Pepsi, PC vs Mac, i-Phone vs Android etc.
6. **Sacred words.** Great branded products tend to develop their own language or distinctive ‘lingo’. This contributes to a sense of ‘in group’ or brand loyalty that meshes with product cachet and which is projected and reinforced by creeds, icons and rituals.
7. **Leaders.** Great brands are often associated with their founders, brilliant developers and smart entrepreneurs. The cult of the leader can contribute to a brand’s following and commercial success (E.g. Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Mark Zukerberg). For faithful consumers, they exercise an influence that is comparable with that of religious leaders. A related cult of leaders is also evident in the celebrity endorsements of brands. Here, the cachet and popularity of endorsing movie and sports stars hopefully rub off onto the emotional association between consumers and brands.

Lindstrom (2007) too wrote about links between branding and religion. He thought that the activity of marketers and advertisers engaged in commercial branding was directly influenced by their awareness of the functions of religious faith. He proposed 10 areas where there were parallel functions between religion and branding – as if the former provided a useful template for consumer branding to follow. His 10 characteristics overlapped to some extent with Hanlon’s seven; Cooke (2012, p. 79) referred to them as the ‘Ten Commandments of Branding’.

The focus of the writers noted above has been on relationships between religion and commercial branding. The project here has a larger scope – it is concerned with the way in which the advertising-media conglomerate mediates a global religion of consumerism. For Catholics, it is interesting to note that this theme resonates with comments about critical interpretation of culture in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* by Pope Francis (2013). The Pope used semi-religious imagery to highlight the economic imperative that drives consumerism:

In the prevailing culture, priority is given to the outward, the immediate, the visible, the quick, the superficial and the provisional. What is real gives way to appearances. . . The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase. [There is] a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of . . . the sacralised workings of the prevailing economic system. (#62, 54)

The worship of the ancient golden calf (cf. *Ex 32:1-35*) has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose. The worldwide crisis affecting finance and the economy lays bare their imbalances and, above all, their lack of real concern for human beings; man is reduced to one of his needs alone: consumption. . . . [in] the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule. #55-56.

**Studies in advertising and marketing: What can marketers learn from religions to enhance business?**

The section above looked at writings which were about how marketing and advertising might be used to advance religions as brands. Here an interesting converse will be examined – where a marketer studied religious cults to see what might be learned from the devotion of their followers which in turn might be applied to advertising.
In 2004, Douglas Atkin published *The culting of brands: Turning your customers into true believers*. He spent time working with members of religious cults looking at what drove their spiritual quest, at their beliefs, and above all, at their loyalty to the religious group and its leaders. He hoped that marketers and advertisers could tap into these same psychological inclinations so that commerce could develop more of a ‘cult following’ in their clients. As noted above, the cult of leaders was a prominent part of his recommendations.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has considered what the research literature has said about relationships between the media, religion, culture and advertising. Even though only a sample of writings were covered, it showed how the growth of the consumerist complex – the ‘consortium’ of media, commerce, advertising and marketing – projected vivid, media-orchestrated imaginations of life in an omnipresent way that has fostered the development of a culture of consumerism. It fuels both consumption and consumer commerce in Westernised countries. And in many ways, it appears to function psychologically in the same ways as a religion. It gave people a program for living: it conditioned their fondest hopes; it offered ready-made packages of ambitions; it enlightened people about all the ‘must have’ experiences and acquisitions; it was a source of beliefs and values; it helped form personal identity; it projected a panoply of role models (saints) to emulate; it created communities of the like-minded; it was global; and its role in enhancing human life was both unparalleled and taken-for-granted as normal reality. If this is what pre-occupied your life, it is understandable that there would be little need or time for formal religion. Secularisation cannot be meaningfully understood apart from this perspective.

If the consumerist complex can be construed as functioning like a religion, then to that extent a study of religions is justified in examining it critically. The next two chapters look into a pedagogy for doing this.

**References**


Chapter 6

Decoding the mise-en-scène of contemporary consumerist lifestyle: A pedagogy for religious education

The previous chapter looked into research literature on relationships between the media, culture and religion. In tracking through the ideas of Marshall McLuhan to the work of sociologist Raymond Williams and educator Neil Postman, as well as noting some writings in the area of marketing and advertising, it identified a developing theme: that consumerist lifestyle was functioning psychologically like a dominant, global religion. The de facto consortium of media, commerce and marketing could be interpreted as projecting this lifestyle vividly through media-orchestrated imaginations of what life should be like. For many in Westernised societies, the projection of consumerist lifestyle became the principal spiritual and moral reference point in their culture. It fostered new beliefs and values, and a sense of the community in like-minded consumers. It conditioned people’s hopes and ambitions, and provided much of the identity building resources that they internalised in the construction of their sense of personal identity. And it was a relatively secure religion in that its world view was taken for granted as a natural reality that was therefore hidden from scrutiny and critique.

Because consumerist lifestyle can be interpreted as a religion, or at least as a secular style of spirituality, it can be argued that it should be studied critically in religious education, along with other religions. This chapter and the next propose a pedagogy for doing just this.

The film studies term mise-en-scène was explained in the previous chapter so that it could be used as an analytical tool for exploring the way religions (and ideologies) help create the background web of meanings that people reference themselves to when constructing meaning, values and plans for life.

This chapter will describe a pedagogy for comparing and contrasting the mise-en-scènes of medieval Christianity and contemporary consumerist lifestyle/religion. This unlikely pedagogy has two useful justifications. It draws attention to the ways in which two very different religions, in different cultures at different times made significant use of visual imagery to propagate and sustain their mise-en-scènes. And by using a religious framework for analysis, the pedagogy highlights how consumerism appears to function like a religion for its believers.

As noted previously, accessing the audiovisual web materials associated with these chapters is essential for appreciating the impact of visual imagery that is being discussed, and which is a central theme in this project. For free access contact: g.rossiter@bigpond.com

Contrasting the mise-en-scène in medieval Christian spirituality with that of contemporary consumerist lifestyle

The task here is to colour in the mise-en-scène of traditional medieval Christian spirituality and contrast it with the mise-en-scène of contemporary secular spirituality (or consumerist lifestyle); this involves a re-visiting, and follow through on, the earlier work of William Kuhns described in the previous chapter. It will consider how the contemporary consumerist lifestyle complex has a shaping influence on people's thinking about life, values and beliefs.
in ways that have parallels with the all-encompassing religious view of life that dominated traditional mediaeval Christian spirituality. Special attention is given to the mediation of influence through the visual.

At some points the comparisons may appear contrived. But in terms of a pedagogical approach to appraising contemporary culture, such weaknesses can be accommodated because the ultimate purpose of the procedure is to prompt educators (and in turn, their students) to think more critically and imaginatively about the values and assumptions underpinning consumerism. It is not a matter of proving particular imaginative comparisons, but encouraging others to engage in creating their own. Nevertheless, the comparison draws attention to the psychological and social functions of traditional religious spirituality, as well as to those of contemporary consumerist ‘religion’. It thus brings both into analysis and scrutiny, with special attention to the mediation of popular imagery.

**How the mise-en-scène of traditional, medieval Christian spirituality was sustained by religious artefacts**

The discussion here complements and follows up the treatment of medieval Christian spirituality in chapters 3 and 4, with a special focus on the psychological functions of the visual.

The works of religious art in early medieval Christian churches were more like films than paintings because of their religious story-telling and symbolic purposes. They were both narrative and symbolic/theological in their meaning. Christians got many of their religious cues from them. The content of practically all the art they could see was religious. This changed after the renaissance when more humanistic material appeared. In large letters above the main entrance to the duomo in Cittadella, Italy are the words *Domus Dei et Coeli Porta* – The house of God and the gate to heaven. This summed up the place of the church in the lives of Christians at the time. A sense of connection to the spiritual/religious world came through the religious artistry. It reinforced their beliefs because there in front of them was imagery that reminded them of what they believed in and it gave a sense of communal assurance and validation to those beliefs. For those who did not travel extensively, and this was the majority, the religious world depicted in their churches described their small universe. They drew on its religious imagery to understand that universe and their place in it.

At least six different types of message-communicating formats can readily be identified in medieval European religious art.

1. **Narrative depiction of biblical events** and stories from the Bible, both Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. They chronicled the events of Christian salvation history and served to imaginatively connect the present Christians with these saving events.
2. **Linking current religious practice with salvation history.** This emphasised the making present again of the saving action in the original events. For example: a painting of the baptism of Jesus beside the church baptismal font.
3. **Locating Biblical events in the local landscape.** Events in the life of Jesus like the infancy narrative, the crucifixion or the deposition from the cross painted within a readily identifiable local landscape – E.g. a Bellini painting in Venice with the recognisable profiles of local towns and churches as the background location.
4. **Locating local saints and religious heroes within the Biblical events.** Symbolically making the saving events present again and reconnecting with the original were illustrated by having well known and venerated recent local saints depicted as being present. For example: Saints Francis and Anthony adoring the Christ child along with the Magi.
5. **Locating key local political and power figures in the Biblical stories.** This went beyond connections through key saints to include local people in the Biblical story, especially the rulers and nobility. This sort of inclusion had a long history as illustrated in the 5th century mosaics at San Vitale in Ravenna where the emperor Justinian and empress Theodora were given prominent positions in the religious pictures.
6. **Key saints coming back to make saving interventions.** This highlighted the religious power of the saints in present times when they came back and effected change. E.g. In Venetian paintings St Mark came back to confound the Muslims with his theology, and in another instance to rescue Muslims from a shipwreck. One painting in Mantova showed St Francis reminding God about a pact made with the Duke of Mantova that Christians who died in the city would go straight to heaven.

The subject matter of the art was spiritual and religious. It was a visual narrative theology. It called for reflection and meditation – and in turn, review of personal life in relation to the transcendent. It constantly reminded believers of the bigger picture that this life was just a preparation for the next life after death. It was intended to inspire awe, adoration and devotion. Also prominent was fear of the devil and of going to hell for all eternity – a powerful motivation to live a moral Christian life.

The art identified primal religious heroes and role models for faith in the biblical and historical records – Jesus, Mary, Hebrew bible heroes, the Apostles and Christian saints. In addition, a cult of relics developed where the remains of saints were revered as sources of religious power that was protective, enabling and miraculous. Also art-related was the religious pilgrimage to holy places. Religious rewards and remission of sins were associated with pilgrimages. Pilgrims got identifying badges showing the successful completion of their devotional journeys. In villages, small mini-pilgrimages to a church outside the town, often up a hill, were instituted; even those who could not travel the notable pilgrimages then had their own small town option.
The art also served to remind people of their shared Christian beliefs, helping give them a sense of faith community. It complemented the religious rituals of belonging and helped communicate a sense of religious identity. The prominence of clergy and religious communities reinforced the social, political and religious stratification of society; the social structure was hierarchical and power-dominated. Everyone had their place from birth – their station in life; and relatively few could change their position in that network. Joining a religious order or the priesthood could change social status considerably for any who were low down in the social order.

The visual religious imagery called on believers to reflect on their valued place in the divine universe and in the Christian church. This pointed them towards a deeper meaning to life beyond its surface level. They were reminded of their affinity with the saints and fellow Christians.

Christians’ access to the biblical texts themselves depended on their level of literacy and education; most were illiterate and therefore more dependent on visual imagery as their main record of salvation history. The bible remained the central identifying cultural artefact of Christianity. It became even more prominent after the Reformation and the inventing of the printing press, when popular access to the bible in the vernacular first developed.

The church bells were the aural reinforcement of the visual architectural dominance that the local church had in the village, and in the larger cities by the cathedrals. The bells, especially at Angelus time, divided up the day’s time periods. Time was also partitioned according to the hours of the Divine Office celebrated in the monasteries. Sunday was by God’s decree the day of rest and religious observance. Mass and religious rituals complemented the narrative theology in the artistry. The liturgical cycle organised life around the remembrance of religious events and the festivals of saints; these celebrations were like re-enactments of the events making for reconnection. In a sense, the prominence of religious art signified a society that was ‘overdosed’ on religion. Other characteristics of medieval Christian spirituality were summarised in chapters 3 and 4.

The popular cultural imagery in contemporary Westernised societies that mediates a different mise-en-scène: A research pedagogy for comparing ‘religious’ functions of medieval Christianity with aspects of contemporary consumerist lifestyle.

This section describes a research pedagogy used with educators. Suitably modified, it could be used with senior school students. It looks at some aspects of medieval Christian spirituality that can have appear to have parallel functions in aspects of contemporary consumerist lifestyle.

Aspects of consumerist lifestyle can appear, with a little imagination, to be serving the same psychological functions as aspects of medieval Christianity. Some comparisons are more plausible than others; this variance is the down side of a useful pedagogy that highlights significant differences in the way imagery is used to envision the good life.

E.g. The mall is like a medieval cathedral; a trip to the designer outlet is like a contemporary pilgrimage; the religious authority of God and church are in consumerist lifestyle replaced by the authority of the individual; the religious idea of life after death is dismissed – life is just for the here and now.

While the images to which people are exposed today include much that is informative and educational, here attention is given only to the imagery concerned with consumerism. Because it looks towards the potential problems with excessive and naïve responses to meaning-making imagery, this analysis can appear negative and biased; this is the unintended impression that can come from an approach that is purposefully diagnostic.

One can speculate about how contemporary consumerist lifestyle as a type of new religion compares with or contrasts with the functions of the following. And consideration can be given to how this is evident in the prevailing imagery.

In the pedagogy used with postgraduate students, the first step was to cover the material discussed in chapter 5; secondly, some of the visuals associated with medieval Christian spirituality were viewed before the students were given a research task; this was then to be followed up with the pooling and discussion of their findings. Either individually or in pairs, students were each given one of the topics below to investigate. They were to speculate on whether aspects of contemporary consumerist lifestyle had any potential similarities and differences in function with the named item in medieval Christian practice.

Aspects of medieval Christianity for speculating about contrasts and comparisons with contemporary consumerist lifestyle.

| 1. The religious authority of God and church |
| 2. The omnipresence of a dominant religious culture |
| 3. The church as the way to God |
| 4. Heaven, hell and purgatory |
| 5. Guilt, sin, forgiveness, redemption and faith |
| 6. Religious faith community and religious identity |
Looking into some of the results of the research pedagogy

The religious imagery that sustained a traditional medieval Christian spirituality, as well as more contemporary Christian versions, is still available for those who choose to relate to it. For many secularised Christians, and those who are not religious in any way, there is a wealth of visual imagery in popular culture that suggests how life could be lived and which informs their mise-en-scène.

Drawing on the discussions with postgraduate students, the following reports some of the contrasts that were identified. Parallels, similarities and differences are given for some of the above listed areas of investigation. Keywords in bold type will help identify the comparisons. The notes here will try to give a brief, general picture, signposting an iconography that could influence people’s spirituality.

Domus Dei et Coeli Porta. An obvious parallel to the cathedral and church is now the shopping Mall or Designer Outlet centre. Whereas medieval Christian imagery concentrated on the spiritual/religious dimension as the inspiration for journeying faithfully through daily life towards your goal in heaven, now the imagery, especially from the consumer/advertising industries, is directed towards getting the most out of life right now – that is, exclusively concerned with lifestyle, consumerism and entertainment. As the song by Freddie Mercury said: “I want it all, and I want it now.” (By the British rock band Queen from 1989).

As consumerism reaches increasingly beyond the acquisition of things to the enhancement of the person, the goal of marketing becomes not only to make us dissatisfied with what we have, but also with who we are. As it seeks ever more ways to colonise our consciousness, consumerism both fosters and exploits the restless, insatiable expectation that there has got to be more to life. And in creating this hunger, consumerism offers its own remedy – more consumption. (Eckersley, 2006, pp. 11-12)

Dominance of religious culture. In medieval Christianity, the culture was dominated by religion with its dominance reflected in religious imagery. Religion pervaded ordinary life. There was little opportunity to deviate from the religious system. But today there is considerable diversity in cultural meanings and individuals have choice as to those to which they will subscribe. Religion has little prominence in popular culture and imagery, and where it does figure, the image tends to be negative (Fenn, 2001; Martin, 2005). Christianity is regarded by many as out of date and largely irrelevant. And the prominence of Islam is perceived as in a worrying clash with Western civilisation.

God and church. As noted in chapter 4, in traditional Christian faith, God was considered to provide the overarching authority, the source of authenticity, and the verification of absolute certainty for the believer. And this was mediated on earth through the church. Now, for many people, it is the personal self that has taken on board this powerful role. Individuals will decide themselves what to believe, and even what they think is true in the spiritual domain (Hughes, 2007). For a number who still identify themselves as nominally Christian, the church has taken an advisory role as an optional, background infrastructure for meaning in life (Hughes, 2007).

There is no room for the idea of God as a supreme being in consumerist lifestyle. But through the experience of extravagance and luxury, individuals themselves can feel like they are being treated as ‘gods’.

For children growing up in a secularised culture, some may not hear the word ‘God’ until they go to school. Or they may hear it from their parents or friends or on television in the form of an expression of surprise or exhilaration “Oh my God!” when something wonderful happens. In her research on children’s prayer, Mountain (2004, pp. 114, 141) showed that this expression sometimes confused children who wondered whether “Oh my God” was intended to be a prayer. What was once a core phrase in religious faith has become secularised into an everyday expression. OMG has not only become an acronym in texting and social media, but even a brand name for clothing and fashion outlets (E.g. OMG and Pinterest, 2013.) Google searches with “Oh my God” coupled with other key words gave the following
results: More than 8.4 million hits were recorded for the Google search “Oh my God” fashion. When experience is substituted there were 20.9 million, with 5.3 million for faith and 5.5 million for religion.

**Consumer heaven, hell and purgatory.** You do not have to wait until after death to get to consumer heaven; consumer heaven is ‘here and now’ – just visit your local mall or go online and ‘see, click, and buy’.

If shopping has become the activity through which we try to give meaning to our lives, the shopping malls that now embellish every city are the shrines we build to this power. . . there is a powerful and carefully manufactured psychology to the shopping mall. . . [it] feels quite different from the world outside. We enter a trance-like state when we enter one, a sort of meditation in which the mantra that focuses our attention is the promise of acquisition. The mall provides insulation against a hostile world. In a perverse way, shopping malls are liberating; we feel that all those goods, all that power are there for us.

Shopping is a response to our existential depression, when the world seems to overwhelm us, when we feel we have been put on earth only to drag ourselves through a life of drudgery. Fleetingly we can break out of and rebel by going shopping. (Hamilton, 2003, pp. 75-76).

For some, heaven is their experience of being part of the exhilaration of enthusiasts at a sports stadium – or in watching the event in comfort at home before large flat screen TV.

Similarly, consumer hell can be existential – and not a punishment after death. It might be interpreted as a situation where all one’s consumer products fail, or where consumer aspirations are totally frustrated. Consumer purgatory might be the ongoing state where individuals continually feel a low level of frustration and anxiety because their consumer wants constantly exceed their economic capacities. Consumer debt might also be another aspect of consumer Purgatory. Even having a disastrous social media profile with few ‘likes’ has been reported as a version of hell.

**Guilt, sin, forgiveness, redemption and faith.** There is little if any sense of guilt in the advertising consumer complex. There may well be frustration where individuals are not able to get all they want or a sense of lost opportunity if a bargain is missed. If there was any feeling of guilt about unbridled consumption, this could be interpreted as ‘losing one's faith in consumerist religion’.

Similarly, there is little sense of sin or moral failure in consumerist culture. As noted above for guilt, a consumer sin might be interpreted as a failure to pull off a good deal or bargain. If there is little if any sense of guilt or sin, one would anticipate that there would be no place for the ideas of forgiveness, redemption and salvation. However, it is likely that many could ‘forgive’ themselves for any consumerist excesses. As one advertisement put it: “If it’s a bargain, then it’s worth it.” Where the word redemption is used today, it is commonly associated with the paying out of rewards from consumer loyalty programs or from gift vouchers.

Salvation could be interpreted as being in the readily available state of consumer heaven. In a culture where the idea that you can have anything you want is cultivated, and where shopping, purchasing and consumption are proposed as key components of freedom, personal identity and distinctive individuality, you can appear to "have it all now". Having faith means believing implicitly in this system of consumerist thinking that in turn is underpinned by consumerist ideology. In this context, ‘losing your faith’ or even having doubts may well be a sign of good health.

**Religious faith community and religious identity.** Contemporary imagery suggests that what you buy is a statement about who you are and what you want to be. In other words, consumerism appeals to people’s identity vulnerability. For example, for many young people, the music they download and the clothing they purchase, and those they befriend on Facebook are all means of personal identification and self-expression, moving them closer to those who share the same likes and choices. This is an easy-going, democratic way of finding community.

While freedom of choice is a central mantra of contemporary culture, there is evidence that some are not really free because their lives are shaped to an extent they would not want to admit by the fashions proposed by consumer imagery. For some, the identity they want to project is strongly influenced by what they think people important to them think about them (de Botton, 2004). Some see their identity as enhanced by wearing the right brands of clothing and having the ‘right stuff’ as regards mobile phones, tablets, cars etc. (Klein, 2000; Quart, 2003). Also significant is the brand power and brand currency. For example, a basic pair of flip-flops might cost $3, but when it has a Calvin Klein logo printed on it, its accepted value may go up to $50.

Today’s visual imagery appeals to individualism which is highly prized. In short, the imagery is about “Me, Me, Me” just as the words “i” and “my” are prominent in advertising and websites. And it proposes that you get much of your fulfillment through what you buy.

While medieval people might have looked at religious paintings and felt some identifying connection with the Christian community, today people may similarly feel connected with the group or ‘club’ that identifies itself through the brands they are subscribing to, and they share in the status and cachet that go with those brands. For example, if you are a Prada handbag person or a Porsche owner, when you see the luxurious advertisements for these brands, you can feel some exhilaration, a feeling of being part of that club, and almost unconsciously this validates who you think you are.
Contemporary imagery promotes the idea that people have relatively unlimited scope and freedom to do what they want in life. But the reality is different. With many more years in education, young people’s expectations for employment commensurate with their educational attainments, and its associated lifestyle, are frustrated by lack of opportunity. University graduates cannot find jobs in their chosen field. The soaring youth unemployment rates, especially in Europe, are a key indicator of this problem. This generates personal and social frustrations that affect personal wellbeing and mental health.

In the past, people understood their identity as essentially religious, intimately connected to the religious world mediated by the paintings and the geographical significance of the churches and cathedrals, and expressed in their religious spirituality. Now people are self-referencing as individuals who see themselves to be secular as portrayed in popular imagery. And they can think that the ‘success’ of their identity is measured in terms of what ‘stuff’ they possess or what experiences they have had. By paying more attention to the way they may be relating to the cultural meanings of consumerism as reflected in media iconography, people may be helped to articulate more clearly what they are being conditioned to seek in life both consciously and subconsciously. This involves reflecting on what it means to be happy and fulfilled, and appraising the ways in which they may be drawing on consumer culture to meet their needs – this proposes a potentially valuable role for an education in identity.

**Religious art.** In modern times, art is no longer limited to the churches, galleries and the dwellings of the rich. Almost everyone can adorn their homes with their own choice of art. But more prominent as the major source of contemporary imagery is film, television, and communications technologies, including the social media. People can now create their own personalised imagery and texts and post these to social media.

Clothing has long been art-related to some degree. In the past, people wore set colours, uniforms and traditional dress to celebrate and reinforce their sense of individual, local and national identity; and this still happens today to a lesser extent. Now people feel a need to have their own distinctive, personalised style of dress, even if from a commercial point of view they are in fact conforming to the ‘uniform’ that the marketers are proposing as uniquely individualistic styles. ‘Crop tops’ showing the bare mid-riff are ‘out’ after having a good run for a few years; holes in your jeans seems to be having a ‘resurrection’ in coming back strongly into fashion, while exposing the shoulders is evidently a sign of being in tune with the latest.

Personal statements are also made on clothing (in addition to the branding); for example, Tee shirts have become renowned for displaying messages; you choose what message or statement you want your clothing to make. One has to search to find a tee shirt without something emblazoned on it. The Italians have invented a new type of shop to cater for making your own personalised Tee shit statement – the Teeshirtaria.

The messaging and self-identifying personal statements can go even further because today you can readily have them engraved on your own body. Tattoos, body marking and piercing have a long tradition in some cultures. The use of identity mediating tattoos and body piercing has now become more universal and more popular. In addition to giving a sense of distinctiveness, it also signals belonging to a tattooed brigade.

**Religious narrative/story and religious texts.** Just as has been the case since the dawn of human history, meaning about life is communicated in story form and often visually. In medieval Christianity before the Renaissance, all of the visual narratives were religious. Film, television, digital technologies and the Internet are now the principal story tellers, and hence they have become the major spiritual and moral reference points for people, displacing religion which tends to get little if any mention in the prominent narratives of popular culture. Every media narrative, even the 30 second commercial, has an implied world-view. And constant exposure to the implied mise-en-scène of the advertising consumer complex may have a significant influence on the development of a personal mise-en-scène. People can readily end up mirroring the media value systems to which they have been exposed. Subconsciously, they can adopt a consumerist-orchestrated sense of personal identity that plays out in a prominent way in their behaviour – especially their retail behaviour.

With the social media, individuals themselves have become the authors of their own visual and textual stories; they script their day to day experience and adventures for anyone and everyone to peruse, constantly updating their digital persona, and even being able to monitor their scoring of ‘likes’ as a measure of validation. Previously, there may have been the religious ritual of saying Grace before meals. Now people will photograph the food on their plate and put the image on Instagram so the whole world will be able to know what they are going to eat.

Research on the personal and social aspects of social media is growing rapidly. To note only a few examples: Personal effects of the new communications technologies (Giddens et al. 2011); Potential influence on group identity and self-esteem (Barker, 2009); Reduction in social involvement and well-being (Burke et al., 2010). Time spent on social media can impact on personal relationships and lifestyle. A report in The Guardian newspaper noted:

> A study has found the average British adult spends more time gazing at their smart phones than their partner’s eyes. While smart phone owners typically have 97 minutes a day with their loved one, they devote a full two hours to their phones, according to research by O2 and Samsung. (Garside, 2013)
Interestingly, of 16 different functions that people can engage in through their smart phones, making a telephone call comes in only as the 5th ranked activity (The Blue, 2012).

Today it is not uncommon to see almost every pedestrian in a group involved with their smart phones – texting, browsing, watching TV, listening to music (perhaps with headphones), playing a game, or even talking to someone. Seeing two people conversing or holding hands can be the exception. Many cannot stop fingering their phones for a few seconds as they cross a street corner. One journalist commented: “Almost every idle moment can now be relieved with a sneaky peek at your phone. If boredom is an itch, we scratch it with our smartphones.” (Freedman, 2011). Part of the problem is that people have become so accustomed to being digitally distracted by trivia that they seem unable or fearful to spend even a minute with just their own thoughts – and perhaps also in serious conversation. The potential problems are not just psychological. The accident rate for pedestrians is increasingly being attributed to distraction during smartphone use (Wyle, 2013). It is also the distraction to car drivers that results in many accidents. The situation in the United Kingdom was reported as follows:

> Children crossing the road are “distracted” by texting friends, “tweeting” messages, surfing the internet, playing games or visiting Facebook instead of paying attention to traffic. Alarming new statistics reveal that serious road accidents involving young children are at a ten-year high – particularly among girls.

> A third of 14-year-olds “reported that they were distracted when crossing a road due to using personal mobile technology.” But the problem starts much earlier. “By the age of ten almost half of children have received their first mobile phone,” says the report. “By age 12, 73% of children have a mobile phone. More significantly, they use their mobile phone functions much more than younger children do. Because of this 25% acknowledge that they themselves have been distracted by personal technology when crossing a road.” (Massey, 2013).

In meetings, lecture rooms and even in conversations, many people are apparently only half focused on what is going on because they have one eye checking incoming emails and social media (Cooke, 2012). While supposedly ‘multi-tasking’, they may be losing the capacity to give anyone or any task their undivided, focused attention. While physically present, they may at the same time be potentially very far away, listening for ‘distant voices’. Most of the stream of their incoming digital information is descriptive and not about anything serious or value laden, and hence one might conclude that their attention is being cluttered and distracted with relatively insignificant trivia – like an ongoing digital ‘trivial pursuit’. If Neil Postman were alive today he would in all likelihood write about this development as “distracting ourselves to death” (in the same vein as his 1985 book about television Amusing ourselves to death).

**Life after death.** The imagery in contemporary popular culture is almost exclusively about the here-and-now – how to get:- instant gratification, ‘buzz’, maximising new experience and pleasure, and, validation of your personal identity. It is not that spiritual and moral dimensions are denied, but they have little or no place in the imagery, so it is easy to come to feel that they do not exist or have minimal significance. In addition, if there is a spiritual dimension to life, then there is not much one can know about it with any degree of certainty – one of the aspects of what is described as cultural postmodernity (Horell, 2004). ‘Transcendence’ seems to have been replaced by ‘personal exhilaration’. Whether or not there is a benign or punishing afterlife is a question that can now be left till your death.

**Church bells and religious music.** In the past, church bells and religious music called people to stop and think about the spiritual world and their place in it. The aural parallel today would be popular music – it is like the soundtrack to people’s lives (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006). It is particularly significant for young people. Popular music provides a vivid universal language and medium for the expression of youth needs, interests and aspirations. It is like a pervading atmospheric presence that keeps many ideas, life expectations and emotions on a ‘low simmer’. This is particularly the case for sexuality, relationships, and the ideas of freedom, individuality, pleasure, and what is ‘cool’.

The way in which young people all over the world share a common language and interest in pop music is not without its significance. It supports an international approach to forming an outlook on life, which is relevant to youth spirituality. Music and its lyrics can trigger emotions and resonate with young people’s moods, concerns, hopes and anguish. Along with film and television, it provides the backdrop to young people’s perception of the world.

While often an element of youth culture from which many adults prefer to keep at a safe distance, the ‘music video’ is a key dimension to young people’s love for music. With their many evocative images, music videos increase the capacity of popular music to massage young people’s emotions and moods. With headphones or earplug speakers people can now listen to music from their i Pod, mp3 player or smart phone at any time anywhere. It is as if not a minute should be wasted so even in those intermediate times your enjoyment can be continued uninterrupted.

The deconstruction of music videos has been a part of English studies for senior school students in some Australian states. The following extended quotation from an English teachers’ journal illustrates the insights that such a study can generate.

> Music has long been recognised as a form of popular culture with certain potency for communicating rhetorically. For young people struggling to find a place in communities dotted with shopping walls but with few community centres, in an economy whose major product is information, music videos play to the search for identity and an impoverished community.
Music, particularly rock, has always had a visual element. [but] viewers typically do not regard the music video as a commercial for an album or act. The videos cross the consumer’s gaze as a series of mood states. They trigger nostalgia, regret, anxiety, confusion, dread, envy, admiration, pity, titillation – attitudes at one remove from the primal expression such as passion, ecstasy and rage. The moods often express a lack, an incompleteness, an instability, a searching for location. In music videos, those feelings are carried on flights of whimsy, extended journeys into the arbitrary.

That music videos present compelling mood states that may claim the attention of the viewer is not a matter of happenstance. In the struggle to establish and maintain a following, artists utilise any number of techniques in order to appear exotic, powerful, tough, sexy, cool, unique.

Born of an amalgam of commercialism, television and film, for the purpose of selling rock albums, music videos frequently employed well-established verbal and visual symbols in telling a story or making a point. If no such symbol exists, music videos coin their own which, given the ubiquity of the medium, quickly find their way into the vernacular (Rybacki & Rybacki, 2006, p. 59).

The saints. Celebrities and film/tv/sports stars seem to have become the modern saints. By following their doings people can feel somehow connected with celebrity. Also, the modern saints are the icons of fashion and tastes. But there can be a down side to this hero worship when people have an ongoing feeling of low-level anxiety because they know they will never measure up to the standards set by the stars when they are continually confronted by images of the richest, most beautiful and most fulfilled people on the planet and compared to them, everyone feels like a loser … Celebrities invent an unattainably attractive cool personality, an image which makes insecure teenage fans feel so inadequate (Fountain & Robbins, 2000, pp. 151, 155). Just as in the past people read the lives of saints for their spiritual edification, now they can follow the trails of their celebrity icons in detail through both television, social media, newspapers and magazines – especially women's magazines. Social media has been the ideal publicity platform for the new saints. It has taken the cult of celebrities to a totally new, omnipresent level. It is also supported by the paparazzi, or photojournalists, whose operation keeps up a steady supply of photographs of today’s saints for publishing in magazines or online. The private lives of the saints are now much more publicly available than ever before. They may well be helpful role models. How much time and energy goes into following today's saints becomes an issue for psychological health.

With people now projecting and self-publishing their own image on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc., they too can aspire to stardom and sainthood even if in a limited way. They do not have to be selected for a reality TV program to achieve stardom.

Shrines, relics and pilgrimages. The shrine (or special site for devotion) at the tomb of St Alban, England’s first martyr saint (in the cathedral at St Albans) was one of many examples of the focal points of popular medieval Christian pilgrimages. Now the shrines for consumerist pilgrims are the shops, local malls, factory outlets, and more recently the ‘designer’ outlets – the new ‘cathedrals’.

Previously, the relics of martyrs and saints were revered with devotion for their spiritual power that could help individuals save their immortal souls. Relics were greatly prized by local communities, giving medieval cities/towns a pre-eminence related to the importance of their patron saints; they were even motives for war (For example: what were believed to be the remains of St Mark were stolen from Alexandria by the invading Venetians).

Today’s consumer shrines are regarded as having considerable power to make people feel good in this life – consumer heaven is available now for whoever can afford it. The new ‘powerful relics’ are bought (paralleling the ‘indulgences’ in the late middle ages?) and taken to their new homely shrines, where ownership conveys personal satisfaction, status and cachet. The large branded paper and plastic shopping bags, as well as the badged purchases themselves, are like the old pilgrim badges signifying a successful pilgrimage and the acquisition of new relics. The metropolitan bus tours to the Outlet Centres are like contemporary pilgrimages to the consumer cathedrals. Visiting your local mall is the mini-pilgrimage.

In the extreme, some people travel overseas on consumer pilgrimages. One woman noted on the Trip Advisor website that she makes an annual visit from the United States to Montevarchi in Italy to get a complete new outfit from the exclusive Prada Outlet. It is so ‘high end’ that it is not even advertised in local street signage like other outlets. Below are personal testimonies from two Italian ‘pilgrims’:

Everyone likes to be well dressed. And if the clothes have a top label, it’s the best. The gorgeous little Prada symbol never goes unobserved. Better than the usual cheap 30 Euro slacks; at the Prada outlet these are 40 to 50 times more beautiful. Very beautiful bags that will enrage my friends.

I adore this outlet. It is organised; there is a vast selection of bags, wallets and accessories from Prada and Miu Miu. You don’t know where to look or where to start. Every dream has become a reality. Because for just 500 Euro you can buy a leather Prada bag. (Translated from Italian comments on the Trip Advisor Website 18/04/13)
Prayer, reflection and meditation. Medieval Christian art prompted prayer and meditation on how religion ought influence people’s lives. It directly linked them with the spiritual world, reminding them of the transcendent and of progress in saving their souls. Today, prayer is the expressed wish for something new to buy. The other parallel is consumerist meditation – pondering goods and advertisements, thinking about what you might like and what you might buy, constantly imagining how ownership of these things would be nice. It is concerned with the acquisition of goods for your use today and not on divine grace that will get you to heaven. It is meditation on what can fulfil your desires – and the ubiquitous presentation of goods in shops coupled with pervasive advertising are persistent invitations to consumerist meditation. Even the strip on football players is space that has been colonised by advertising. It would have been unimaginable in the 1950s to think that football and cricket players would be labelled with multiple advertising logos.

Reflection and prayer are about stopping and thinking about the spiritual and moral dimensions to one’s life. But the existential focus of contemporary imagery militates against the need to ‘stop and think’. And this can tend to encourage people subconsciously to direct all their time and attention to enjoying the now. iPods and smartphones etc. mean that you can keep yourself digitally distracted whenever there are a few minutes to fill in. Texting and paging through social media on a smartphone screen have now become common practice for people while walking or travelling from A to B. It is as if some cannot bear to be alone with their own thoughts, they need to be digitally engaged whenever they have a potential short period of aloneness. It may be that this development mediates a preoccupation with current experience and description of experience; this might promote too much living at the surface level of ‘description’ with a decreased capacity to be reflective and evaluative, and to think about life’s meaning.

The drive towards consumerism is atmospheric; it is difficult to avoid the overwhelming orientation towards consumption and acquisition. Individuals do not pay attention to all of the advertisements they are exposed to. They even accommodate and become insensitive to advertising, ignoring those that are of no interest to them, particularly when they interrupt television viewing. But the prevailing consumerist mise-en-scène of contemporary culture comes to be accepted as just the normal unquestioned reality because it is signified and highlighted by the omnipresence of advertising. It is difficult to take a critical stand on consumerism when that is the atmosphere people have been breathing since birth, the unchallenged social reality that gives direction to their lives.

The advent of the Internet has added new dimensions to consumerist meditation. The use of online purchasing is said to make shopping easier and more efficient, reducing the time and energy actually spent in shops. But for some, they now spend more time meditating on, and purchasing products online than they ever did in the shops. And this has resulted in an exponential increase in the work of Australia Post contractors who deliver parcels with goods bought online. Between 2011 and 2013 there was a 46% increase in Australian online purchases. The scope of products people can now preview and buy online goes well beyond what they might be able to see in a department store. And so the question arises as to how ‘healthy’ this consumerist meditation is, depending on the balance as regards time, energy, influence on spending discretionary income, and effects on personal relationships.

The consumerist meditation changes somewhat on the social media, even though commercial advertising has colonised the space. Here, individuals advertise and sell their own persona. The number of ‘likes’ scored and the extent of one’s ‘following’ are the rewards that make you feel good about the image you are cultivating. Just as the founder of Facebook predicted a link with personal identity, the medium has become the space where individuals project their own ‘personal brand’.

They’re keeping up with their friends and family, but they’re also building an image and identity for themselves, which in a sense is their brand. They’re connecting with the audience that they want to connect to. It’s almost a disadvantage if you’re not on it [Facebook] now. (Zukerberg, 2009).

Some who spend a lot of time tending their Facebook projection give an impression of narcissism. They seem to preview much of their life in terms of how it is going to ‘present’ on Facebook. They cultivate the image they want to represent. In turn, they can become so preoccupied with this self-publication process that there appears to be little space around their person for anyone else; and so it is easy for others to be treated as useful infrastructure to their grand personal designs. It is not that there are no concerns being raised about the positive and negative influences of social media. There is not space here to consider the research.

What is authentic personal identity then becomes problematic. Or perhaps it is just the modern technological way of projecting identity by people who are insecure. Oscar Wilde’s 1905 comment on the insecure seems even more pertinent today to those whose identity is heavily invested in Facebook. “Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.” (Wilde, 1905).

One recent poster noted: “I hope one day that you will have the wonderful life you are pretending to have on Facebook.”

Priests. Kuhns (1969) considered that the entertainment milieu had taken on psychological functions that formerly were the province of religion. The talk show hosts have become the new priests, helping people think through life’s meaning.
In the case of the *Dr Phil* show, his approach to teasing out the moral issues in people's lives could be taken as a valuable model for today's clergy. The relatively esoteric theological language in some church homilies might as well be about life on a distant planet as far as its relevance to the congregation is concerned. Relevance is an essential for theology if it is to have a meaningful role in enhancing people's spirituality (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, pp. 397-401).

**Sacramentality.** Christian sacraments are regarded as signs that communicate spiritual presence and power; they convey God's grace. The power that branded consumer goods conveys is personal satisfaction together with the sense of status that comes through the cachet of the brand. Consumerist sacramentality is evident in that the personal interest and desire for these products go beyond being satisfied with their normal function. People do not buy prestigious branded products just for function, but also to participate in the mystique and status of the brand itself – they are purchasing the signifying power of the brand. Consumer sacraments are not limited to key events in people's lives like Christian sacraments, but they cater for all areas of goods and services, even though some items are marketed as signifying a rite of passage.

**The blessed Sacrament – real presence.** A parallel to the reservation of the blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle for Christian devotion and reflection is evident in the consumer goods in shop windows and in displays for consumer contemplation – and now in online advertising. They are not locked away but are given maximum visual exposure in attractive arrangements to entice the desires of potential consumers.

**Feast days.** The Christian religious feasts of Christmas, Easter and Shrove Tuesday have been turned into consumerist feasts colonised by advertising for the purchasing of presents and celebratory food and drink. Markets have been astutely 'cashing in' on other non-religious events, turning these into lucrative consumer feast days as well – for example, in addition to Mothers day and Fathers day etc., there has been significant growth in the economic significance of Valentine's Day and Halloween.

**Religious indulgences.** The word indulgences traces back to Christianity in the 15th and 16th centuries where the performance of nominated rituals and religious practices (e.g. a pilgrimage) were said to help remove the temporal punishment due to sin – it was considered that even though sins were forgiven, a punishment was still owing because God had been offended, and this punishment was measured in terms of time spent suffering in Purgatory. A 'plenary' indulgence was special because it remitted all punishment due to sin and left people with a clean slate as far as purgatory was concerned. Through good deeds and religious practices, individuals could gain indulgences or 'get out of jail' cards for nominated periods of punishment in purgatory. The church scandal of selling indulgences precipitated Martin Luther’s first steps in the Reformation.

“Discover the many ways you can *indulge*” is the theme for the Castle Towers shopping precinct in North Western Sydney. The prominence of the words 'indulge' and 'indulgence' in advertising shows how they readily translate into contemporary consumerism with probably a more direct etymological link to the origins of the words than the religious indulgences that were prominent for many centuries in Catholicism. It is not difficult to imagine what a 'plenary indulgence’ could mean – a shopping expedition where you could get all that you could ever want!

The shopping gift card is a parallel to the old religious indulgences – it entitles you to a specified monetary dose of consumption.

It is noted from the following Internet headlines (27/07/2013) that the matter of religious indulgences is not dead.

- One hell of a deal: Pope Francis offers reduced time in Purgatory for Catholics that follow him on Twitter. Court in charge of forgiveness of sins says those that follow upcoming event via social media will be granted indulgences
- Vatican offers 'time off purgatory' to followers of Pope Francis tweets
- Sinners able to earn indulgences by following Pope Francis on Twitter

**Stations of the cross.** Paralleling the devotion of moving around the 12 episodes commemorating the passion and death of Jesus, is the movement from brand shrine to shrine in the shop. This is particularly evident in the shrines in a specialist cosmetics shop or duty free store (The 12 stations could be: L’Oréal, Maybelline, Dior, Chanel, Gucci, Estée Lauder, L’Occitane, Yves Saint Laurent, Calvin Klein, Elizabeth Arden, Clarins, Clinique. etc.). Or it could be a consumer meditation across 12 shops in the designer outlet mall.

**Novenas.** A novena involved performing a religious ritual (like Mass) for seven or nine days with a particular purpose in mind. Consumer rewards programs are a parallel – you score consumer rewards points for successive visits to purchase, or a free coffee once your score reaches the target number, or frequent flyer points.

Also paralleling special novena-like practices – such as the Nine first Fridays and the Six first Saturdays in Catholicism – are the retail Sales: the special opportunities to get your consumer goods at a bargain price. Bargains have become a significant part of consumerism because people feel that they are getting what they need as well the status in their chosen brands at a price below what they would normally have to pay. Sales and bargains add to the excitement and interest in shopping. Some follow the sales with ritual fervour. They will always be at the Boxing Day sales, New Year clearances, stocktaking sales, closing down sales etc.
Despite the rapid growth in online shopping, in-store ‘sales’ are still very popular. More than $2 billion was spent in the Boxing Day sales in Australia in 2013. Some consider that going to a department store sale is like a consumer rite of passage. Mortimer (2013) felt that sales were “consumer ritualism at its best” and extended the metaphor as follows: “There’s this new emerging shopper coming through. It’s not about economics and thrift and trying to save money. Shopping is almost a modern-day consumerist sport.” McNeilage (2013) added: “Regardless of income, gender or culture, we are all susceptible to the irrational nature of shopping.”

**The cost of spirituality.** In medieval Christianity the cost of spirituality could be demanding on individuals where the practice of tithing was in place. It was like a religious tax and it could be crippling for the poor. But it had a fixed place in the religious society. Today, consumer spirituality works on a user pays system. Individuals choose and purchase what they think will make them feel good.

At another level, some contemporary religious spirituality has been changed into ‘consumer spirituality’ – a product like others designed and sold to enhance your feel-good and sense of wellbeing.

Religious consumer spirituality emerges where religion becomes ‘business oriented’. For example: the Christian minister Rick Warren referred to himself as a ‘Stealth Evangelist’. He saw himself capitalising on a “new great awakening spiritually in America”. “I’m not a bureaucrat … I’m a spiritual entrepreneur” promising to “reduce your stress, focus your energy, simplify your decisions, give meaning to your life and … prepare you for eternity” (Baird, 2004, p. 18). The newspaper article on Warren said that he “encouraged ministers to think of their churches as businesses and congregations as customers.” It concluded that he was appealing to a notion of “a comforting God who acts like a great therapist in the sky” – thus compromising religious concerns for social issues and social justice. (Baird, 2004, P. 18).

Cooke (2012) advised churches and not-for profit organisations about how to present their message effectively through strong ‘branding’. His concern: “. . . in this hyper-connected, highly distracted world [with social media], how do you get your unique idea, project or vision on the radar of the people who need to know it?”(Cooke, 2012).

Beyond the way some religious people work with consumer spirituality is the non-religious version where self-help movements, New Age etc. seek to market practices that will enhance wellbeing. For example: 

> Thought Field Therapy: The most powerful technique you will ever experience. Learn how to eliminate fear, anxiety, stress, trauma, guilt, anger, phobias, jealousy, procrastination, addictions, lose weight and increase confidence and energy in minutes!! (Piccinotti, 2004, p.40).

**Religious words.** In summary, the pervasive way in which consumerist lifestyle functions like a religion is evident in the way that traditional religious words have now become prominent in the discourse of marketing, advertising and product desirability. The following is not an exclusive list that can be found in contemporary advertising: god, divine, heavenly, hell, angels, adore, grace, reverence, pilgrim, sin, indulgence, prayer, worship, believe, commitment. At designer outlet malls, one can find shops and/or brands such as the following:- Pilgrim, All Saints, St John, OMG and even True Religion.

**Summary of contrasts: Mise-en-scène in traditional and contemporary spiritualities**

For medieval Christianity, the narrative about life was spiritual and religious. It was directly concerned with the spiritual realm and the next life. People were called on to look beyond present life to its eternal consequences. God himself through the church validated the socio-religious structure of society. The mise-en-scène was about the ‘economy of salvation’. Asked about one’s identity, the answer would have included: I have an immortal soul created by God; with the help of Jesus, Mary and the saints, and through the church, I can save my soul.

By contrast, the dominant mise-en-scène today is almost exclusively existential – concerned only with the here and now. The iconic lines to a recent current official Pepsi Beyonce video encapsulate this: “Embrace your past; but live for now”. (Beyonce, 2013). If there is an afterlife, then that is a bonus, but it is not something towards which this present life is subordinated. The words ‘contemporary secular spirituality’ have been used to describe the situation. But the word spirituality is not fully appropriate; rather, the modern mise-en-scène is about lifestyle. Because all lifestyles, no matter how secular, have implied values and meanings about life, one can infer that they also have an embedded or implied spirituality; so it can be like a spirituality by default. But spiritual or spirituality would not be the descriptor that most people would choose to describe their lifestyle or outlook on life. Their answer to a question about identity might be likely to make reference to the following: What brand of smartphone they have; how well their social media account is projecting their desired image; and what is their status/popularity score in terms of ‘likes’, ‘friends’ and ‘followers’.
Some implications for religious education

It is unlikely and not appropriate that the clock can be turned back towards the spirituality of the medieval mise-en-scène. Hence, religious schools hoping to educate and enhance the spirituality of their relatively non-religious students (and this refers especially to religious education), need to explore more proactively the existential quality of contemporary spirituality. As explained in more detail in chapter 10 on critical pedagogy, religious education needs to help young people learn how to identify the values and meanings implied in all aspects of contemporary life, and how to appraise them in the light of wider community values. For many young people, this is where their spirituality is located. Hence it is argued that this approach should have a more significant and valued place in religious education curricula, especially in Australian Catholic schools where the religion curricula still tend to be more or less aligned with a traditional Christian spirituality. This proposal is contrary to the views of those who think that religious education should remain more or less exclusively concerned with formal religious content, and not with content that is more focused on personal development and on contemporary personal and social issues that do not appear to have an overt religious component.

In the history of school religious education in English speaking countries, both in state and religious schools, there has been a well-established view that studying religion is linked with the personal development of students. For example, in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, one expression of this linkage, dating from the work of Grimmitt (1983), that is still prominent today is that religious education should be concerned not only with students’ learning about religion but also with learning from religion in ways that enhance their personal development (Byrne & Kieran, 2013). But in most contemporary religious education, the content is still concerned mainly with traditional religion. And as noted above, some consider that venturing too far from religion into personal development content is straying from its religious focus. But if the view of Kuhns (1969) about the entertainment milieu functioning like a religion, and the follow up argument here showing how contemporary consumerist lifestyle is like a pervasive religion, are both given credence, then one could argue that it is pertinent to religious education’s natural focus to study critically this new ‘religious’ phenomenon.

References


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Chapter 7

An example critique of some of the beliefs and values in ‘consumerist religion’

It has been argued that school religious education can make a valuable contribution to young people’s education, and in turn to their spiritual and moral development, whether or not they are religious. Most Australian young people, including those in Catholic schools, are not particularly religious. Neither are they anti-religious. They represent a range of spiritualities, with the majority fitting into the category of a relatively secular spirituality.

It is a given that the school education today emphasises the purpose of getting students to be well-informed, critical thinkers. Religious education should have a leadership role in the school curriculum in skilling students for interpretation and evaluation of spiritual and moral issues. Hence, at the end of chapter 4, the need for evaluation of different spiritualities according to community values was proposed so that students could make judgments about what constitutes ‘healthy’ elements in spirituality and what might be potentially unhealthy – and often the judgment would depend on what was a ‘healthy balance’.

This chapter exemplifies such an evaluation. Here the target will be some of the relatively hidden aspects of the mise-en-scène or ‘metanarrative’ of consumerist lifestyle, which was shown to function psychologically something like a religion or style of spirituality – expanding the commentary in chapters 5 and 6. If educators are to lead students in such evaluative studies, they themselves need to be familiar with the pertinent issues and arguments, and coherent and insightful in the way they talk about them.

Teasing out the mise-en-scène of contemporary lifestyle with a view to informing educators

To appraise the spirituality/values dimension to the mise-en-scène of contemporary consumerist lifestyle, some understanding of the psychology of globalised consumerism is needed. Again, special attention is given to the mediating visual imagery. Icons at one end of the spectrum are the beverages/food giants like Coca Cola and McDonalds. They can be found almost anywhere on the planet from Eastern Russia to the Tunisian desert and South America. Then there is a comprehensive range of consumer products, usually produced in countries with the cheapest labour and which are marketed globally. At the other end of the spectrum are the exclusive, designer luxury brands. These are like the ‘Formula One’ of consumer products; they have the top status and they set the bar for consumerism that plays out differentially across the rest of the spectrum; they highlight ‘in bright neon lights’ the unquestioned belief in the quest for happiness and personal identity through the buying and possession of designer goods. It is this latter area that will be considered here because it demonstrates principles that apply to varying degrees across the range of consumer goods and services. While not exhaustive, this partial analysis is proposed as an example of the sort of educational inquiry that is needed in the evaluation of consumerist lifestyle.

From bespoke for the wealthy towards designer status for whosoever can afford it

In earlier centuries in Western countries, it was only the wealthy who had bespoke clothing and luggage etc. made for them; bespoke was the badge of nobility and the very rich; only they could afford it. All of the items were one-off productions. For example, in Bond Street in London, there are shoe shops that still have the wooden casts of significant people for whom they made shoes in the 17th century to the present day. An example of costs: some today get bespoke watches made for them at costs above $20,000. Bespoke Birken handbags could cost $20,000. There is a waiting list of about 10 years for hand-made bespoke cars.
Formerly, this bespoke luxury was only evident amongst the wealthy. It was the taken-for-granted way they lived and the way they defined themselves to their peers. Anyone else who tried to dress ‘above’ their given ‘station’ in life was regarded disdainfully as a parvenu – someone who had recently come ‘into money’ but had no ‘culture’ or ‘breeding’. But with more widespread consumerism, this has all changed.

While the very exclusive bespoke consumerism remains, there has been a shift in production and marketing by the premier brands to make their exclusivity and status more widely available to whoever can afford it. The higher levels of discretionary income across the whole population have been targeted by offering designer cachet for all; and the desire for this cachet is widely promoted by ubiquitous advertising. Research indicates that both the rich and poor have the same strong aspiration for designer branded goods.

The premier brands try to retain a mystique of exclusivity and individuality (tapping into personal identity needs for distinctiveness) while at the same time catering to globalised markets. The trade-offs between exclusivity, price, image and industrialised production costs are carefully worked out. Abercrombie and Fitch were criticised for not making clothing for overweight people – they did not want ‘fat’ people to be seen wearing their brand. (McNally, 2013).

Another strong suite in this brand mystique is that possession of the ‘branded gear’ signifies that you are part of the exclusive club – you are ‘badged’. For example: women with Prada handbags have been seen turning the bag so that the triangular Prada emblem can be readily seen and identified; they assume that this label implies identification and recognition of their status and good taste. There are parallels in those with expensive sports cars; clubs of sports car enthusiasts exist where ownership provides entrée.

There are parts of the shopping precincts in most modern cities and airports where the exclusive label brands live. International status is achieved when they become fixtures in the designer label set. This process occurs because people all round the world learn to desire their products; their status is universally acknowledged in different cultures. If they were not marketable and did not develop their international status, they would not last long. The distinctive designer brand clubs cross national and racial boundaries. Australian companies such as Ugg, Elle McPherson and Billabong appear to have achieved some international repute as designer brands.

Why do people shop to buy designer status?

This question needs to be explored to identify the core psychological processes at work. Basically, people have become accustomed to wanting designer goods because possessing them makes them feel good. And it is a natural, healthy human quality to want to feel good. Perceived high quality ‘stuff’ has become an important external identity resource. In times when consumerism is both promoting and targeting ‘congenital identity deficiency’ (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, p. 121), people have been persuaded that having a well-recognised quality product enhances their sense of self-worth – and this registers on their feel-good indicator. This was evident in a segment from a recent documentary where a young Japanese woman living in a tiny apartment said that she felt escape and relief from her bleak home/work situation when she went out wearing her Gucci clothes and accessories – these made her feel great; she was also gladdened by identifying some sense of ‘sisterhood’ with others who wore the same ‘gear’. Also, she had her branded items significantly placed in her apartment to remind her that she owned them and to reinforce the feel-good associated with them.

Knowing you have luxury goods can convey feelings of power and status, signifying that you have ‘made it’ in the wealth stakes. They can signal where you stand in the social pecking order. They can compensate for felt personal and physical limitations. Quart (2003, p.31) noted that the teenagers who were most obsessed with designer labels tended to be those who felt they were not conventionally attractive and who needed to compensate by ‘branding’ themselves. A similar example: shorter men apparently needed higher incomes to equal the marriage potential of taller males (Whitbourne, 2013).

Consumption no longer occurs in order to meet human needs; its purpose now is to manufacture identity. The nature of consumption spending has changed from an activity aimed at acquiring status through displays of wealth to one of creating the self through association with certain products and brands. We no longer want to keep up with the Joneses; we want to trump the Joneses by differentiating ourselves from them. . . useful goods [have been transformed] into lifestyle accessories. (Hamilton, 2003, p.95)

While feel-good fuels branded consumerism for both men and women, there are likely to be gender differences. Some think that for women the need to look and feel good is more prominent than it is in men. But this will depend on individuals. Evidently for men displaying power, masculinity, prowess and sex appeal are likely to be underlying factors. For some men, their new, younger wife can be regarded as proof of their success and virility – the so-called ‘trophy wife’ syndrome (Siegel, 2004).
The term ‘power dressing’ has been applied just as much to women. Wearing ornaments, distinctive clothing and marking the body have been used for distinguishing powerful people since Neolithic times. Perhaps revelling in the display of a very expensive car is just the contemporary version of the biggest and strongest in a bunch of cavemen asserting himself.

What is wrong with having designer branded goods?

There is nothing inherently immoral in purchasing recognised quality products. Quality and excellent function cost more. Similarly, there is nothing wrong with enjoying one’s quality goods. It is always a matter of balance. Problems arise when there develops an obsession with brands that goes way beyond reasonable quality function towards excessive desire to acquire the mystique and cachet of the brands; here perceived status and consequent brand feel-good have become the driving factors. The desires can then fuel consumer spending that goes beyond reasonable needs and this can distort the use of disposable incomes in the direction of waste and compromise of financial future. It is a matter of fine judgment to determine when branded consumer spending becomes unhealthy. This can also affect physical as well as emotional and financial health: for example platform stilettos are not designed for spinal and postural well-being; the pursuit of the right look has led some into anorexia. Some develop an obsessive psychological dependency on branded products.

The branding process is not only pervasive, it is often perceived as natural, taken-for-granted and not questioned – just the way things are. There is a danger here that a culturally constructed and commercially motivated process can begin to distort, and perhaps even substitute for, the process of identity development.

Another potential problem is where obsession with branded items may have something to do with a sense of insecure personality and identity. Where there are not enough secure internal identity resources, individuals may have an excessive need for external identity resources which help ‘prop up’ their projected self by reminding them that they have status because they are labelled members of a higher class (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006).

In a sense, [branding] provides kids with a sense of self-hood before many of them have even recognised that they have a self … [they] suffer more than any other sector of society from wall to wall selling. They are at least as anxious as their parents about having enough money and maintaining their social class, a fear that they have been taught is best allayed by more branded gear. And they have taken to branding themselves, believing that the only way to participate in the world is to turn oneself into a corporate product. (Quart, 2003, pp. 59, xxv).

The potential problems are exacerbated for those for whom social media have become an identity displaying platform. A number of young people have reported that they carry an ongoing low level of anxiety created by the perceived quality of their projected identity on Facebook.

How people become conditioned into branded consumerism is also an issue (Twitchell, 2005). While consumer activity is free, some argue that people’s perceived freedom and individuality have been seduced and diminished to some extent by living in a commercial atmosphere where advertising creates the dominant social reality/cultural meanings. And this social reality says that the purchasing of branded consumer goods is an essential, natural part of personal identity development.

the individuality of modern urban life is a pseudo-individuality of exaggerated behaviours and contrived attitudes. The individuality of the marketing society is an elaborate pose people adopt to cover up the fact that they have been buried in the homogenising forces of consumer culture. The consumer's self is garishly differentiated on the outside, but this differentiation serves only to conceal the dull conformity of the inner self (Hamilton, 2003, p. 72).

Quart’s book Branded: The buying and selling of teenagers (2003) showed how the complex of marketing/advertising/media preyed on young people’s identity vulnerabilities and was pushing further into childhood to tap the new retail potential of pre-teens – the 11–13-year-olds. Market research has understood the psychology of identity development well enough to plan successful links between branded consumer products and the perceived needs of young people (Montoya & Vandehey, 2003). Advertising imagery orchestrates their imaginations in non-verbal as well as verbal ways, to make them more receptive to brand messages.

Designer clothing brands produce children’s wear with the overt aim of establishing brand loyalty at an early age. Research has shown that young children quickly learn to distinguish the major designer labels in clothing and electronics (Ross & Harradine 2004).

Today’s teens are victims of the contemporary luxury economy. Raised by a commodity culture from the cradle, teens’ dependably fragile self-images and their need to belong to groups are perfect qualities for advertisers to exploit … They look at every place of children’s vulnerability, searching for selling opportunities … Kids are forced to embrace the instrumental logic of consumerism at an earlier than ever age … finding self-definition in logos and products. (Quart, 2003, pp. xxiv, xxv, 95).
When people assume manufactured identities, instead of searching for their real selves, they come together as collectivities of attitudes and elaborate poses rather than real flesh and blood, and this has profound implications for the nature of social interaction. (Hamilton, 2003, p. 88).

Brand consciousness is also being pushed with reference to the lowest age group – babies (Thomas, 2007).

Fussy cashed-up parents are digging deep for the right look.

Baby gear (clothing, cots, prams, nappy bags, feeding chairs and the rest) has gone from the stuff of necessity to that of status – for the parents anyway … But the strange thing about the current obsession for the best, coolest and latest for our babies is that it has nothing to do with our babies at all. (Lunn, 2006, p. 26)

Yet another issue is ethical. There are concerns about the way in which people in poor situations are exploited to manufacture designer goods which are sold at ‘rip-off’ prices in more developed countries. Also, when the pursuit of luxury goods goes to the extremes it becomes a moral obscenity in a world where there still remains a great gulf between the rich and the poor.

How visual imagery resonates with the contemporary consumerist mise-en-scène and conditions people’s thinking and behaviour

People are always in the process of constructing meaning that they use to frame their personal lives, even if this is done relatively unconsciously. And visual imagery can have a significant shaping influence on the way this happens; it ‘clues’ them into the prevailing consumerist story or mise-en-scène; and they act sometimes consciously, and sometimes without much consideration, in tune with the prevailing story line with which they are aligned.

Two influential factors are people’s basic human need for feeling good and for a sense of belonging. Just as eating and drinking release good feelings, getting positive feedback or validation about how you look and present yourself conveys some feel-good. A simple example: the way that people have adopted ‘onesies’ (one piece animal suits) as more popular and acceptable wear in public, and not just as they were regarded earlier as esoteric, and fetish-like party dress ups, illustrates the process. Onesies developed from the small niche fetish group called ‘furries’ who liked to dress up in animal clothing but who rarely displayed their ‘animal personae’ in public. On TV individuals see others in this clothing and almost unconsciously wonder how they would feel in following that new trend. If their imaginative rehearsal results in good feelings, they will be inclined to take up this dress option. In keeping with the animal wear metaphor, the clothing may even make them feel like a cat generating feel-good pheromones when it rubs itself on other cats or people from whom they want affection and validation. Closely allied with the feel-good is the need for some validation or acceptance from important others. And it is the visual imagery itself that provides the first and often most influential validation; through this, the individual feels an approved member of the onesie wearing community; the feel-good is then enlarged to include the happy emotion of belonging. Feel-good and sense of belonging are closely associated. The first aspect of belonging is whether individual feels at home or comfortable ‘within their own skin’. Then it relates to how comfortable they feel with a particular situation, place and reference group.

The feel-good, in this particular instance, is not of great consequence and is fun. But if individuals become conditioned to rely almost exclusively on the use of externals to generate feel-good, then this could become a health problem. They could spend much time from one day to the next trawling for enough externally generated feel-goods to keep them both occupied and satisfied; the high level of continuous distraction in search of this feeling could inhibit them from thinking more seriously about values that may be important for their lives. It seems easier to get by through depending on externals for your feel-good, personal validation and sense of belonging. A preoccupation with such externals can be the reason that some give little or no thought to questions about meaning and purpose to life – at least to long-term meanings and values because they have only short term interests revolving around externals. And when such people are under stress, they need a lot of external validation to help them avoid feeling that they are ‘falling apart’.

While religion provides people with a package of ready-made meaning for life, many still feel that, whether religious or not, they need to construct a DIY (Do It Yourself) system of personal meaning (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, p. 215). And a DIY system needs ongoing daily maintenance, more so than the situation where you have a well-established set of religious beliefs to depend on; and thus constructing meaning can become increasingly burdensome.

When people are stressed and traumatised, they have increased needs for personal validation through feel-good and sense of belonging. When church-going people are stressed, they can be validated and supported by the ‘big picture’ of their religious faith, which in turn is underpinned by a religious culture. In medieval Christianity, this picture was ‘writ large’ in the religious imagery that permeated the culture. The religious, political and social dimensions to life had coalesced giving a dominant, unified meaning system and this was suffused with religious imagery that validated and reinforced the social reality of the time; authority and certainty were key characteristics. Today there is an even more extensive saturation of the culture with images about how life should be lived. But it is the opposite of the medieval system; it is not unified – although there is a strong unifying consumerist undercurrent; it is diverse; there is a strong in-built feeling of uncertainty in human meaning; and there is a taken-for-granted, universal presumption of freedom.
and individuality as key themes. Political, social and spiritual aspects of life can be disparate and at odds with each other, while the overriding power that conditions the contemporary mise-en-scène is consumerism.

Physically and financially, most people in medieval times led a harsh existence. By contrast, the situation today in Westernised countries shows how great progress has been made in making life longer, more healthy, comfortable, prosperous and enjoyable than ever before – at least for many. But there are indicators that all is not well as far as communities’ psychological health is concerned (Eckersley, 2005; Hamilton, 2003).

It is difficult for people today to avoid being influenced by the ‘atmospheric’ consumer imagery projected by the media. The images can almost subconsciously reach into human depths making people feel that they are at the centre of their universe. The imagery thematics resonate with people’s fundamental desires to want to be comfortable and beautiful, and to acquire beautiful things. Just as medieval Christianity made people feel they were part of a grand divine scheme, contemporary consumer imagery can make people feel a part of something greater – part of the amorphous world of luxury and beauty. There is always a questing for ‘more’ – like an ongoing subconscious hope that your life will be ‘upgraded to business class’ or ‘a more luxurious car’. In the past, for the majority of people, consumption was about survival; now for many it is often mainly about status. Formerly, only the wealthy could realistically aspire to grand residences, comfort and luxury; now the consumerist aspiration is evident across the whole range of people. No longer are the majority of people content to live within the limits of what was regarded in earlier times as their ‘station in life’. Now the ‘good life’ is available to any who can afford it; recent generations are the first to believe that they have some natural birthright to luxury. There is also the complementary myth that ‘you can be whatever you want to be’. But people often learn the hard way that this is not true: You can want to be whatever you can be, but the limited opportunities and constraints may well stifle this wish.

The various types of ‘reality’ television show that ordinary people can have their moments of public fame and make their own distinctive marks on the world. They can identify with McLuhan’s (1967) group icon – a media orchestrated imagination of the good life for all. Omnipresent advertising keeps ‘refreshing’ and hence re-validating the image of the good life, like a constantly refreshing computer monitor screen. And now a new form of image validation operates through the social networking media. Your own digital self-projection, through tweets, Facebook, Instagram and selfies, promotes your preferred image of self. This can be validated by your score of ‘likes’ and responses – and frustrating and potentially humiliating if your self-publication gets not much of an audience beyond your own self.

The relatively new media and communications technologies have created additional pressures on the development of personal identity – particularly the projective function of identity (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, p. 94) concerned with the desired image and characteristics the individual wants to display for others. Negotiating these pressures to get satisfactory self-validation has become a prominent concern for adolescents, as well as for many in their 20s to 40s and beyond. For some, it is as if their lives are constantly being framed through the lens of how their present activity might be reported on Facebook – like travelling through life with a reality TV camera constantly recording their every move. For some, a perceived relatively poor performance in these stakes can cause frustration, shame and depression, while for many their digital performance remains a constant problem that worries them. De Botton (2004) referred to this as status anxiety. A recent prominent example was reported by Choy (2013) in the documentary Change your race. The practice of using cosmetic surgery to change distinctive ethnic features is becoming more common in Australia’s Asian community. In Seoul, South Korea, the capital of de-racialisation surgery, 20% of women have reportedly undergone surgery to make them look more ‘Western’. The documentary identified the great psychological pressure on young Asian women in Australia to conform to their perception of the social reality – that to be attractive and desirable you need to look Western and white. By implication they are feeling that ethnic Asian looks are ugly. The ready accessibility of cosmetic surgery and the force of the visual imagery driving the social reality make some think that if they do not take up that option, they are in fact ‘choosing’ to look ugly. And the pressure is even greater if surgically enhanced looks are what their parents want for them.

Articulating these pressures about how to look and perform, and trying to resolve them, have become important tasks for identity development. In medieval life, the pressure was on performing the good life so you could qualify for heaven; now the pressure to perform is about enhancing and maintaining your desired image and status.

Compared with the medieval society where there was little if any choice in lifestyle apart from accepting your lot, today a large range of options is a keynote of the modern consumer lifestyle – it insists that you have options and this is projected in the media imagery as the expression of freedom and individuality. Religion is now regarded by many as an option with an advisory function, and no longer as the overarching and unquestioned meaning system that gave purpose and value to life (Hughes, 2007). The medieval Christian world view was not so much forced onto people but accepted without question; they were not so much constrained within it, but immersed in a social reality reinforced and maintained by interlacing social, religious and political powers; there was little or no thought of challenging this social reality. There are some parallels in contemporary society where it is little escape for the majority from the omnipresent media-portrayed image of the good life. It is difficult not to accept this as just normal reality. People are not constrained or forced to accept it. But it is rarely questioned.

Individuals can now feel that they have a natural right to experience the maximum in the good life. The range of options for making yourself distinctive and unique, and for ‘making your mark’, has become huge, and this has
economic repercussions through tapping into discretionary income – it is not just through dress, accessories, cosmetics and hairstyle, but through cars and various digital toys, and even through cosmetic surgery, body supplements, steroids, tattoos, body piercing etc. An illusion of unlimited possibilities for self-projection and self-validation is created, and is available at a cost. While people may begin to feel uncomfortable under all of this pressure, they may feel, like their medieval forbears, naturally reluctant to question the larger than life social realities that condition the way they think and feel. One significant difference with the medieval situation is in quality of life. Despite the tensions that modern consumerism can create, it is difficult to challenge or reject a style of life and consumerist philosophy that promise so much comfort, pleasure and emotional validation; and which tantalise with feelings of success, immersion in luxury goods, friends, travel, peak experiences, good food and drink.

Eckersley (2007) acknowledged that much of the progress that has accompanied the growth in consumerist societies has been regarded as positive.

Initially, as changes occurred, we were convinced they represented progress. The old certainties gave way to the exhilarating possibilities of human betterment through economic growth, social reform, scientific discovery and technological development. Even if life’s meaning became less clear, life itself became more comfortable, more varied, safer, healthier and longer (p. 41).

But he also acknowledged that the progress had also created its own pathology.

We see growth at the extremes of self and meaning, a loss of balance: pathological self-preoccupation at one end, the total subjugation or surrender of the individual self at the other. A vast consumer economy has grown to minister to the needs of ‘the empty self’ (p. 42).

An educational analysis of what has happened needs to identify both the positives and the problems. So here an example will be considered about how feel-good and sense of belonging can be involved in interpreting a current social problem: youth binge drinking (in Australia). It is proposed that this is the sort of analysis that is needed when attending to what school education can do as part of the wider community’s concerns to address the problem. The focus is on an inquiring research-oriented pedagogy that might help young people to see how cultural meanings that appeal to feel-good and sense of belonging can have a shaping influence on their thinking and behaviour in relation to this problem.

The first thing to identify is that the social, economic and consumer progress have downsides. They generate tension and stress for individuals. The general level of suicide, depression, drug and alcohol abuse, and violence – especially domestic violence – are indicators of social pathology. Lack of balance in the pursuit of feel-good and sense of belonging can generate unhappiness that in turn fuels the pathology. For example: The multiplicity of lifestyle and consumer options can be one source of personal tension. Navigating through ‘consumer heaven’ can cause ‘retail stress’ – stress in trying to decide which consumer path and which brands to buy. This was first identified as part of the stress felt in dealing with the extensive range of goods in supermarkets (Aylott & Mitchell, 1999). But now it applies more widely across the consumer spectrum where ‘branding status’ (Klein, 2000) has become important.

Another source of tension can be ‘congenital identity deficiency’ (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, p. 121) described as the susceptibility and vulnerability of young people to the reflections of self coming from others. A mature identity needs some internal resilience so as not to be swayed too easily by negativity coming from the outside. In addition, there are stresses from the conflict between the media-orchestrated ideas of the good life and the reality that individuals cannot always be what they want to be or get what they want to get out of life. Also there is uncertainty about the future and secure employment; and now one’s involvement in social media can be an ongoing source of stress.

The point in the above listing of sources of tension (not an exhaustive list) is to indicate why many young people appear to be carrying a continual low level of anxiety that comes just from living in the 21st century. Anything that relieves this tension and makes them feel that they have escaped from it at least temporarily is likely to be attractive. And this is where alcohol consumption to excess comes in.

Often the analyses and programs trying to address binge drinking concentrate on the costly damage to health and property. A fundamental that appears to be missed is the question: Why do people do this? And related questions: What is the payoff? Why is it desirable despite the downsides? Alarmingly, a high proportion of binge drinkers (in the order of 40%) deliberately set out with the express purpose of getting intoxicated. This could be motivated to a significant degree by the alcohol induced euphoria that helps them escape from the anxiety of ordinary life. Helping young people to address this question and think through the psychological dynamics at play may hopefully bring more reason to bear on the issue.

Peer group culture gives young people a sense of camaraderie in their deliberately getting ‘smashed’, ‘wiped out’ or ‘off your face’. Doing it the first time is like earning a corporate badge of honour. The popular cultural meanings supporting binge drinking also imply that it is another example of where the experience needs to be pushed to the limit to get maximum pleasure and satisfaction. Even the negativity of hangovers can be accepted as part of the overall feel-good and escape that the drunkenness offers. Talking about the hangover with friends can add humour, contributing
further to the sense of camaraderie. The feel-good of release and escape, together with the camaraderie of being part of the ‘happy’ group can hopefully be identified by young people as important driving factors in relation to binge drinking.

Getting to the heart of what is driving the low level of anxiety that alcohol soothes will not be a panacea for curing binge-drinking. But hopefully raising the questions in student research on the topic may possibly promote a better self-understanding in relation to cultural forces that affect personal behaviour. The issues raised are also pertinent to other anxiety reducing behaviours like the use of marijuana, amphetamines, ecstasy, ice, heroine etc. – and perhaps other risk taking behaviours. They have also influenced the great popularity of schoolies week and the excessive behaviours that an increasing number of young people exhibit during that event. Schoolies is a week-long celebration by Australian school leavers at beachside areas and places like Bali. Since the 1990s, the practice has grown into a ‘must-do’ experience for school leavers and is a remarkable example of how oral tradition and more recently social media have built up the social reality of its importance. It has been commercially exploited – there are now package ‘tours’ available for purchase. The mise-en-scène of the experience is signified in the prominent tee shirt message “Party, crash, sleep, repeat”. High levels of binge-drinking, alcohol-fuelled violence and sexual activity (with 50% considered to be unprotected sex) have been marring the celebratory experience. Problematically, the expectations of celebration and fun seem for many to include drunkenness as a statutory requirement. Another indication of the extent of the problem has been the emergence of community groups like Red Frogs to help protect vulnerable teenagers in threatening situations (Dumas, 2013).

Changing media ‘diet’ and exposure to the mythology of consumerist lifestyle

There are constantly changing, evolving patterns of electronic media use by people today, especially the young. And this will affect their exposure to the visual imagery of consumerist religion. For a long time, television advertising was probably the most prominent vehicle for such imagery. But now it is prominent in social media and on the internet generally. One thing is certain, the marketers, informed by advertising psychology, will be sensitive to any changes and will be quick to find new ways of ‘colonising’ any relevant electronic spaces to ply their wares – and thus sustain the mythology of consumerism.

So if some young people draw back somewhat from Facebook, or from watching free-to-air television and spend more time downloading or streaming films and drama series for personal ‘on demand’ viewing, without advertisements, it is not likely that this will change their exposure to the pervasive consumer mythology very much. There are so many ways in which the visual desirability of consumer products and experiences can be encountered. Just to name a few: product placement in films and drama/sitcoms; brand sponsorship on the clothing of sports people; celebrity endorsements etc. Some predict that newspapers will die out and that free-to-air television will be gone in 10 years, while others suggest that online shopping will eliminate department stores and even malls. It will be interesting to see how things pan out commercially over the next decade. What is likely is that the pattern of consumer commerce and entertainment will remain complex and varied, according to the preferences of individuals and groups. But it is unlikely that the overall projection of the visual imagery of consumerist lifestyle will diminish. Some have also suggested that people generally, and young people in particular, are becoming more ‘savvy’ to, and suspicious of, advertising. This is true. But their attachment to their consumerist religion is very strong and is not going to be changed much by knowing how their identity vulnerability is constantly being exploited commercially. They can be happy to feel some sense of exploitation if the payoff is something that they like.

What sort of impact might educators hope to have on young people’s consumerist religion? Perhaps not much. But if it can engage them in identifying and researching some of the issues, and in seeing the potential influence of visual imagery, it could help them acquire better intellectual resources, hopefully for thinking about what constitutes a healthy lifestyle and about the need for some wisdom in deciding how to avoid excesses, and for maintaining wholesome balance

Finding the balance

The dominant contemporary mise-en-scène taps into the desire to lead life to the full. And it is not that the consumer objects of human desire are bad in themselves – they are basically good. The crucial matter is the question of balance – how do all the elements in one’s actual lifestyle and lifestyle hopes fit together harmoniously in tune with a healthy conception of what it means to be human.

But there remains a further problem here about who is going to decide what this idea of healthy human life means? In practice, this is defined by individuals implicitly through the way they live. Most do not defer to any outside authority about the meaning of life, unless it is the peer groups to which they are aligned. The plausibility of religion as a source of meaning for life has been eroded through secularisation.

Hence the burden of the educational argument being advanced here is to challenge young people to stop and think about these basic questions, and to appraise the cultural influences on them, providing them with information that may be useful when it comes to reviewing the balance within their own lives in the light of the values they hold as fundamental. An example: An individual may place great store on particular externals for feel-good and self-
validation – E.g. having a Prada handbag. But if this pattern becomes too prominent, individuals can be basing their feelings of wellbeing and self-esteem almost exclusively on having particular consumer goods – a relatively fragile and precarious basis for personal identity. One could argue that a healthy personal identity draws more on internal identity resources like values and commitments than on externals (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, p. 125)

And there is also the challenge to consider that the range of ideas about what it means to be human needs to be larger than the one individual’s limited perspective. It needs community frames of reference, and one significant contributor here is religion. This view sees the critical interpretation and evaluation of cultural meanings as an essential component of education; and one that is particularly relevant to religious education. Hopefully this can inform public debate in the classroom about the ways in which communities and individuals approach these fundamental questions; hopefully too, it can resource the individuals’ own personal review of life, a task which is not part of formal education, but which might be taken up in their own time.

The critical interpretation of cultural influences together with personal review of life call on individuals to consider how the extent of their consumerist thinking and practice affects other areas of their lives such as: their close personal relationships, responsibilities for family and friends as well as for home, commitments, long term goals, work responsibilities, engagement with the community, and even environmental stewardship. If the potential influence of perceived social reality orchestrated by media imagery is acknowledged, people can then make better judgments about their consumerist involvements, hopefully helping them to make wise decisions about finding balance in life.

Critical interpretation and evaluation of lifestyles: Implications for religious education

The existential and feel-good emphases in contemporary lifestyles seem to have eclipsed the transcendence, reflectiveness and review of life that characterised traditional spirituality. The clock cannot be turned back on these pervasive cultural changes; there is no likelihood of a widespread return to the religious practice that was common in the past. Hence a religious education that does no more than propose a traditional religious spirituality will be insufficient, even though it validly gives access to religious heritage. For religious education content and pedagogy to be relevant to most young people today, and to enhance their basic human spirituality, it needs to probe the values implied in the existential and feel-good aspects of lifestyle. This is precisely where the spiritual and moral dimensions, or their absence, need to be investigated. If there is any fundamental starting point for investigating spirituality today, then it is in the area of lifestyle.

Most people are interested and engaged in lifestyle; for many, the word spirituality has little if any meaning. Even some overtly religious people may be indistinguishable from their secular counterparts as far as participation in consumerist lifestyle is concerned; their operational core values may be the same despite their engagement with the overlay of a religious culture. For these reasons, at least some part of religious education needs to address lifestyle directly; it needs to help young people explore how consumerist culture conditions life expectations (Hill, 1990) and how the marketing/advertising/media complex orchestrates imaginations of what life should be like (Warren, 1992; Williams, 1980). And if the argument advanced here that consumerist culture functions like a ‘religion’, then this would be an added reason for including the study of such culture as content appropriate for religious education.

This approach asks fundamental questions about the healthiness of excessive attention given to the existential and to feel-good. It raises basic questions about what it means to be human and about what is essential and crucial for happiness and harmony. The pedagogy engages young people in stopping and thinking about the values and spirituality that may or may not figure in contemporary culture. It prompts critical thinking, reflectiveness and moral judgment – elements that have long been important for traditional religious spirituality. And it provides an inquiring context within which their religious tradition has something constructive to say.

While religious educators may well agree with the cultural diagnosis and pedagogical approach proposed here, the official Catholic religion curricula for schools remain traditional, to some extent like scaled-down seminary theological syllabuses. Nevertheless, there is some creative scope for religion teachers to increase the extent of critical interpretation and evaluation of contemporary culture.

The pedagogical approach proposed for investigating the mise-en-scène in traditional medieval and contemporary secular spiritualities is a practical example of one way in which the spiritual/moral dimension to modern culture can be investigated fruitfully.

The argument presented here suggests that contemporary consumer lifestyle functions like a religion. To the extent to which this is plausible, a further interesting conclusion can be considered – a new meaning for secularisation. The traditional meaning for secularisation is a decline in the prominence and influence of mainstream religion in personal and social life (Norman, 2002) – despite the situation within particular pockets of society where traditional religions still remain conspicuous and powerful. But now a different note to secularisation can be added: It is not so much that traditional religion has declined, but that people have switched to another religion – consumer lifestyle, and it shows a widespread high level of fervent religious devotion. Secularised people may remain quite religious, but with a different sort of consumerist religiosity. This religion is global; it has a dominant influence on thinking and behaviour in
Westernised countries, and its dominance is rarely questioned. This prompts the question: Has secularisation always included 'consumerisation'?

Another aspect to this interpretation: There are many religious people today whose lifestyle and values are hardly different from those of consumer-oriented people who have no religious affiliation; they appear to practice two religions! One might wonder about these bi-religious people: Which of their religions is most influential, and to which do they give most allegiance? Has their traditional religion been accommodated to harmonise with, and perhaps even reinforce their consumer religion?

These reflections also give a new twist to the meaning of secularisation: If consumerism is your religion, what does 'secularisation of your consumerist religion' mean? Initially, secularisation meant that people both questioned, and dissociated themselves from organised religion; they took more personal responsibility for the construction of their own spirituality with greater independence from religion. So, by analogy, a 'second secularisation' could mean a questioning and withdrawal from consumerist religion, taking a more independent values stance in relation to consumption. Paralleling traditional secularisation, the new or second secularisation could be regarded as the action of individuals who consciously identify and question the presumed dominant cultural religious meanings and values in consumerist lifestyle, and who reduce their involvement in status-oriented consumer activity.

Finally, a new twist to the study of 'world religions': In tune with the above argument, a question can be raised about whether global consumerist religion warrants a place in programs of religion studies where world religions are the content. For example: If the current interest in the inclusion of some form of religion studies in the new Australian national school curriculum ends up being successful, could consumerist religion be part of the content? Or could a topic such as ‘the religious function of contemporary consumerism’ be included in current Year 11-12 state based religion studies courses?

**Conclusion: Pedagogical significance of the contrasts in the visual elements to traditional and contemporary spiritualities**

Identifying how the mise-en-scène of traditional, medieval Christian spirituality took its cues from the visual elements of Christian culture, has provided a helpful template for analysing contemporary secular spirituality – or more appropriately, contemporary consumerist lifestyle. In turn it provides a platform for evaluating how healthy or otherwise is the overwhelming exposure to cultural imagery that emphasises consumerism and entertainment. There is a need to educate both adults and young people about the iconography of today’s visual world. Many do not pay much attention to the way that popular imagery has a shaping influence on their thinking about life and its purpose.

The focus of the visual iconography today is not on the spiritual world but on contemporary lifestyle, experience and living both to the fullest extent. There appears to be little overt place for a formal spiritual/religious dimension in much of the contemporary iconography. So, for many non-religious people, the spirituality that is there is not overt or consciously referenced to a religious culture. Here the spiritual is implied in the values that operate, and it becomes evident when people stop to think and reflect about the meaning and the value of what is transpiring. They have to learn how to detect, identify and articulate the spiritual dimension. So the sort of pedagogy that would help do this is one that is critical, and inquiring. It also means that some criteria have to be established about what is a healthy meaning, healthy identity and healthy living so that there are standards by which individuals might make judgements and decide on actions. This tries to address the danger that they can drift relatively unconsciously into living life at a superficial and materialistic level. It is not that there is anything wrong per se with human experience, with buying things and with the enjoyment of life. It all becomes a question of balance. One of the roles of education is to skill people and prompt them to think about balance.

The approach discussed here can provide a useful pedagogy. However, there is a natural problem when educators seek to get young people or adults to become critical interpreters and evaluators of contemporary cultural meanings. It can be perceived as an attack on their lifestyle. Parents report that temporarily taking away the smartphone from their teenage children is the most severe punishment imaginable because it is experienced by them as a fundamental threat to their sense of freedom and individuality. Hence the comparative model can be a less fraught way of conducting an evaluation of the influences on contemporary spirituality.

The approach is also fruitful because it addresses another difficulty in social analysis and cultural interpretation. Potentially influential cultural elements like visual imagery tend to be taken as *cultural givens or products* rather than as *cultural processes* (Williams, 1980, 1995). If accepted as givens, they are taken for granted and not so accessible to analysis and evaluation. But if they are considered as socially constructed processes, then the production processes themselves are more open to analysis and critique. Showing how the visual mediation of spirituality has evolved is a valuable way of bringing the contemporary use of images, especially those mediated electronically, into educational scrutiny. The cultural imagery that projects imagined possibilities for life can then be evaluated, and this in turn can help people avoid being just *passive consumers* of visual culture. Value judgments can be made about how the visual imaginations of life are projected in media and how they serve consumerist and entertainment purposes. This helps people see that it is easy to go along with the dominant modes of living as proposed in cultural imagery, and making
sense of life in a relatively unquestioning way. But they can end up being slavish conformists living with a cherished illusion of unlimited personal freedom.

A key purpose in an education in spirituality is to help young people pay more attention to the visual media imaginations of life that are being offered for consumption. As one of the tee shirt messages says: ‘Stop and think’. And borrowing from the Australian cartoonist Leunig’s (1984) picture of the Understandascope, education, and religious education in particular, can help in developing this instrument in the minds of young people so that they can better interpret and evaluate the visual imagery that everywhere surrounds them, learning how it can affect their meaning, identity and values.

References


Chapter 8

Contrasts between children's spirituality and adolescent spirituality: Some questions for religious education at primary school level

Previous chapters have examined what has been labelled as contemporary, secular spirituality – along with an appraisal of the cultural influences on its development. Here, attention will be given to some issues with the interpretation of children’s spirituality, with particular reference to Catholic religious education at primary school level.

The research literature has in recent decades has looked into psychological dimensions to children’s spirituality. For example, it highlighted the place of wonder, awe, the experiential, imagination, playful learning etc. in children’s spiritual development. This makes a valuable contribution to understanding the natural ‘human’ dimension to children’s spirituality at both pre-school and primary school age levels. One readily gets the impression of very positive findings about how naturally spiritual young children are. And this contrasts with the studies of adolescent spirituality and religiosity that show strong indications of secularisation. Whether this means that adolescents are less naturally spiritual than children then becomes a question of interest, especially for religious educators.

What seems to be neglected, and which warrants more attention, is the primal socialisation into the spiritual that young children absorb from their parents/guardians, and immediate family. In other words, a key to interpreting children’s spirituality is the sort of spirituality exhibited by their parents. And for many Catholic children entering Australian Catholic primary schools, their parents have a relatively secular, individualistic, subjective and self-reliant spirituality – which is not particularly religious. Their children’s starting, pre-school religious baseline may not include much reference to God and religion.

From this point of view, an attempt will be made to interpret the apparent discontinuity between children’s and adolescents’ spirituality.

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light, (1-4)
... trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy! (65-67)

Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
... the vision splendid.
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day. (68-77)

William Wordsworth, 1804. Ode. Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood
Children’s spirituality and primary school religious education

The extensive literature on children’s spirituality in books and academic articles paints a positive picture of children’s spiritual development both at early childhood and primary school age levels – to name a few selected references: Adams et al., 2008; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008; Berryman, 2009; Nye, 2009; Grajczonek, 2011. Also notable are articles in the International Journal of Children’s Spirituality published in the United Kingdom. Collectively, this literature discusses the following:

- spirituality in terms of ‘connectedness’ to self, others, the world and the transcendent;
- wonder and awe as childlike expressions of spirituality;
- development and exercise of the imagination;
- experiential ‘hands on’ learning;
- constructivist learning theory with children as active agents in their own spiritual learning – that is, children having their own ‘voice’ in learning and not just being passive receivers of beliefs from adults;
- learning through play.

Nye (2009) summarised this thinking under the acronym SPIRIT – space, process, imagination, relationship, intimacy and trust. This discourse makes a valuable contribution to exploring and understanding the natural ‘human’ dimension to children’s spirituality in psychological terms. The interpretation of what might be called a ‘basic human spirituality’ in children complements and informs thinking about religious development and the growth of a personal religious faith (Dillen, 2007; Roehlkepartain et al. 2006; Sullivan, 2011.) The discourse readily gives an impression, that as far as fundamentals are concerned, children’s spirituality is not problematic. They are as spiritual as they ought to be.


In the light of these developments one could surmise that the ‘state of play’ in children’s religious education at primary school level is healthy. Anecdotal evidence from early childhood and primary school religious educators, would suggest that this optimism is prominent in practitioners, notwithstanding the acknowledged perennial need for further improvement. Teachers of children’s religious education enjoy their work very much and they readily judge it to be effective and successful. Usually, they find children easy and agreeable to work with; and they consider that children are responsive and enthusiastic in their both their engagement with religious education and in religious practices. Some teachers have reported how children have carried their interest in religious education back into their homes. This is also consistent with the impression given in educational literature that children show natural energy and enthusiasm in a variety of learning areas (E.g. Australian Government Early Years Learning Framework, 2010, p. 34; Feehan, 2006).

While there have been a number of informative, recent Australian research studies of the views of secondary teachers in Catholic schools (E.g. Finn, 2011; Kenyon, 2010; Wanden, 2011.), to date there has been no comparable systematic study of primary school religion teachers’ understandings of the nature, purposes and practice of religious education.

Adolescent spirituality and religious education

In contrast, the picture of adolescent/young adult spirituality and their lack of interest in religious education is very different. Studies of youth spirituality over the last few decades show that there is an increasing prominence of a relatively non-religious spirituality. While there are still young people who are overtly religious, a significant proportion have a spirituality that is subjective, individualistic, relatively secular, eclectic, questioning and self-reliant (Tacey, 2003; Smith and Denton, 2005; Smith & Snell Herzog, 2009; Crawford and Rossiter, 2006; Kay and Zieberts, 2006; Hughes, 2007; Mason et al., 2007.). Even where they retain some sense of denominational religious identity, their religion may have little tangible influence on their spirituality. And as Hughes (2007) noted, religion tends to be regarded as an optional spiritual resource, and as an area of natural epistemological uncertainty such that individuals make up their own minds as to what it can mean and how it might or might not help them.

This sort of contemporary secular spirituality is not just a characteristic of youth. It fits the description of many adults – including a significant number who send their children to Catholic primary schools.

For those who teach religion to adolescents in Catholic schools, there is not the same glowing positive picture that tends to be painted by primary school religious educators. While some secondary students are responsive and engaged with religious education, most anecdotal evidence suggests that the opposite is more common. Teaching religion in the secondary school has been described as a ‘health hazard’ (Kenyon, 2010, p. 234), These teenagers may not be openly antagonistic to religious education, but they are often patiently and enduringly uninterested, even when they judge that it can be helpful for them personally (Maroney, 2008). Teachers’ awareness of this situation was also identified in the research of Finn (2011) and Wanden (2011).
Perspective on interrelationships between children’s and youth spirituality

Does spirituality decline as children become adolescents?

After reading the literature referred to above, one might begin to wonder: “Are we teaching different species in primary and secondary religious education?” While acknowledging that different content/pedagogies related to the distinctive spiritualities of children and adolescents are needed, it is equally important to avoid creating an unrealistic divide between the two. What is needed is perspective that shows how the two spiritualities are part of a single continuum of personal/spiritual development, always influenced by the contemporary socio-cultural environment. And religious education practice needs review in the light of such a combined perspective.

The first issue to be addressed is what might be called the ‘Wordsworth Romantic myth’ of childhood spirituality that has influenced thinking since the emergence of romanticism in the 18th century. Wordsworth’s Ode on Intimations of immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood suggested that children seem to have an innate spirituality related to nature and the transcendent, which is gradually eroded as they grow older – particularly in the relatively harsh social environment of the newly industrialised and urbanised Britain of Wordsworth’s time. This same theme coloured the research of Edward Robinson in the Oxford Religious Experience Research Centre in the 1970s – evident in his book The original vision (1977) and which is still evident in some parts of the contemporary discourse on children’s spirituality and religious education.

Perhaps the most striking example of this thinking is the article ‘Peering into the clouds of glory: Explorations of a newborn child's spirituality’ (Surr, 2012). The abstract notes:

This article seeks to understand spirituality in newborn children through an exploration of Wordsworth's clouds of glory. First the article explores adult reactions reflecting a newborn child's spirituality. Objective manifestations of spirituality in newborn children, such as love, presence and connection, wonder and meaning, and faith, are explored next. Third, in the light of the perspectives developed in the first two sections an attempt is made to describe a wider understanding of spirituality in very young children as they may experience it. Some suggestions are made in context for potentially productive avenues for contemplation, research and practice about spirituality at birth and in the early years.

Another example claims that:

Children tend to be more open to spirituality than adults because they draw upon their nonverbal powers of communication, whereas adults rely more upon their abilities to use words and language, which often cannot express the spiritual. (Hyde 2009 p. 39)

One of the problems with this thinking is that it vaguely implies that children’s spirituality is somehow more ‘pure’ than that of adults, as if it were ontologically superior. It suggests that the development of rationality and language ‘contaminates’ children’s spirituality, whereas it is proposed that the ideal for spirituality should be an ‘adult’ spirituality, towards which children’s spirituality should develop – while acknowledging that the latter has an integrity and an authenticity that should not be obscured by interpreting children only in terms of miniature, immature adults. The claim that adults have a diminished capacity for non-verbal and spiritual expression is disputed. Rationality, moral judgment, wisdom and sense of responsibility – as well as non-verbal expression – are proposed as desirable and essential elements of any healthy adult spirituality.

In practice, it is natural and to be expected that many, especially parents and teachers, will lament the passing of childhood while they are not actually subscribing to the romantic myth of children’s spirituality. Children in their simplicity, their vulnerability and naivety, their uninhibited and straightforward expression of feelings are naturally attractive, likeable and loveable. And usually people find adolescents and adults more problematic to deal with – most people expect that it is easier to teach children than adolescents. When adults/parents say about their young children “I wish they would not have to grow up”, this is an expression of their love for the distinctive childlikeness of their children at that age – but they do not literally believe that this is desirable. This natural nostalgia about children and childhood should not inhibit children’s growth towards adulthood by proposing an ideal for spirituality that gives an impression of wanting to ‘prolong’ childhood.

However, the reverse – accelerating adult development in children – is actually a more significant problem. One example: The individualistic theme of ‘constructing your own meaning and identity’ has increasingly been applied by adults and teachers to children (E.g., in the religious education theory of Erricker & Erricker, 2000). And by implication they are being asked to take on what is a more adult task. Rather, it is more natural for them to accept relatively unquestioningly the meanings in life proposed by parents and community agencies (E.g. their religion) until they are old enough and wise enough to judge and decide for themselves (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006. p.459.).

What is the principal starting point for interpreting children’s spirituality?

The recent research literature tended to focus on children’s innate spiritual capacities as the main starting point for describing and explaining childhood spirituality. Expressions of awe and wonder and the exercise of imagination were
like ‘proto-spiritual’ activities. No doubt such a developmental approach is valid, and as noted above, it highlights the psychological dimension to spirituality. However, this literature seems to give little attention to the starting point that probably has most influence on both children’s spirituality and religiosity – the primal socialisation of the pre-school child into the spiritual from parents/guardians, whether this be religious or non-religious in orientation. In other words, the operative spirituality of parents/guardians/family should be a principal reference for interpreting children’s spirituality. Not to do this runs counter to both intuition and research indicating that in the earliest years, the influence of parents/guardians is both primal and dominant.

Before they get to school, young children in religious families often have a strong sense of God and of the practice of religion; while children from non-religious homes have a well-established ‘child’s’ version of a secular, individualistic, self-reliant spirituality. Acknowledging that many children begin school with a comfortable secular spirituality is important for resolving the apparent conflict between children’s and adolescent spirituality; it suggests that one of the most common, final, adult products – a secular individualistic spirituality – is already present in many children. It is not the product of secularisation during their adolescence.

At this point, attention will be given to the different spiritual dynamics that affect children in religious and non-religious homes.

**At home with God**

Take for example, a home where the family were practicing Catholics. Very young children would readily absorb some feelings and ideas about God from family behaviour. There would be prayers each night where the child was helped to pray to God for family, pets, etc. by speaking directly to God who the family believed was listening to their prayers. The child’s notion of God would develop as they acquired a capacity for abstraction to understand how God was a spirit (that is non-corporeal) who authored and sustained the universe and who knew them personally and cared for them individually. In addition, they also prayed to Jesus who was God as well as being human. Crucifixes, religious pictures, and perhaps religious sculptures and small family shrines might serve as symbolic reminders and reinforcement of the family beliefs in God. Weekly visits to church would help imprint on children’s consciousness the centrality of religion and religious practices – with its architecture, symbols, rituals sounds, praying and singing, all in a context of a social event in a community of like-minded believers. For young children, it is difficult to underestimate the potential religious influence of the experiential and of the physical symbols.

For a child in this situation, it is likely that when they first go to school they bring with them a familiarity with God and religion. And this fundamental orientation will affect the way they both perceive and respond to the school’s religious education. It is important to note that what is written in current Catholic primary school religious education curricula presumes that this situation is the norm applying to all children.

But what of young children who grow up in a different home context where perhaps they have hardly heard the word ‘God’ before they go to a Catholic school? Special attention will be given to this group firstly, because it now probably represents the majority of pupils entering Catholic primary schools and secondly, because it is considered that attention to the spiritual/religious needs of this group is central to the contemporary mission of Catholic schools – attention that does not necessarily compromise the needs of the religious children.

**Growing up in the ‘divine absence’ and hearing about God for the first time**

For children growing up in homes where a relatively secular, non-religious spirituality prevails, some may not hear the word ‘God’ until they go to school. Or perhaps they only hear it from their parents in the form of an expression of surprise “Oh my God!” when something unusual happens. In her research on children’s prayer, Mountain (2004, pp. 114, 141) showed that this expression sometimes confused children who wondered whether “O my God” was intended to be a prayer.

In contrast with the situation in a religious home, here there is a distinctive *divine absence* – that is, no words or behaviour that imply acknowledgment of the existence of God or of any place for God in the family’s human affairs; similarly, with religion. They may learn something about God and religion from television; but this would depend on what their TV ‘viewing diet’ was. The impression that these children would absorb when they first become aware of religion is that it is a cultural phenomenon that has little if any relevance for their lives; their family gets on well without it. In this sense it is ‘outside’ information, not primordial family information, and likely to be processed like other outside information – for example, new knowledge about their ethnic cultural identity that was not referred to in the home. And this has significant implications for content and pedagogy in religious education.

Table 8.1 summarises some of the principal differences in the spiritual environment of young children in homes that are religious and those that are not. The latter are not strictly non-religious; the parents are theists; they themselves (or one of them), may have had a Catholic schooling and they retain some religious identification with Catholicism; but they have no contact with a parish community and there is no mention or sign of God or Catholicism in their way of life – their home spiritual horizon does not include God or religion. But they believe that a Catholic schooling is desirable for their children and they are prepared to sacrifice to pay for that education. The prospect of their children’s Catholic religious education is usually not a problem; they think it could be morally and culturally beneficial for their children or at least that it could do little harm – and it is part of the package when one chooses a Catholic school.
Table 8.1 Contrasts in spirituality between children growing up in homes with a religious spirituality and homes with a secular non-religious spirituality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of God and religion in the home</th>
<th>Distinctively religious homes</th>
<th>Relatively non-religious, secular homes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>At home with God</strong> – children growing up in a religious family with regular practice of religion at home and at church.</td>
<td>The divine absence – children growing up in a family with a relatively non-religious spirituality where God and religion are referred to infrequently or never.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| How children experience Catholic primary school religious education | RE experienced as affirmation, support, extension and enhancement of well-established personal / family belief and religious practice; it reinforces primal religious beliefs; it gives new information about their religion; may clash with parental religious views. | RE experience involves ‘hearing about God’ for the first time; experienced as new cultural knowledge that has vague and tenuous relationships with the ‘home view’ of God and religion. |

| The nature or quality of the religious knowledge acquired from religious education | In many cases, is naturally congruent with ‘inside’ family religious knowledge: acquired from teachers who represent their ‘extended religious family’; likely to be naturally affirmed at home. Where the parental religious views are fundamentalist / Pentecostal / very conservative, there could be a clash between the religious perspective taken at school and that of the home. | Not congruent with the way in which religion fails to figure in the family social life; acquired from ‘outsiders’ (to the family) who nevertheless represent the cultural religious group to which the child’s family nominally subscribes; tends not to be consciously rejected at home but just ‘quietly ignored’. |

| How the religious knowledge might relate to personal belief | May be readily and directly related to a pre-existing personal faith. May challenge the faith of those who have fundamentalist beliefs. | May or may not remain at the level of knowledge of religious heritage: may prompt personal belief; or individuals may appear to affirm belief just because they show interest and do not overtly reject what they have learned, or because they think that affirmation of belief is required of them at school. |

In the non-religious family situation, children, even if they cannot articulate this at the time, will learn that if there is any spiritual dimension, then it is intimately connected with life. It would have to do with values and the moral quality of their relationships. Spirituality would not be overt but implicit in the way people acted and spoke – and hence naturally problematic to identify and interpret. They would also learn that whatever others might say about God and religious spirituality, no matter how important, their home experience would tell them that it is not something really life changing, and that it warranted little attention; it was very much in the background.

Nevertheless, the religious knowledge acquired in their school religious education would become a cultural spiritual resource, their religious heritage, that may or may not become more important in their lives later. At least they were being educated spiritually and religiously in their cultural religious tradition – something to which they had a birthright. And this is valuable in itself, and one of the key objectives in the mission of the Catholic school. The Catholic primary school will significantly extend the spiritual and religious horizons of children beyond what they would normally experience at home. Extending children’s cultural horizons is one of the basic educational purposes of schools.

Young children from both religious and non-religious homes will readily accommodate to the religious world view and religious spirituality and practices of the Catholic school. Because they naturally tend to be eager to discover the new, they will almost always show interest in religious education just as they would in any other learning area. They will learn how to pray and participate in religious rituals and Mass. They will demonstrate religiosity, and this may be interpreted by their teachers as signs of personal religious faith. Equally, they can comfortably move back into the spirituality regime of their own homes whether or not this mirrors the spirituality of the school. They can accommodate to different spiritualities in different contexts, just as they can accommodate to different behavioural regimes to that of their home (E.g. those that apply when at their grandparents or when at child care).

**Hearing about god for the first time – content and pedagogical implications**

As noted above, children from religious and non-religious homes will perceive and respond to the experience of religious education differently. This is one particular case of what is a more general educational principle – children’s own idiosyncratic response to teaching. For children from relatively non-religious backgrounds, their first knowledge
of God starts within the school educational culture. Whether or not, and how much knowledge might develop into a personal belief, would be difficult to determine – even for the child him/herself. The path from cultural knowledge to belief and commitment is complex and obscure. And Christian theology says that the animating role of the Holy Spirit is involved. Also possibly influential would be children’s growing awareness of different racial, cultural and religious groups – especially through the medium of television.

Knowing that many of the children before them have no knowledge about the idea of God, the religion teacher should avoid an approach that presupposes in advance that all the class are established believers and well-identified as Catholics. In this sense, in the theme often taken in Catholic primary school religious education of ‘sharing our faith story’, the word ‘our’ does not strictly include these children. They have a tenuous Catholic identification and the approach that better addresses their situation would be to help establish for the children that they are part of a very old cultural religious tradition, and their school religious education will inform them about this heritage. This could help them to progress towards the stage of feeling that “yes, this is our religious story”. The better the sense of community in the school (a strong suit in most Catholic primary schools), the greater will be the plausibility and credibility of the teaching of the tradition. The theme ‘this is the story of your Catholic religious heritage’ would be more appropriate than the presumptive ‘sharing our faith story’. This is not just a matter of semantics, but precisely about how much to presume, and how objectively information is presented, and how this is reflected in content and pedagogy.

There is a need to establish for children through the experience of religious education that the Catholic primary school is a community of religious meanings, a community with a religious history that is there to provide them with educational access to their traditions – whether or not they are or will become members of a parish. To be properly educated in today’s Australian society, they need to learn the cultural meanings from their religious identification (Catholicism) just as they need to learn from other identifications (E.g. national, ethnic, civil, democratic and local social identities etc.). They need to see that their religious education is enhancing and resourcing their spirituality for life.

Being careful to strive for objectivity in the presentation of religious traditions is important for maintaining a vital feeling of inclusivity for the children coming from diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds. They are invited to join and benefit from a religious education that does not discriminate with respect to their initial spirituality. This inclusivity is equally important for the children who are not Catholic; this has become a significant pedagogical issue for the increasingly high proportion of children who are not Catholic in Australian Catholic schools. For example, more than 50% of children in Tasmanian Catholic schools in 2011 were not Catholic. Where teachers have consciously attended to this presence, they have reported that it often generates an unintended positivity. When children from other denominations / faith traditions, including non-Christian religions, were included in the classroom study and allowed to refer to their own traditions, teachings and practices, this has stimulated Catholic children to take a greater interest in knowing and becoming more literate about their own faith tradition.

**Progression from children’s to adolescent spirituality**

As regards their participation in religious practice and religious education in the primary school, practically all the children appeared to be quite religious, even if the spirituality of many in their home situation would not be categorised the same way. They seemed to be effervescent and enthusiastic in religion class. But when secondary school religion teachers painted a contrasting picture of the indifference to religion that many of their students displayed in religious education, one may wonder “What is happening here?” At first sight there appears to be a decline in spirituality as children progress into the secondary school. If so, what have been the causal factors in play? Was it a result of poor religious education at secondary level – and students lost interest? Was it poor primary school religious education whose outcomes were eventually discredited by adolescents as being too ‘baby’-like? Was it developmental where adolescents in searching for a sense of freedom and independence felt the need to distance themselves from the religious authority perceived as telling them how they should live their lives?

To help clarify the complex issues here and to judge whether or not there is a decline in spirituality as children become adolescent, it is helpful to use these three terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal spirituality or basic human spirituality</th>
<th>Spirituality implicit in the individual’s values; how they perceive and relate to spiritual and moral dimensions of life, including the transcendent; the level of love, care, altruism, sensitivity etc. in their makeup. (c/f the discussion in chapter 2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal religiosity</td>
<td>Observable religious behaviour (apparent interest in religion, prayer, mass attendance, spiritual reading etc.), particularly when at home and not at school because this may or may not be identical with the religiosity demonstrated during attendance at a Catholic school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘School uniform’ religiosity</td>
<td>Observable religious behaviour during school hours when at a Catholic school. It is principally thought of in terms of level of overt engagement in religious education lessons, prayers and liturgy, and in the level of their observable interest in religion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To interpret changes from children’s enthusiastic religious behaviour in primary school to a relative indifference to religion and religious education in the secondary school, the first distinction to be made differentiates spirituality and religiosity; and a second distinction is between contexts – school and home.

Decline in ‘school uniform’ religiosity: What religion teachers are thinking about when they feel that children’s spirituality has declined may not necessarily be a decline in their personal spirituality. They may have become more mature and critical thinkers and better informed about religion; they may be more caring and less self-centred: they may have developed more solid personal values, becoming more reflective, more autonomous, and more responsible. So their core spirituality may have developed positively. And it may have been just their ‘school uniform’ religiosity that has apparently declined. When the childlike enthusiasm for religion in the primary school wanes, their school uniform religiosity declines. But whether or not this signals a decline in their core personal spirituality is a very complex question with no simple answer.

For children from religious homes, there may be congruence and harmony between their school uniform religiosity, and their personal and family religiosity. For the children who came into the Catholic primary school with no tangible personal religiosity, they apparently took on board a school-based or ‘school uniform’ religiosity while at the Catholic primary school. But it may not have been an enduring acquisition.

For children from non-religious families, their basic spirituality was probably never strongly religious, even though they participated responsibly in religion in the primary school. Hence the transition to adolescence has been accompanied by a falling away of the school uniform religiosity that developed and functioned during their primary school years. It worked like a temporary cultural overlay that was consistent with the religious orientation and identity of the school. Even to the end of their schooling in Year 12, it is likely that pupils in Catholic schools will retain some measure of respect for, and identification with, the desired religiosity of the school. But by the end of their Catholic schooling, many students emerged with the same secular spirituality they absorbed as young children. And what seemed to be discarded was the school uniform religiosity from their primary school days that gradually fell away while they traversed the secondary school.

Was their Catholic religious education therefore ineffective and useless? Certainly not, because they have been educated spiritually and religiously both in their cultural religious tradition and hopefully also in terms of their basic human spirituality such that they can better respond to the spiritual and moral dimensions of life they encounter. Those who measure the ultimate value of Catholic schooling in terms of the numbers of past pupils who go to Mass regularly will not accept this as anything else but failure.

Everything that young children do at primary school can appear new and interesting. They are readily engaged and responsive, and this applies in religious education as much as in any other learning area. Hence it is easy to interpret their natural energy and enthusiasm in religious education as a positive religious response. They are also cooperative and ready to participate in prayer and liturgy. However, as they grow older they develop ‘interest filters’; they become more confident in discerning and choosing what interests them specifically and what does not. And their interest in religion and religious education quickly loses out. They can readily learn how to discern what is ‘cool’ from what is not; their interests can easily be swayed by groups of friends and even more so by what popular culture proposes as the sources of ‘feel good’.

The school uniform religiosity of primary school children would be classified in terms of Fowler’s theory of faith development as vicarious and imitative (Fowler, 1981). This is not to say that it is superficial or not authentic. They readily assimilated the religious meanings and practices in the Catholic primary school whether or not they were congruent with their home spirituality. For those from non-religious homes, religion / religious education at school was like a ‘second language’ to that spoken at home. And as they became older the need for maintaining this ‘second language’ became less compelling. And by the time they leave school they have no need for it at all – in the same circumstances they were in before they went to a Catholic school. The argument for a relevant religious education would claim that learning this ‘second language’ has not just been about Catholic traditions but about learning how to better discern a meaningful spiritual/moral path through life whether formally religious or not.

The negative change in children’s thinking and feeling about religion as they move into adolescence is not necessarily a conscious anti-religious movement. For many of them, their cultural religious meanings just seem to fade into the background as they become more autonomous in their thinking and more self-reliant in their behaviour. Religious meanings are eclipsed by more immediate cultural meanings about lifestyle, feel-good, looks, friendship and entertainment. And also significant will be the emergence of sexual feelings and interests. As one parent commented: “Teenagers are like hormones on feet.” And at the very time when life seems to be opening up explosively for them, their religion appears to have little to say that is relevant to their concerns.

Developmental influences: As hinted at above, there may be a developmental component to young people’s declining school uniform religiosity. Just as some needed to distance themselves from parental authority in their quest for a greater sense of autonomous self, they needed to draw back from showing interest in religion and religious education at school to indicate their independence from religion and religious authority.
When adolescents are preoccupied with other pressing matters (personal appearance, hormones, sexual feelings, friendship and friendship groups, developing a sense of personal identity, ‘stuff’ that makes them feel better, personal freedom), then religion just fades into the background – thought to be useful for some, but something about which they have a choice; and many feel they have little need for it just then.

Secularisation: For some initially religious children the decline in their school uniform religiosity may also have been an indicator of what was happening to their personal religiosity. There is some evidence for this occurring where young people from religious homes choose not to attend church. A complex of personal and social factors may have influenced them. But this is not necessarily the complete story about what has happened to their spirituality.

Level of religious understanding: The change processes discussed above would suggest that the decline in school uniform religiosity could not be accounted for simply by blaming primary or secondary religion teachers for faulty religious education – as if somehow a more forceful presentation of Catholicism would have saved the day.

Of many complex influences, some have considered that children may build up an attractive experience and image of what religion is like for a child, and if this is not updated as they grow older, they may gradually detach from their childlike view. Religion might then remain like a pleasant childhood relic – while not relevant to the world of the adolescent and the adult. It would be difficult to prove whether or not this was occurring.

There appears to be no clear and simple explanation of the decline in school uniform religiosity and its implications for personal spirituality. But whatever the complexity of influences affecting both religious and non-religious children and adolescents, it still reflects something of the secularisation and change in the landscape of spirituality discussed in chapters 3-7.

Summary conclusions: Some implications for primary school religious education

Religious starting points of pupils: Acknowledging the spiritual and religious starting points of pupils without any indications of discrimination is essential. Whether or not they are religious, the Catholic pupils have a right to a religious education that acquaints them with Catholicism. Particularly relevant would be learning about and experiencing basic religious practices and beliefs. The style of teaching should emphasise that such knowledge and experience are an important part of their cultural education; it is educational in flavour and not proselytising. And this applies equally to the non-Catholic pupils. They can accept the importance ascribed to religion and religious education that are hallmarks of Catholic schooling. Creative teaching can often include sensitive reference to the other religious traditions, including non-Christian religions that are represented in the pupil cohort.

An educative community that specialises in studying Catholic traditions: The primary school religious education can be projected as ‘extending’ children’s knowledge of Catholicism beyond the usual ‘religious horizons’ of their own homes. It specialises in transmitting Catholic religious traditions.

Avoiding unrealistic spiritual/religious interpretations of children’s responsiveness to religious education: Care is needed not to be too ready to label children’s natural interest and engagement in primary school religious education as an indicator of an authentic ‘faith response’. There is nothing un-authentic about their responses; and the educational and personal value in their engagement is not in question. But, over-estimating their religiosity while at primary school can create unrealistic estimates of what is actually happening within their personal spirituality. Focusing on what a good religious education entails is a healthier and more realistic path for teachers to take than speculating too much about how overtly religious pupils are or should be.

This thinking can be evident in the words teachers use both in class and when describing their purposes in religious education. Words such as ‘faith response’, ‘religious’, ‘reverence’, ‘pious’, ‘prayerful’ etc. may sometimes not be as appropriate as would words like ‘responsive’, ‘reflective’, ‘inquisitive’, ‘imaginative’, ‘energetic’, ‘playful’ etc. for describing pupils’ responsiveness in religious education (for further discussion of the issues see, Rossiter, 2012A and Hyde, 2013).

Developing a discerning perspective on pedagogies related to play-based learning, story-telling and children’s imagination: The excesses flowing from a Romantic notion of children’s spirituality need to be avoided. But in so doing, respect is needed for its natural integrity – rather than view it as ‘watered down adult spirituality’.

Emphasising children’s own personal ‘wondering’ about the meaning of scriptural stories needs to be balanced with explanations of traditional Christian interpretations, as well as to more contextual interpretations that take into account scripture scholarship and understandings of the nature and formation of scriptural texts. For example, older primary school children can appreciate the ‘subversive’ intentions of Jesus New Testament parables; emphasising Jesus’ caring for the lost sheep can miss the challenging message in the parable.

Care is needed when using play-based learning not to give the impression that children can only learn when it is ‘fun’. Primary school religious education needs to be intellectually challenging while not missing the fundamental point that ‘hands on’ pedagogies that engage children actively should be very prominent (C/f Rossiter, 2012B).
The arguments in this chapter complement the earlier treatment of secular spirituality. They drew attention to the primal spiritual/religious socialisation of pre-school children in their homes as a key to interpreting how primary school religious education impacts on both their basic human spirituality and their religiosity. Acknowledgment and acceptance of the relatively non-religious, secular spirituality that now characterises most of the parents of children in Catholic schools need not make religion teachers and clergy fearful because they feel it might weaken the rationale for the whole enterprise – because if the children are not very religious before they come to Catholic schools and are not very religious when they leave, then what is the point of having Catholic schools? However, this acknowledgment is a potent catalyst for reinterpreting the mission of the Catholic schools to enhance and resource the basic human spirituality of both students and their parents whether or not they are engaged with a local parish. And as noted in chapter 1, this mission is one that makes a valuable contribution to the spiritual and moral dimensions of Australian education and to the country’s common good.

References


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Part B

Issues for Catholic school Religious Education

The first part of the book explored the changing landscape of contemporary spirituality; the chapters here are concerned with implications for curriculum and teaching. They are primarily about clarifying the discourse of Australian Catholic school religious education. How educators think about the project of religious education, and the words they used to describe its purposes and processes, have a significant influence on expected outcomes, content and pedagogy.

In 2017, the Australian Catholic bishops published *Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment*. It was a valuable document that reviewed the scope of Catholic youth ministry in the light of a summary of youth spirituality and some aspects of contemporary culture. The Report’s material on culture and spirituality is consistent with that in chapters 3-7. As anticipated, it concentrated on church ministry to youth; the word ‘ministry’ was used 109 times, ‘Catholic’ 220, and ‘formation’ 79. That Religious Education was referred to only 10 times is understandable and appropriate because it is one context in which educators can see their educational work from a religious perspective of ministry.

Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish the purposes and processes of religious education which are different from those of youth ministry. The latter is usually interpreted mainly from an ecclesiastical perspective, whereas, religious education has broader educational purposes. While youth ministry and religious education are complementary, what religious education can contribute to young people’s education and personal/spiritual development should not be confused with the purposes of youth ministry.

It will be argued that religious education suffers from the perception that it is almost exclusively an ecclesiastical, rather than an educational, activity. A restoration of balance between these perspectives is urgently needed. Attention is also given to a critical evaluative pedagogy that needs to be used for personal development and cultural analysis, as well as in theological content. Finally it discusses issues related to the Catholic identity and mission of Catholic schools.
Chapter 9

Continuing language problems for Catholic school Religious Education

The words that Catholic diocesan authorities choose to describe religious education are passed on to practitioners through normative documents and associated professional development programs. The words used, and the background assumptions and intentions loaded into the words, have a significant bearing on the way that teachers understand the nature and purposes of classroom religious education in Catholic schools. The normative words and constructs set the parameters for the discourse of religious education and for anticipating outcomes. This chapter looks at problems that appear to have arisen from the excessive use of ecclesiastical terms at the expense of more educational language for religious education.

My concern has not been with [religious education] curriculum issues, but more with faith formation programs, seeking to know “what works”.

In a recent letter from one of the Australian Catholic bishops

The only purpose of Catholic schools is to fulfil the Catholic Church’s mission. They should increase young people’s engagement with the church to become regular attenders at Sunday mass.

Key ideas from the homily of an Australian Catholic bishop

Introduction

Authorities in Catholic religious education, as in any area of the school curriculum, have an influential ‘language-making’ role. They decide the key words that practitioners are required to use for articulating purposes and practice. Even where religion teachers may not read much normative theory, they are still affected by the words and ideas that percolate through the system. The normative language of religious education structures the discussion of the subject. This in turn can determine the range of possibilities in content and pedagogy that will emerge. It shapes teachers’ expectations of what they should be achieving and on what and how they teach. It influences presumptions about the types of responses they will seek from students. It influences teachers’ perception and interpretation of problems in religious education. It even influences the way teachers feel about their work – “Am I a success or a failure?” The language can be enabling and empowering, or it can be oppressive if it restricts religion teachers to limited or unrealistic ways of thinking and talking about their work.

In the very first professional development program I conducted for Catholic diocesan religion teachers in 1983, I used the following statement to draw attention to the problem Catholic religious education was having with too many ecclesiastical constructs. That it can still be used effectively today shows that this problem had not gone away. Some of the constructs are no longer in vogue.

A statement of religious education theory

The Church documents and religious education theorists have many important things to say about making catechesis more effective and life relevant. This contributes to the Ministry of the Word. By making use of Groome’s present dialectical hermeneutics (an aspect of shared praxis) together with Moore’s typological phenomenology, and taking into account developmental theory, it is possible to facilitate the faith development of pupils from an intuitive-projective stage to a synthetic-conventional stage. There may also promote individuating-reflexive or paradoxical-consolidative faith. However, this does not resolve the question: To what extent can an
education in religion contribute to an education in faith? The use of Grimmitt's dimensional and existential approaches (that is, covering explicit and implicit religion respectively), may serve as a pre-catechesis and also as a pre-evangelisation. Furthermore, the initiation of young people into the evangelising interpersonal interactions of the faith community would constitute the catechumenal dimension of the R.C.I.A. (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults). These same processes would effect a degree of secondary religious socialisation, and no doubt this would serve the purposes of evangelisation and inculturation into the faith. This would invariably be a faith formation and it would reinforce Catholic identity. It is also suggested that a liberational approach will help with the process of conscientisation, or raising of critical consciousness. This will challenge young people to be Christian witnesses and will effectively provide a dimension of mission which is more effective than that of a Kerygmatic approach or of a life-situation catechesis (Anon. 1983).

Invariably over the years, the responses of postgraduate students and religion teachers to this statement has been the same. It prompted them to identify from their own experience the following issues:-

1. **Jargon.** While various professions had problems with jargon, it appeared to be a particular problem with religious education, with a large number of ecclesiastical constructs being applied.

2. **Poor definition of terms.** The key terms used to describe religious education were rarely defined with clarity, leaving practitioners somewhat confused about what they were supposed to be doing.

3. **Obscuring the meaning and purpose of religious education.** The use of ecclesiastical constructs in a jargon-like fashion (or as the latest ‘buzz’ words) tended to stop educators from thinking further about the meaning and purpose of religious education. It also seemed to presume that the outcomes of religious education were to be mainly in terms of young people’s engagement with the church.

4. **Ecclesiastical rather than an educational activity.** The number of ecclesiastical terms used gave the impression that religious education was more a Catholic Church activity than an area of education. This reinforced a sense that religious education was unlike any other area of learning or curriculum. This affected its subject status negatively. The classroom is part of one agency (the school) which deals with a part of young people’s lives. But if the language over-emphasises the mission and ministry of the church, there is a danger of overestimating what religious education can achieve. Teachers may mistakenly think that the classroom is the main place where the church's ministry is offered to young people. Religious education is then talked about with terms that are more appropriate to the roles of church and home; as a consequence, the distinctive religious educational role of the school is obscured. Through being too concerned about ‘changing the personal faith’ of pupils, the valuable contribution that the religion classroom can make to ‘educating’ them religiously is neglected.

5. **Unnecessary complexity.** The multiplicity of terms seemed to imply that religious education was very complex and esoteric. This tended to sap the confidence of religion teachers. They can be overburdened by the very constructs and language that should be helping them articulate their role in a realistic way. Where teachers may already be self-conscious about their poor theological background, they can feel even more inadequate when the words they are supposed to use for religious education appear unnecessarily complex and impenetrable. Teachers can feel excluded from the discourse of religious education because it is too ecclesiastical; and this applies even more to parents.

6. **Religion teacher self-confidence.** Some teachers who are creative and enthusiastic in other curriculum areas can be diffident and ineffective when it comes to religious education. A significant part of the problem lies in their expectations that are conditioned by too much ecclesiastical language. The theory and the language for religious education should be simple enough and clear enough to give teachers confidence; it should give them a meaningful and unambiguous understanding of their role; it should be realistic and show that the task is not too difficult; it should help teachers see that with a reasonable effort they can be effective.

7. ‘Camouflaging’ what happens in the classroom. The use of ecclesiastical terms can ‘camouflage’ or mask what is actually happening in classroom religion lessons. Where a ‘rhetoric’ of religious education prevails, many of the real issues in the classroom may remain unarticulated (E.g. attending to students’ perceptions of religious education); current practices may remain relatively unchallenged. Where theory and practice are not readily accessible to critique, scope for improvement is impaired.

8. **Dismissal of the value of religious education.** Where it is framed almost exclusively in ecclesiastical terms, religious education can be more readily dismissed by teachers (and also students and parents) as of no consequence or educational value. Despite the rhetoric about its importance, religious education can be regarded as just the ‘Catholic bit’ that you have to put up with if you are in a Catholic school, rather than as an area of curriculum that is self-evidently valuable to young people’s education no matter what their level of religiosity.

9. **Hiatus between theory and practice and between authorities and practitioners.** The emphases in the normative discourse of religious education tended to make religion teachers feel that there was a hiatus between theory and their experience in the classroom; and consequently, they could also feel a growing reality gap between religious education authorities and the practitioners.

Where problems with the language of religious education have been researched, it was found that both Catholic school religion teachers and parents considered that the ecclesiastical constructs were important. But they also considered that they were confusing and not helpful for understanding religious education (Finn, 2011). They tended to accept respectfully the views and language proposed by authorities, even where this was not always meaningful. This is an issue where more extensive research would be helpful; but it requires courage to ask the uncomfortable questions.

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Problems with the language of religious education were identified as early as 1970 by the US scholar Gabriel Moran, still today a prolific writer in the field. His article titled _Catechetics R.I.P. made sense to many involved in religious education, but was not well received by Catholic authorities_. In the early 1980s, another US scholar, James Di Giacomo (1984), wrote about his experience of religious education in Australian Catholic schools as follows.

In Australia, as elsewhere in the world, religious educators labour under a crisis of identity which afflicts even those who do not advert to it. Some confusion is inevitable when administrators and instructors operate from different philosophies and with different methodologies. To some extent, this diversity can be enriching, as long as it reflects a healthy pluralism within a school department. But sometimes it results in people working at cross purposes, to the confusion of students, the loss of academic respectability in the eyes of the school community and reduced effectiveness in sharing the message of Christ.

This same problem remains evident in Catholic school religious education today. Before looking into the history of changes in the key words used to explain the normative purposes of religious education, a related question will be explored: How religion teachers understood their role in religious education.

**How religion teachers understood their dual commitments to the church and to the personal development of their students**

The history of Australian Catholic school religious education showed that in the 1960s and 1970s, as a result of significant socio-cultural change, educational change and changes in the Catholic Church in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, there was a period of uncertainty and some confusion (see the historical accounts in Rossiter, 1981, 1999; Buchanan, 2005; Ryan, 2013). The old ways of the green catechism, Bible history and apologetics were no longer felt to be relevant, but it was not clear just which new direction should be taken. But one thing was quite evident: religion teachers worked hard trying to make religious education more relevant and meaningful for students. To this day, commitment to promoting the personal development of young people and to trying to continually improve the relevance of religious education has never been lacking in Catholic school religion teachers.

As noted in chapter 1, in the late 1960s and in the 1970s, almost all religion teachers in Australian Catholic schools were members of religious orders. They had committed their lives to the service of the church, so no one could question their commitment to its welfare or to the promotion of its mission. Their hopes that religious education would educate students in the Catholic faith tradition and dispose them towards engagement with the church were held in creative tension with efforts to help young people make sense of life, and to negotiate the perils of adolescence in what was becoming a more complex and challenging culture. These dual commitments were so strong, so embedded and held in creative tension, that they were often taken for granted and not articulated as they have been here. In my experience of that period, I never met a religion teacher who thought that getting the students to Sunday mass was the central aim of religious education – even though there were some vocal groups like Catholics Concerned for the Faith who felt that faulty religion teaching was responsible for declining mass attendance. Religion teachers thought that good religious education would benefit young people whether or not they chose to be regular church goers. It was not regarded as an exclusively ecclesiastical activity.

At this same time, following new government funding arrangements for private schools and the gradual development of diocesan Catholic Education Offices, there was not a strong exercise of church control over the religion curricula in Catholic schools. There were Catholic doctrinal syllabuses, but the religious order schools were in effect free to develop their own religion curricula. This was also a vogue period for SBCD – School Based Curriculum Development – and this was often the only sort of religion curriculum in operation.

So both schools and religion teachers had freedom to experiment. With this freedom, and given the period of rapid change, there was much trial and error in religious education. Also the religion teachers in the 1960s and 1970s often had little in the way of professional learning in scripture and theology.

One significant development in Australian Catholic school religious education at this time was the Communitarian retreat. It was introduced in 1964 by South Australian religion teachers trying something different from traditional practice, which might help address the spiritual and religious needs of young people. This marked an important turning point in the conduct of school retreats. Within a few years, what began as an innovation by a small group of religious educators eventually became the norm for retreats for Catholic secondary schools across the country (Tullio & Rossiter, 2009; Rossiter, 2016). This was a substantial, ‘grass roots’ educational innovation. This ‘practitioner leadership’, together with effective support by the authorities in the religious orders, was crucial for the nation-wide spread of the new style retreats. The success story of retreats, as well as helpful experimental approaches in the classroom, were possible because of the freedom and independence that religious order schools and religion teachers were able to exercise. As could have been expected, there was also a down side to this freedom where there was evidence of some unprofessional and naïve practices by individual teachers.

A crucial lesson to be learned from this history is that healthy Catholic school religious education needs to retain a **creative tension between ecclesiastical concerns and teachers’ views about the spiritual/moral needs of pupils**. Where there is no creative tension, and where ecclesiastical purposes predominate, religious education could more readily be perceived as if it were just ‘telling students about Catholicism’. There is a tendency for ecclesiastical interests in
religious education to be concerned with promoting engagement with the church and regular mass attendance; and from the teachers and students’ points of view, this focus appears somewhat unrealistic and not so relevant to young people’s lives. Naturally, ecclesiastical expectations of religious education will be ‘conservative’. In the sense of conserving and handing on the religious tradition, these are valuable, justified purposes. But if this perspective is so prominent to the extent of eclipsing other more personal-development and educational purposes, then religious education runs the risk of being perceived increasingly as irrelevant.

By the 1990s, a general consensus emerged about what might be best described as a ‘subject-oriented’ approach in religious education. This meant that religion was treated as a core learning area in the school curriculum, aspiring to be as challenging as any other learning area, with content and pedagogy that did not suffer by comparison with what was being done in other subjects. This included all the protocols and procedures of the established academic subjects/learning areas – with a normative curriculum, objectives, performance indicators, varied student-centred pedagogies and appropriate assessment and reporting. In many Catholic secondary schools, religious education in Years 11-12 consisted of a state board-determined course in Religion Studies (or Studies of Religion) which had the same academic status as subjects that counted towards tertiary entrance scores.

For many religion teachers, subject-oriented religious education was about educating pupils religiously and spiritually – it was an educational exploration of religion and not necessarily a religious experience as such. There still remains, however, some variation in the views of teachers about how devotional, how religious and how personal (in the sense of having personal disclosures) the activity should be. This ambiguity is also related to language problems in religious education as noted earlier.

At the same time religious education was acquiring more academic status and respectability in the school curriculum, this development was being affected by an increasing tendency to regard it as more an ecclesiastical activity than an educational one. I believe that this tendency runs counter to the academic and core educational character of religious education. Also, the more centralised and fixed the religion curriculum, the less freedom there was for adapting religious education to meet contemporary needs.

My conclusion: There is an urgent need to restore the creative tension between educational and ecclesiastical concerns. This is needed above all to promote the relevance of religious education as an academic subject for students – but also to promote research, creativity, and innovation.

It is pertinent to note that the academic study and research related to religious education at tertiary level (in Catholic and other institutions) is a crucial reference point for maintaining a creative tension between educational and ecclesiastical concerns. Tertiary religious education has usually always had academic freedom giving it the independence needed to explore and appraise insights from education and the social sciences, as well as from theology and religious studies.

Where the place of religious education in a Catholic university becomes dominated by ecclesiastical concerns, it is regarded more as a part of campus ministry rather than an academic discipline in its own right. The desirable creative tension collapses and the discipline declines – particularly evident in academic research and publishing, as well as in numbers of higher degree research students in religious education. And rather than providing a critical forum for studying and appraising school religious education, it reinforces the problems already evident in the schools.

The historical pattern in the use of key words for Australian Catholic school religious education

In education, different constructs develop over time to articulate new theories for enhancing teaching and learning. But in almost all areas (for example: mathematics education, English, etc.), the basic name for the endeavour remained the same. But in Catholic religious education, a variety of names emerged to describe the process as noted earlier. All of these words were ecclesiastical and their meanings reflected more a church perspective on enhancing the religious life and practice of students than a view of what it meant to educate them religiously.

Within the discourse of Catholic schooling, the use of ecclesiastical words has tended to eclipse, and create ambiguity about, the fundamental term religious education. Consistent with the issues raised in relation to the jargon statement early in this chapter, the frequent use of words like faith development, faith formation, Catholic identity, catechesis, new evangelisation, mission and ministry to encompass religious education tends to makes unrealistic presumptions that what happens to pupils psychologically during religion lessons will change their faith and religious practice. And what gets neglected is a realistic understanding of what it means to educate them spiritually and morally. This latter purpose is one that religious education can actually achieve quite well – but efforts enhance pupils’ religious knowledge does not automatically generate personal faith. Also, a successful, meaningful, and relevant religious education cannot adequately be appraised in terms of traditional religiosity performance indicators like Sunday mass attendance.

Through different metaphors and perspectives, the ecclesiastical terms can nuance the understanding of religious education from the church’s point of view. But again, as discussed earlier in the chapter, there is also a downside – too many normative constructs can constrain thinking and can stifle freedom and creativity, as well as create confusion.
about fundamental purposes. While identified as early as 1970, this issue is yet to be acknowledged and addressed as a significant problem for Australian Catholic schooling.

Attention will now be given to the evolution in the use of normative ecclesiastical terms in Catholic Church documents. But it is important initially to note that the succession of Roman documents dating from the second Vatican Council have been more generally concerned with the church’s broad Ministry of Catechesis and the Ministry of the Word. Religious education across age groups, and more specifically religious education in schools, were only parts of the wide scope of those documents. But they have often been read by educators as if everything applied to the school context. By contrast, the documents from the Congregation for Catholic Education – especially The Catholic School (1977) and The Religious Dimension of Education in Catholic Schools (1988) – were more focused on the Catholic school and RE.

This evolution is evident the percentage frequencies of key words that have been used in a selection of authoritative documents that have been applied to religious education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church Documents</th>
<th>Length in words</th>
<th>Faith</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Catechesis</th>
<th>Evangelisation</th>
<th>Development</th>
<th>Formation</th>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Mission Ministry Witness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1966 Vatican II Declaration on Christian Education (GE)</td>
<td>5K</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970 Renewal of Education of Faith (Australian) (REF)</td>
<td>47K</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971 General Catechetical Directory (GCD)</td>
<td>31K</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988 Religious Dimension of Education in Catholic schools (RDCS)</td>
<td>19K</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997 General Directory of Catechesis (GDC)</td>
<td>69K</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 Catholic Schools at a Crossroads (NSW/ACT Bishops) (CR)</td>
<td>4K</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9.1 Analysis of the frequency of words that have been used to refer to religious education

The Vatican II 1966 document Gravissimum Educationis (GE, Declaration on Christian Education) focused mainly on the word education (66%). This emphasis was both expansive and ecumenical in scope. It was naturally open to dialogue with other Christian denominations where ‘Christian education’ was prominent. This also articulated with the wider, international discourse of education, showing how education within a particular religious tradition and ‘educating one’s faith’ could make a valuable contribution to people’s spiritual and moral development, as well as to civic education.

In 1970, the Italian and Australian bishops in a sense ‘jumped the gun’ in publishing their post Vatican II directories (The Renewal of the Education of Faith, REF) before the Roman General Catechetical Directory (GCD) was issued by the Congregation for the Clergy in 1971. The idea of educating people’s faith was carried through from the Vatican document, while catechesis (23%) became more prominent – it was used only once in the Vatican II document.

A sharp decline in the use of the word education was evident in the Roman GCD (1971). From roughly 70% prominence in the Vatican II document, education was virtually replaced by a 70% usage of ‘catechesis’ and ‘faith’. This naturally inhibited ecumenical links with those outside Catholicism who used the words education and Christian education. From then on, the discussion of religious education from a normative Roman Catholic perspective tended to become ‘in-house’ and not as open to the wider educational discourse because it was more or less locked in to a set of ecclesiastical constructs that had little currency outside the Catholic Church. This also meant that the religious
education endeavour was understood and talked about more as if it were an ecclesiastical activity. The more ecclesiastical, and correspondingly the less educational, it was perceived to be, religious education became increasingly insecure in the Catholic school curriculum. If it was not regarded primarily as education, in all likelihood this would eventually have negative consequences in terms of the perceptions of teachers, students and parents. However, to be fair to the GCD, it was never intended to be a document about school religious education, but rather the wider religious ministry of the Catholic Church for faithful of all ages in a variety of contexts.

As might have been expected, the Roman Congregation for Catholic Education’s 1988 document The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School (RDECS), as also its earlier document The Catholic School, 1977, gave special attention to the word education – consistent with the emphasis in the Vatican II document. These documents helped raise the status of religious education in the Catholic school curriculum, noting that it was distinct from catechesis. From the church perspective, both catechesis and religious education were needed, and religious education was ‘at home’ in the school.

The Roman document The General Directory of Catechesis (GDC) was a 1997 rewrite of the 1971 GCD. It too was concerned with the church’s ministry of the Word and not just education in Catholic schools. The word frequencies for both documents were similar.

While not as prominent as the other ecclesiastical constructs, the words mission, ministry and witness were used in all six documents. They showed a church mission perspective on activities. Religion/religious was common through the documents – used 200 times in the GDC and 10 times in GE. Theology/theological was less common – 21 and 18 times in REF and GCD, and not at all in GDC and CR – it was used twice in GE.

The 2007 Australian document (NSW & ACT) (CR) used education four times more frequently than catechesis. In addition, it is the first of the documents to use the specific words ‘faith formation’ and ‘Catholic identity’. While forming/formation, develop/development and identity (to a lesser extent) were used infrequently in the earlier documents, the precise words ‘Catholic identity’ appeared only once (in the 1997 Roman document), and ‘faith formation’ not at all. Somewhat surprisingly, the term ‘faith development’ does not appear in any of the six documents; it did, however, come to have great prominence in Australian Catholic religious education circles after the publication of John Westerhoff’s Will our Children have Faith? (1976) and James Fowler’s Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning (1981).

What is a feature of the 2007 Crossroads document, which contrasts with the focus on education in the Vatican II document, is the way that religious education was treated primarily as an ecclesiastical process. Coupled with this assumption was a concern that, despite the high level of resources invested in Catholic schools, they were not successful in inclining young Catholics to become regular church goers. Because of low church participation rates amongst Australian Catholic youth, it was considered that there must be a crisis of Catholic identity in Catholic schools. New evangelisation and strengthening Catholic identity were proposed as principal strategies for ‘reigniting’ young people’s spirituality and improving their engagement with the Church. Increased Sunday mass attendance was listed as a performance indicator for Catholic schools. This author contests these views, considering that there is no crisis of identity in Australian Catholic schools, and that there are no causal links between Catholic schooling/religious education and the ultimate mass attendance rates of Catholic school graduates. Religious education is about educating young people religiously in their own tradition as well as helping them find a more meaningful view of life in a complex and confusing culture. This is primarily an educational task and not an ecclesiastical one; and Catholic schools are capable of doing this well. But no matter what the quality of school religious education, this cannot make the church more meaningful and attractive to young people – only the church itself can do this. While there is evidence of a widespread crisis in the Catholic Church, this cannot be said of Catholic schools in Australia, which are thriving. Making the church more relevant is of great concern for Catholics, but it has a different and extensive agenda to be addressed, and school religious education has little if anything to do with that.

In 1977 I wrote an article in the Catholic Weekly countering the claims of a group called Catholics Concerned for the Faith who blamed faulty Catholic school religious education for declining mass attendance among youth. In some quarters, this same problematic view of religious education remains evident today. In 2015, the Catholic journal AD 2000 reported the following letter from concerned Catholics.

We firmly believe that the Church has a major problem with its delivery of religious education in her school system and think that urgent action is required to improve her performance. A mere 20% of students in the Catholic school system attend Mass on Sunday during their schooling, but 72% of them stop practising their faith by the time they are 29 years of age.
. . . there is something drastically wrong with the curriculum and the way it is being taught.
. . . While the school factor appears to be the major factor causing students and ex-students to stop practising their faith, other factors also contribute such as the family situation, mass media especially TV and social media.
. . . The crisis in Catholic education suggests that the curriculum is lacking. Children need to be made familiar with the Catholic Catechism, the Bible references and the importance of going to Mass every Sunday at the very least.
The most recent document on Catholic school Religious Education from the Australian bishops was produced by the National Catholic Education Commission in 2018. Its word usage unequivocally emphasised ‘religious education’. Quotations from, and comments on, the Framing Paper will be included later in this chapter.

**Brief overview of ecclesiastical terms that have been applied to Catholic school religious education**

Before looking more carefully at problems with the usage of particular ecclesiastical terms, a brief summary is provided with the author’s interpretation of their core meanings. These interpretations are provided because I find that in most instances, those who use the terms with reference to religious education never clarify what they mean. These core interpretations are intended to help educators judge just how much the terms are pertinent to the sphere of interpersonal relationships and to what extent they might apply to the public educational forum in religion lessons.

Table 9.2  Summary of ecclesiastical terms that have been applied to religious education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ecclesiastical terms</th>
<th>Brief definition of core meaning</th>
<th>Area of operation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Catholic Identity** | There are various dimensions to religious identity both personal and institutional:— formal church membership, moral identity (how good the person or the institution really is in the way they treat others), prayer/spirituality identity, liturgical identity, level of religious practices, curriculum identity (for an educational institution).  
Articulated Catholic identity: this means the precise words used by the institution to define what it believes is its meaning and purpose.  
Actual Catholic identity: This includes the way that members and others think about its identity according to the ways they are treated.  
Popular Catholic identity: What people in the community generally think about how Catholic the organisation is. | Mainly interpersonal; Institutional practices |
| **Faith formation** | An activity that intentionally sets out to change the personal beliefs and commitments of individuals. A problematic term because those who use it rarely give a definition. The best meaning for faith formation is probably catechesis, where the notions of voluntary and adult come into the picture. By contrast with ‘faith-forming’ intentions which can be easily presumed, it is difficult to judge objectively whether an activity actually is faith formation or not. | Mainly interpersonal; Some education |
| **Faith development** | This is a process in which an individual's faith becomes ‘better’. A problematic term because those who use it do not define what they mean; and the word ‘development' tends to have overtones of an economic discourse where ‘growth’ is the key term referring to wealth. Sometimes referred to as ‘faith growth’. It may imply change from lower to higher levels of ‘faith development’ according to James Fowler’s theory about the psychological processes involved in believing. | Mainly interpersonal |
| **Catechesis** | This is the activity where committed, adult, believers voluntarily engage in a process of articulating, sharing and trying to enhance their own personal faith and commitment to God. It may involve some educative processes. Catholic Church documents (GCD, 1971) defined catechesis as an adult activity and proposed that the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) was the principal model for catechesis. | Mainly interpersonal; Some education |
| **Evangelisation** | By treating and relating to people as Jesus would – through actions, words and commitments – this ‘announces' the good news of Jesus or the evangelion. If this is what Jesus was like, then such care for others implies an invitation to consider following Jesus. It also involves critiquing the culture from the perspective of Christian values. Evangelisation is primarily interpersonal and not propositional. Evangelisation is not education. | Mainly interpersonal |
| **New evangelisation** | Pope John Paul II instituted this word to mean the second or new attempt to love and care for people so that they see this as an example of the good news of Jesus Christ – which was a renewed invitation to consider faith in Jesus and engagement with the Christian church community. It may be interpreted as efforts to get people back into the church. | Mainly interpersonal |
The principal work or mission of the Catholic Church is to treat people as Christ would have treated them – to be Christ for them. While individuals exercise a personal mission through their own actions, some aspects of the Church's mission are carried by various organisations and institutions. E.g. Aged care, care for the homeless, hospitals, healthcare, education, youth work etc.

Ministry

Ministry is a religious interpretation of how one respects and cares for others – individuals see their work with others as motivated by personal faith and contributing to the church’s mission. An area of work or activity is regarded as a ministry by those who see it as religiously motivated – E.g. ministry in nursing, health care, the legal profession, education etc. The idea of the "Ministry of the word" refers to the way the church is committed to evangelisation and announcing the good news of Christ and to furthering knowledge of the word of God in the Scriptures.

Witnessing

Being a Jesus Christ exemplar. Christ-like in one's personal relationships – caring for, and loving others in an unconditional way. Through their actions and relationships, individuals try to exhibit the Christian qualities to which they are publicly committed. Witnessing goes on all the time (E.g. teachers both inside and outside the classroom). The quality or the goodness of the human person is the measure of witness.

The above interpretations propose that the ecclesiastical terms are principally pertinent to the domain of inter-personal relationships – and only secondarily, and in a limited way, that they can be meaningfully applied to the particular situation of the religion classroom in Catholic schools; this is essentially a public educational forum and not a voluntary religious commitment group. Hence I am inclined to consider that terms which are not naturally ‘at home’ in the classroom are misused if they are the principal key words for describing the nature and purposes of religious education. Also, I consider them inappropriate for a semi-state Catholic school where most of the students are not practising Catholics, and where the rationale for religious education needs to be primarily educational; in other words – inappropriate for defining a public forum educational process for informing young people about religion and culture, and for helping them learn to become critical thinkers. Readers may refer back to chapter 1 to see how the nature and purposes of religious education can be formulated without the use of these terms.

Special attention to the use of the term ‘faith formation’

In 1987, a priest Diocesan Director of Catholic schools said to me “What we need is faith formation and not religious education”. Then and subsequently I found that those who used the term rarely if ever defined what they meant. It appeared to be used with the connotation that somehow faith formation was more important and influential than religious education – as if the intention to form faith made the activity more effective in changing the quality of the individual’s personal relationship with God. Education was apparently considered inferior to formation. No indication was given about how an observer could look at activities and clearly see why one was faith formation and others were 'merely' religious education. Also apparent in the connotation was its focus on recruitment to regular mass attendance; this seemed to be the criterion of faith formation that ‘works’. This language trend devalues religious education and distracts from giving attention to what it means to educate young people religiously.

The National Catholic Education Commission's (2017) document on faith formation for Catholic educators defined it as follows:-

Faith formation . . is an intentional ongoing and reflective process that focuses on the growth of individuals and communities from their lived experiences, in spiritual awareness, theological understanding, vocational motivation and capabilities for mission and service in the church and the world. (NCEC, 2017. p. 9) Some could equally use these same words to define aspects of religious education. This suggests an ambiguity that in my observation always seems to be present where people use the term faith formation.

Australian Catholic use of the term faith formation has etymological roots in the words ‘houses of formation’ in first half twentieth century religious order and seminary practice. Formation was like a ‘religious Marine boot camp’. The emphases were:- conformity, ‘marching in formation’, uniformity, obedience, being moulded and changed personally according to a desired model. Faith formation tends to become something of an oxymoron when this connotation is associated with a comprehensive view of Christian faith as a committed personal relationship with God, and as a gift from God freely accepted (as described in chapter 2).

On the other hand, education today tends to connote being informed, critical thinking and personal autonomy. It may
be that fear of such potential could foster a negative view of religious education and a more positive valuation of faith formation because it seemed to better serve ecclesiastical purposes.

Faith formation tends to be used more with reference to voluntary religious ministry programs than with reference to formal religious education. But its increasing prominence in schools is now eclipsing religious education and this will in turn devalue the place of religious education in the school curriculum and its status as a challenging academic subject.

A division between ‘educational’ and ‘faith formation/faith development’ aspects of the school’s overall religious education has been used to make helpful distinctions; but it uses the wrong language to do so. It makes long term outcomes, or more accurately ‘hopes’, take the place of the main process word. It gives an impression that the educational engagement with religion in the classroom does not contribute to the development of the individual’s personal faith – and this is not the case. The classroom study of religion can make a vital contribution to the understanding and deepening of the individual’s faith. This would be the one aspect of the overall development of an individual’s faith that is most in tune with what schools do best – educate.

Elsewhere, attention has been given to interpreting issues related to the use of other ecclesiastical terms ‘faith development’ and ‘Catholic identity’, and also to the distinction between ‘catechesis’ and ‘religious education’ (Crawford & Rossiter, 1988, Ch5; 2006, Ch. 18; Rossiter, 2013).

Related to the problems considered above is the emergence of new religious leadership positions in Catholic schools. Originally there was the Religious Education Coordinator (REC) or Assistant Principal Religious Education (APRE). Now there is a variety of positions with names like: Director of Catholic Identity, Dean of Mission, Coordinator of Mission and Catholic identity, Director of Evangelisation, Faith Development Coordinator. Anecdotal evidence suggests that apart from changed language patterns and some related professional development activities, the new positions have had no appreciable impact on the quality of religious education and pastoral care in Catholic schools. This is an issue that merits investigation through research. It must be noted that these comments are about language and new leadership roles and not about any evaluation of the Enhancing Catholic Schools Identity Project that has been conducted in Catholic schools across the country, and especially in Victoria.

One postgraduate student told me that over a few years, across 2-3 schools, her leadership position changed from Religious Education Coordinator to Dean of Mission, then to Director of Faith and Mission and finally to Director of Catholic identity. She noted: “It would be difficult to find large discrepancies between these role descriptions. . . . There needs to be a lot more thought put into decisions made related to the titles of Positions of Leadership in the area of Religious Education.” The current preoccupation with the construct Catholic identity seems to have influenced some schools that have changed the name of the college to include the word Catholic.

The same problems with ecclesiastical language for school religious education have affected the academic discipline of religious education in some Catholic tertiary institutions. Where it has become more ecclesiastical, and less academic and research oriented, it is weakened as an academic discipline. And this in turn has negative repercussions for school religious education. Religious education at tertiary level should be a ‘lighthouse’ for academic freedom and independence both for its scholars as well as for the educators who engage with scholarship in their professional development studies.

In the light of this discussion of language problems in Catholic religious education, it is pertinent here to comment on the most recent document on Catholic school religious education released by the Australian Catholic Bishops through the National Catholic Education Commission in 2018. (Framing paper: Religious Education in Australian Catholic Schools).

Its word usage is as follows:- religious education, 86; religion, 14; faith, 25; formation, 15; faith formation, 5; identity, 4; Catholic identity, 1.

It noted that classroom religious education was distinct from, but complementary to, faith formation. It gave a detailed account of the nature of religious education, its place in the school curriculum and the ways in which it hopefully fosters the education and personal/spiritual development of pupils. It avoided a number of problems with the construct ‘faith formation’ by:-

- offering no definition of the term and not considering how one might identify whether an activity was faith formation or just educational.
- not exploring what the word formation might mean when applied to changing the quality of the free, personal faith-commitment relationship between the individual and God.
- not exploring in detail potential relationships between faith formation and religious education.

What I found encouraging in the document was material that articulated the educational purposes, processes and value of religious education. Below are selected phrases from the document that illustrate this point:-

- [Pupils in] the Catholic school have the opportunity to engage with a range of . . . educative experiences that support
their overall development and growing religious self-understanding and spirituality.

- Religious education, . . the classroom learning and teaching of religion . . which is responsive to changing social, ecclesial and educational contexts . . [is] the learning area at the heart of the Catholic school.

- [Pupils] develop knowledge, understanding, skills and positive dispositions about Christianity in the Catholic tradition, in dialogue with their own religious background and other religious worldviews. . They can become informed and active contributors . . to Australian and global citizenship.

- [Religious education is] a scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands in the same rigour as other disciplines.

- Religious education is responsive to the variations in the life and religious experiences of students and their degrees of connection with the Catholic Church. Irrespective of these situations, all students have an entitlement to learning in religious education that seeks to develop deep knowledge, understanding and skills.

- [Religious education] expands students’ spiritual awareness and religious identity, fostering their capacities and skills of discerning, interpreting, thinking critically, seeking truth and making meaning.

- Many parents. . enrol their children [in Catholic schools] for a variety of reasons, many of which are not religious. However, they know that they have chosen the school that teaches religious education.

- The prevailing pluralisation and secularisation are part of the context in which students and their families live.

- Religious education needs to interpret the signs of the times and to “reread the memory of faith”, recontextualising so that students can engage in an open narrative and dialogue between the Catholic tradition and their personal experiences and contemporary cultural contexts.

These characteristics can readily accommodate the account of religious education summarised in chapter 1 and developed across the whole book. I consider that the document avoids the obfuscation of religious education that occurs when the discourse is dominated by an almost exclusive use of the ambiguous ecclesiastical terms discussed earlier in this chapter.

Conclusions and recommendations

In the light of discussions with Catholic school religion teachers in postgraduate programs over the years, I know that the critical evaluation in this chapter resonates with their experience. Also, I recognise that the conclusions and recommendations will be acknowledged by many practitioners as important and in need of further consideration and debate. I also know that not all will agree with the interpretation and some will find the conclusions challenging because they do not sit comfortably with the status quo or because they conflict with the views of authorities. So far, it appears that this critique has had no impact at the level of Catholic school system authorities. So what is now crucial is the need for systematic research to find out the extent to which these issues are of concern to the whole population of Australian Catholic school religious educators.

The main conclusion I draw from the argument developed in this chapter is that the biggest problem facing religious education in Australian Catholic schools today is the perception that it is essentially an ecclesiastical rather than an educational activity. I consider that it needs to be thought of, talked about, appraised and developed more as education and not judged in terms of how it promotes pupils’ church practice. This would hopefully restore the creative tension between the ecclesiastical and educational concerns that operated just after Vatican II – this does not mean returning to the same practice of those times. I consider that this will be the best trajectory for the students and also for the church. Until this major structural issue, as reflected in the language of religious education, is resolved, efforts to make it more relevant and meaningful to students, and efforts to substantiate its academic subject status will remain ineffectual. Until the educational basis for Catholic school religious education is secured, efforts at improvement will remain cosmetic rather than substantive.

The recommendations flowing from this conclusion will be presented in the final chapter (12). Below are the four headings under which they are explained.

I Building up the critical dimension in the religious education curriculum: Trying to address the needs of contemporary young people to help them chart a constructive path through the maze of contemporary culture.

II Taking into account the relatively secular spirituality of young people as a starting point for religious education.

III Taking into account students’ disposition towards Religious Education.

IV Simplifying the language of religious education and exercising leadership in Australian education

References


Chapter 10

The need for a critical, dialogical, inquiring pedagogy and issue-related content – re-orienting the Catholic school religion curriculum

The need for a critical, informative, research-oriented pedagogy has been a recurring theme throughout the book. This chapter explains why such an approach should be a principal characteristic of Catholic school religious education. It is pertinent not only to personal development and cultural analysis topics, but also to theological, scriptural and world religions content. Just how critical the pedagogy should be depends on the age and intellectual capacity of students. It is more relevant at secondary school level, especially in the final four years of schooling.

The traditional framework of religious meanings within which Catholic school religion curricula are written tends to be out of sync with the meanings that inform contemporary spiritualities. A proposed responsive change in orientation suggests that more prominence needs to be given to the interpretation and evaluation of cultural meanings, while not neglecting the more traditional aim of giving young Catholics meaningful access to their religious heritage. If many of the pupils in Catholic schools will never become actively involved in parishes when they grow up, then religious education needs to offer more than familiarising them with Catholic theology and religious practice; it also needs to skill them in addressing the spiritual and moral issues they will encounter in life. Attention is given to what this entails in both content and pedagogy, at primary and secondary levels.

Some historical perspective shows that an inquiring, issue-raising approach has a long established tradition in Catholic religious education. But it is not as prominent today as it should be.

Because of the significant changes in the landscape of spirituality as considered in Part A, religion teachers in Australian Catholic schools face a challenging dilemma; it appears that this same situation applies in Catholic schools in other Westernised countries. They set out to educate young people in the Catholic tradition, through a religion curriculum framed within traditional Catholic cultural-religious meanings. However, most of their students have little identification with this authoritative view. Rather, in tune with the very different cultural meanings that frame their thinking, they tend to regard religion as an optional resource for living, like potentially useful infrastructure – but very much in the background.

While many young people accept that religion may be attractive and useful for the religiously inclined, they have little doubt that it is largely irrelevant to their own needs, interests and lifestyles. Most young people say they still believe in God, as a kind of benign ‘therapist-in-the-sky’ who can be asked for help when it is really needed (Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 162; Mason et. al., p. 82; Maroney, 2008, p. 184); and they retain a nominal religious identification – they are not anti-religious. They tend to accept religious education without antipathy because they see it as an established part of their Catholic schooling which they value highly. But usually for senior students, there is not much serious engagement with religious education because they feel it is not relevant to their lives, and in any case, it is hardly a subject with the same academic credentials as those that ‘count’ like English, Maths etc.

At first sight, this description of adolescents’ lack of engagement with religious education does not seem to be congruent with what is said about the spirituality of children, where there is a much more optimistic teachers’ account of their openness to the spiritual and to religion – with interest, enthusiasm and ready engagement. But as discussed in
chapter 8, this may be partly explained by the natural inquisitiveness of children and their tendency to display a ‘school uniform’ religiosity when in primary school which appears to fade during their secondary schooling.

Much of the diocesan support for religion teachers encourages them to try harder to make the religious package more attractive, to ignite students’ interest and participation in the Church (e.g. Catholic Bishops of NSW and ACT, 2007); but this formula does not adequately identify the problem, let alone address it effectively.

Following up the interpretation of fundamental historical changes in contemporary spirituality in terms of shifts in cultural meanings in Part A, the following proposes some broad, general implications for the K-12 Catholic school religion curriculum, mainly from the perspective of a more adolescent/adult spirituality; and then it will address briefly the differences needed at primary school / junior secondary levels, that are related to children’s spirituality.

The argument begins with the claim that a successful Catholic school religious education in the traditional sense is no longer adequate, nor even possible, in Australia (and this is probably also the case in some other countries). Aiming relatively exclusively at reproducing what is currently considered a traditional Catholic spirituality is not relevant to most pupils – neither is it relevant to most of their teachers. There is a need to re-orient Catholic school religious education more in the direction of trying to enhance the basic human spirituality of young people, whether or not they engage with Catholicism.

However, the radical change in contemporary spirituality does not require a radical change in religion curricula, but rather a subtle one. There needs to be a greater emphasis on reflective/critical/interpreting/evaluative activity. In the classroom, religion needs to be treated more as a valuable but contentious area to investigate, than as a set of beliefs that the students should accept and adopt. This does not mean abandoning the teaching of traditions because good access to one’s historical religious tradition is not only a birthright, but a spiritual resource that serves as a starting point in a lifelong search for meaning, purpose and value in life.

**How a religiously sponsored education might enhance a relatively secular youth spirituality – probing the relationships between the spiritual and the religious**

A Catholic religious education that can enhance youth spirituality needs a way of understanding the relationships between the spiritual and the religious, and between spirituality and religiosity, and connections with religious faith as discussed in chapter 2.

The style and pace of life in contemporary, Westernised, industrialised societies has changed the way that many people relate to religious meanings: for many, they get by without much reference to them. People may remain nominally identified with a denomination or religion: nevertheless, they pay little attention to it because its meanings seem to have little connection with their everyday living. While previously ‘obedience to God’ was prominent, now this is eclipsed by concerns to ‘live one’s life to the full’ – and little thought would be given to the potential overlap between these two ideas. Hence there has been a significant change in the locus of spirituality. It appears to have moved away from religiosity, where it was relatively easily identified in formal religious activities including prayer and liturgy. But where has it gone? Some judge that it has disappeared, and where this happens there is no spirituality. Others suggest that it has moved into the personal lives of individuals, becoming more subjective and individualistic. However, the idea of conscious ‘movement’ does not seem to describe meaningfully what has happened. The decline in engagement with religious meanings simply leaves human spirituality in its ‘raw’ state, *de facto*. It has not gone anywhere; it has just lost its cultural religious overlay – for better or for worse.

This interpretation sees spirituality as always embedded in people’s thoughts and actions; but without a religious overlay, it is more implied than overt; it is therefore difficult to identify because it is rooted in the psychology of the individual which is not fully open to public scrutiny. Determining what is ‘spirituality’ in people’s lives is therefore naturally problematic, and this needs to be addressed in religious education; it means giving attention to the personal, subjective, psychological aspects of spirituality – and not just to the communal. Also needed is scrutiny of the cultural meanings that appear to influence people: Can they be identified? Are they healthy or harmful, depending on the extent of their influence? Hence a religious education that is beneficial to contemporary spirituality would need to include a search for the spiritual and moral dimensions in experience and events – this implies a search for spirituality followed by evaluation.

**General implications for religious education in the changed landscape of spirituality**

For many people, including youth, the fading of the cultural-religious overlay that informed a more overt religious spirituality left them with a residual, basic human spirituality. The words ‘basic’ and ‘residual’ should not be interpreted pejoratively as if this indicated little if any spirituality. Still, it remains difficult to pin down human spirituality because this involves a sort of ‘mind reading’ – theorising about which spiritual/moral meanings, if any, are affecting the individual. Hence it is necessary to acknowledge the natural uncertainty that goes with identification of human spirituality.
This problem in interpreting what is the ultimate *operative spirituality* applies both to religious and non-religious people. For religious people, whether or not religion was a dominant influence, they could readily point to their religious cultural system as articulating the ideal values and virtues that should be at the core of their behaviour. It is thus easier to identify someone’s being religious than it is just being spiritual. Following the line of thinking in this paragraph has limited potential for religious education because it is so personal and subjective. It remains important for personal reflection and review of life, but religious education would do better to concentrate on the cultural meanings part of the equation, with the hope that this more objective focus may in turn prompt personal reflection.

Before leaving the area of personal/subjective spirituality, one further observation is pertinent. For religiosity, there was often a consciousness of the religious obligation or challenge to try to enhance and develop one’s spirituality; this was one of the main purposes of prayer, worship and religious rituals. This makes a statement about the importance of a spiritual dimension to life; and it postulates that this spiritual dimension needs *practice* and active enhancement. There would be considerable variation in the extent to which individuals consciously took steps in personal reflection or in social action to enhance and practice their religious spirituality. This same variability would apply in a non-religious, human spirituality. However, in the latter, the implied spirituality might not often be articulated by the individual; and this could easily lead to a neglect of the spiritual/moral dimension to life. Hence, the overt reminder to ‘attend to the spiritual’ within religious spirituality is a lesson that would be valuable for any human spirituality. Even for non-religious people, review of life, clarification of personal values and taking steps to foster a spiritual/moral viewpoint would be beneficial for them personally.

In re-orienting Catholic school religious education, two principal strategies will now be considered.

1. Access to the individual’s inheritance of cultural religious meanings;
2. Critical interpretation and evaluation of culture

1. **Access to young people’s inheritance of cultural religious meanings: Studying the religious tradition**

Given the emphasis on basic human spirituality in earlier chapters, it may seem surprising that the first strategy refers explicitly to the teaching of religious traditions. But there is a good reason for this.

In terms of their lifelong search for meaning and purpose in life, children need to learn some basic familiarity with their own religious tradition, whether or not they will embrace this actively as adults. Children have a birthright to access their religious tradition; it is their cultural religious inheritance. It can give them some sense of the core spiritual meanings in the tradition – even if their parents or guardians have only a nominal religious identification. This gives children a starting cultural reference point for meaning in life that they can develop and change as they grow older and more capable of thinking for themselves. For children whose parents are atheist or agnostic, this principle still applies. While it could be expected that such parents would communicate to their children their particular views about the existence of god and about religion, nevertheless, they would be remiss if they did not help their children see that religion was intended to help people find meaning and value in life, even if they as parents consciously wanted no association with religion. Some knowledge of the place of religions in culture and of their function in individuals’ lives is a valuable part of the education of any citizen, religious or not. Without any initial religious meanings, children could grow up with a cultural deficit, like being raised in a partial vacuum of meaning (with a *tabula rasa* of spiritual resources). In effect, this would leave them to construct their own system of beliefs at an age when they are naturally more dependent on ready-made meanings. No doubt they would already have familiarity with the values in the parental lifestyle, as well as exposure to the plurality of values implicit in the media and the social groups in which they participate.

Catholic school religious education contributes to pupils’ cultural exposure to Catholicism; it can extend their cultural horizons beyond what they might absorb from their immediate home and community environment. This should also include knowledge of other religious traditions in the culture. Young people need some familiarity with their own tradition and knowledge of religions generally, even if at the time they may think this has little relevance for them.

Similarly, young people’s identity development needs to be resourced by their religious tradition. Religious education can contribute to the communication of a basic sense of religious identity to children; this informs their initial self-understanding and interpretation of society. Later, when more mature, they would have their own say in determining their sense of identity and the extent to which any religious identification might apply.

While affirming the important place for the study of religious traditions, this strategy is not saying that the Catholic school religion curriculum is therefore adequate and should be left unchanged. The approach to teaching religious traditions needs to be modified – it needs more problem-posing content and a critical, student-centred, research-oriented pedagogy. More will be said about this later in the chapter.

2. **Critical interpretation and evaluation of culture**

Crawford & Rossiter (2006) showed how the phrase ‘search for meaning’ has become more prominent in psychology and education since Viktor Frankl’s book *Man’s search for meaning* was published in English in 1964. There was said to be a contemporary ‘crisis’ in meaning, and education was considered to have some role in helping young people in their quest for meaning and purpose in life. But whatever this crisis might entail, it should not be interpreted as a luck
of cultural meanings. As never before, there is a multiplicity of cultural meanings – all looking for adherents. And this in itself creates a problem for the individual’s search for meaning. How to judge the appropriateness of cultural meanings and what criteria might be used therefore become important in education generally and in religious education in particular.

It is not enough for religious education to be concerned just with the handing on of Catholic cultural meanings. Because for many young people religion is no longer a major source of meaning, there is a need for their religious education to look more critically at wide ranging cultural meanings. For example: conflicting meanings from different groups can be a root cause of prejudice and racism; frameworks of meaning can be sources of liberation or of domination; and the dissemination of meanings can insinuate the causes of particular economic and political interests. Learning how meanings are assigned and how they may need to be uncovered and appraised is a part of becoming wise. What young people need is not so much new cultural meanings but the capacity to evaluate them carefully, and this skill, practiced in religious education, can become a part of their lifelong learning. It can not only help them in any dialogue with traditional religious meanings, but also with seeing where they stand with respect to various ideologies, political views and messages coming from different quarters, especially the commercial and entertainment worlds. Understanding cultural dynamics is a prerequisite for making judgments and considering possible social action.

Critical evaluation of culture has long been a concern of Catholic religious education. It was stressed in the encyclical Evangelii Nuntiand (Evangelisation in the modern world) by Pope Paul VI in 1975, and was regarded as important for youth ministry, adult education, missiology and theological education. Nevertheless, it has not been as prominent as it should be in the content of Catholic school religion curricula, even though the words evangelisation and ‘new’ evangelisation are prominent in the discourse of Catholic schooling in Australia.

Much has been written about education itself as a process of critical interpretation of culture. Critical theory and hermeneutics, including philosophical and sociological perspectives, have stressed the need for interpreting what is going on in culture; and in turn, this is proposed as a task to which public education can contribute. Hill (1990, p.3) described this role as the “interrogation of one’s cultural conditioning”. Young people are naturally very critical, but are often naive as regards the political, manipulative and exploitative aspects of culture; or if they are aware of exploitation, many may not worry too much as long as it does not affect their lifestyle.

Critical interpretation and evaluation of culture addresses the following:

- exploration of the shaping influence of culture on people’s thinking and behaviour; appraisal of healthy and unhealthy effects;
- investigation of a range of contemporary social issues;
- identification of the influences on decisions and events; uncovering the historical, ideological and political forces at work, identifying who stands to gain or lose;
- deconstructing the components of writings so that they can be understood within their original contexts; this will inform potential meanings in different contexts;
- searching for the underlying economic and commercial interests that affect a situation;
- highlighting justice and environmental issues;
- calling ideologies to account.

This critical approach has also been referred to as an ‘issues-oriented’ religious education (Crawford & Rosssiter, 2006; Nipkow, 1991). Crawford & Rossiter (2006, p.394) advocated this approach with examples of topics for the secondary religion curriculum. They considered that it needed to enter into classroom practice across all year levels, while content and method need to be adapted to suit the maturity of pupils; a balance with other content was essential. They judged that this approach would enhance the perceived personal relevance of religious education. Generally, many Catholic youth and adults felt that the Catholic Church – and consequently its theology and religious education – had little relevance to life. They will quietly ignore Catholicism – and its religious education – unless they sense that something serious is being said about issues in personal, social, and political life. If there is not sufficient engagement with the real spiritual and moral issues of the day, they will get used to the expectation that their religion remains only marginally relevant to their lives. While religious education cannot be expected to resolve the problem – it cannot make the Catholic Church itself more relevant – it can endeavour to make the study of religion a more life-enhancing experience for pupils. And this requires an approach – in content, language and pedagogy – that realistically addresses young people’s spirituality. This means identifying the ways they construct meaning, and helping them to critically appraise the principal cultural sources of that meaning: it sets out to alert them to the spiritual and moral aspects of life which can often be obscured beneath the all-engrossing contemporary concerns for personal wellbeing and happiness in a consumer oriented society. And it is within this context that the religious wisdom of Christianity can be effectively drawn into the educational process.

Making judgments about situations in the light of values, and the consideration of potential action to address social problems, are part of the process. In Catholic terminology, this is what is meant by the phrase ‘evaluation from a gospel perspective’. Religion teachers should help pupils learn these evaluative skills, while at the same time modelling the process.
This approach has also been described in Catholic religious education as ‘raising critical consciousness’ or ‘conscientisation’ (Rossiter, 1981, p. 117) – words that were prominent in the discussions of catechesis by South American Catholic bishops in the 1960s and 1970s. Their documents had an influence on thinking about church ministry and religious education (Warren, 1983). It paralleled the impact on education by Paulo Freire’s ideas on praxis (shared reflection and action) and the pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 1971, 1980). It was also prominent in the area of critical pedagogy – the pedagogical application of critical theory (Darder et al. 2003). These themes were reflected in Thomas Groome’s approach to religious education – Shared Christian Praxis (Groome, 1980, 1991, 1998). Catholic religious education today retains prominent motifs of liberation and social justice. But this is judged to be not prominent enough in current Australian Catholic diocesan religion curricula.

Critical interpretation is a starting point for what the Warren (1992; 1993; c/f Williams, 1980) has called cultural agency. He proposed that one of the aims for religious education is to encourage and skill young people to go beyond being passive consumers of culture to become active constructors of culture. This acknowledges that cultural meanings are socially constructed and open to evaluation, not something that is a given, and hard to identify and change.

A part of critical interpretation and evaluation of culture needs a religious viewpoint; this can show how Catholicism, and religions generally, provide important values reference points for questioning the authenticity of media-conditioned imaginations of the world and of human development that have such a strong influence on young people. This challenge for religious educators was evident in the exhortation of Pope John Paul II:

> to develop your culture with wisdom and prudence, retaining the freedom to criticise what may be called the ‘cultural industry’ remaining all the while deeply concerned with truth … faith will ask culture what values it promotes, what destiny it offers to life, what place it makes for the poor and the disinheritedit with whom the Son of Man is identified, how it conceives of sharing, forgiveness and love (Pope John Paul II, 1984, p. 324).

What is written here about critical interpretation and evaluation of culture in Catholic religious education is not new. It has a long history. It was prominent in the period of rapid change in religious education after the Second Vatican Council, especially in the quest for personalism and relevance in class discussions of personal and social issues (Rossiter, 1999). The discussion of issues was also evident in British state school religious education in the mid-1960s as influenced by the writings of Loukes (1961, 1965, 1973). But what proved problematic in both contexts at the time was the pedagogy. Uninformed discussion often amounted to little more than sharing ignorant opinions. And usually this could not sustain student interest for too long. Also, this approach was perceived by students as a low grade pedagogy in a subject that had little academic status; and, as explained by Crawford & Rossiter (2006, pp. 307-309) its potential educational value was subverted by what they called the “psychology of the learning environment”. The crucial missing ingredient was a high grade pedagogy – a serious study of the issues, in the light of up-to-date expert information. Here discussion was one useful part of the whole study exercise – like an informed debate – and not like a time-filling, non-directed, relatively purposeless activity.

Specific attention will now be given to pedagogy.

Implications for pedagogy and content

If religious education is to be a credible subject in the curriculum, then it needs to engage students with nothing less than the same sort of intellectual challenges that they accept as normal in other key learning areas. In other words, it needs to be academically challenging from Year 1 to Year 12, acknowledging that what ‘academic’ means at different levels needs to be determined. In primary and junior secondary classes, academic can well include experiential, hands-on learning methods (like scripted dramas, role plays, cartoon summaries, student audio-visual productions, group work, etc.).

For students who may readily tend to perceive religion lessons as extended sermons, in a pejorative sense, there is an even greater need than in other subjects / learning areas to demonstrate that the study of religion is open and inquiring – concerned with exploring the content and issues – and not with the ‘getting of Catholicism’: hence the need for a content-rich, student-centred, research-oriented pedagogy. Such a pedagogy can be applied to both the content areas referred to above: Catholic traditions and critical interpretation/evaluation of culture.

A critical pedagogy is understandably appropriate for the interpretation and evaluation of cultural meanings. Personal and social issues can become topics for investigation. It is easier for the students to explore social issues which are more ‘out there’; hopefully, this can prompt them to reflect on personal implications.

Both individual and group research methods can be used. Here the students have the power as investigators. This approach is clearly different from a didactic one where the teacher usually provided the information. This sort of critical, inquiring pedagogy is consistent with what students are experiencing elsewhere in the curriculum; and this is a good thing for religious education.

Careful attention needs to be given to the selection of issues to be investigated, and how these might be spread across the school religion curriculum. Firstly, it is appropriate to give more attention to the study of social issues at secondary
level, especially in senior classes; however, a simpler critical approach is also needed at primary level. Students need to learn the skill of scrutinising cultural meanings through example investigations. If too many issues were studied, this would result in an unbalanced curriculum; it might also depress the students by giving too much attention to problems.

The critical interpretation and evaluation of social issues should not be limited to religious education; it should enter into learning areas across the whole curriculum as in a scheme proposed by Crawford & Rossiter (2006, pp. 304-315) where three integrated approaches were used:

- **Explicit**, with both whole subjects – like religion, philosophy or ethics; and as parts of study units in regular subjects;
- **Contextual**, where issues are touched on briefly in different learning areas or subjects without compromising the integrity of the principal subject matter; this approach postulates that values issues are often there in regular curriculum content, often just below the surface – they do not have to be introduced from outside; and
- **General skills and consciousness-raising** where all subjects contribute to the development of learning skills that carry over into personal learning for life.

Where religion teachers have engaged students in the interpretation and evaluation of social issues, the results have been positive. Of particular value were the research reports that students produced and shared with others. In some postgraduate religious education units at Masters level, I asked teachers to do mini-research projects on a range of social issues so that they would have first-hand experience of the pedagogy that was proposed for their own students. Here too, the results were very encouraging. Readers who would like to view the project reports from these studies should contact the author for the web address.

Problem-posing content topics can also be used in the study of religious traditions, especially at secondary level. An example was given in Crawford & Rossiter (1985, pp. 80-81). Different approaches to teaching the topic the Rosary were described – some considered appropriate and others inappropriate. The recommended approach engaged junior secondary students in a research oriented class project entitled “Investigating the place of the Rosary in Catholic spirituality”. The sub-questions were: - What is the Catholic rosary? When was it invented? How did it develop over the centuries? How was it used in prayer, both historically and in modern times? Why is the rosary apparently dying out? If it dies out, will something valuable be lost – a place for meditative, repetitive prayers? After examining material on the origins, history and development of the rosary, the students conducted a limited survey of Catholics they knew, particularly from the older generations, to see how the rosary was prayed and to find out how it contributed to spirituality. Further comparative information about Buddhist and Muslim rosaries was accessed before the class discussed its conclusions. In addition, there was an experiential component to the study where the students prayed the rosary together; and there was an optional rosary prayer session in the chapel in free time. This example showed that an open, inquiring approach often ended up with more content than could be handled in the time available; and while being informative, it did not come across as an exhortation to improve the rosary saying performance of pupils.

Other examples of issue and problem-oriented topics for studying religious content are provided in Crawford & Rossiter (2006, p. 395). The topic on the rosary was not controversial; however, if this approach was extended to include topics like women priests, new Christian interpretation of sexuality and contemporary interpretations of doctrines like original sin, atonement, salvation, the virgin birth, the immaculate conception etc., then it would be likely to prove unacceptable to many. Here the approach would run into difficulty. Hence it is important to determine an appropriate level and extent of critical topics that could be a valuable part of the Catholic school religion curriculum. A systematic and critical study of theology is an adult task. And Catholic schools are not seminaries or theological colleges; their role is to introduce young people to theology and not to train them as theologians. Hence, the extent of controversial theological topics needs to be limited; still, a healthy, inquiring, critical approach can still be used appropriately throughout the religion curriculum.

Another related difficulty for religion teachers to negotiate is where the students themselves raise theological questions – their readiness to do this can be disconcerting for teachers who are unprepared. Here, teachers need to show an awareness of contentious theological issues, so that they are able to articulate briefly the various viewpoints, and direct students to some pertinent resources, even if it is beyond their scope to conduct an informative study of such topics. No matter what view religious authorities might take on trying to limit the scope of a critical approach in religious education, nothing will stop the students from questioning; not to acknowledge their questions or trying to ‘fob’ them off, would be counterproductive. Often they ask genuinely challenging questions about the logic and the meaning of religious teachings that need to be addressed. The issues raised in this paragraph require considerable further attention by Catholic religious educators.

While religion teachers have made good use of a critical inquiring pedagogy in religious education, whether Catholic school and ecclesiastical authorities are ready to endorse its wider use in normative documents remains a crucial question. At times, religious authorities are afraid to do this because they feel it will encourage too much questioning by students, which might turn them away from the faith. On the contrary, it is considered that trying to eliminate questioning would be more off-putting for young people who find their cultural experience and education naturally saturated with questioning. A critical pedagogy that explores the evolution and change in theological doctrines can help students understand religious meanings in their original cultural context and how they have been reinterpretated in
later times. This can engage them in some initial ‘theologising’. Not to do this can leave them with simplistic and often literal interpretations of Catholic doctrines that they acquired when they were very young; and these teachings become eminently disposable in the students’ eyes – or they become reasons for dismissing religion because they feel they have been deceived. Trying to develop some understanding of the changing meaning and function of doctrines within the Catholic theological system is an important aim for religious education. It is crucial to acknowledge who is asking the questions and why.

The approach described above is not new to Catholic school religious education and can be observed in the practice of particular religion teachers; but how extensive it might be across the system remains unknown. The point that this chapter is trying to make is that this view of the role of the Catholic religion curriculum should be much more prominent than it is currently; and it should be focused on trying to enhance the human spirituality of pupils. A critical approach can be implied in social justice topics. Nevertheless, the main curriculum emphasis still remains on conserving the religious tradition – as if all will be well as long as ‘good’ theology and scripture are taught.

Catholic diocesan religion curricula are basically conservative in the good sense of ‘conserving’ the tradition; hence the content topics cover all traditional theological content. But given contemporary youth spirituality, such curricula are just too ‘tame’ to attract much interest from young people. State based religion studies courses in Australia are also considered to be too tame, but for different reasons (Rossiter, 1999). It may well be that diocesan authorities will not make substantial moves to encourage a critical approach in content and pedagogy. If this is the case, then the only way that the recommended re-orientation might occur would be when teachers at the school level make adjustments in the way they implement religious education.

Relationships between primary and secondary school religious education

The argument here is based principally on an interpretation of the spirituality of youth and adults. Only limited reference will be made to children’s spirituality which was discussed earlier in chapter 8; but it is hoped that this will raise issues that prompt responses from primary school religious educators. While acknowledging significant differences between primary and secondary school religious education, which should be linked to differences between the spiritualities of children and adolescents, there is a need to avoid creating an unrealistic divide between the two. What is important is to see how the change between children’s and adolescents’ spirituality is gradual and nuanced.

As far as the religion curriculum in Catholic primary schools is concerned, this author judges that there is no need to change the basic content and pedagogy, which are directed to a hands-on, experiential approach which helps socialise children into the teachings and religious practices of Catholicism. There is scope for elements in a scaled down critical approach, but there is no need to develop this extensively at primary school level. However, religious education in the primary school needs to keep pace with the level of critical pedagogy and critical content that pupils normally experience in other learning areas. The emerging intellectual and critical faculties of children should not be ignored but enhanced. Children at this level can still ask challenging questions about the meaning of religious teachings that would have been unheard of from the older generations when they were that age. One simple example of critical interpretation of culture in a junior primary class was evident where the teacher had groups of students run a regular Friday short session on ‘Commenting on what is happening in the world news this week’.

The apparent decline in pupils’ interest in, and responsiveness to, religious education as they progress from primary to secondary school has been considered in chapter 8.

Young children are open, impressionable and trusting; usually they go along with whatever their teachers tell them or ask of them. No matter what view of religion prevails in their homes, they may happily enter into the religious world view created at school, and their participation suggests that they are engaging effectively in their religious socialisation. As explained in chapter 8, at this stage of development, their overt religious spirituality at school is vicarious and initiative (Fowler, 1981) – they can readily assimilate the religious meanings and practices in the Catholic primary school. This is not noticing that their spirituality is not personal and authentic. At school, they seem to accommodate readily to a different view of religion from that which prevails at home. Religion/religious education at school is like a ‘second language’ to that spoken at home. And, from the children’s point of view, mostly there appears to be no significant conflict. Inevitably, the spectrum of their responses changes as they get older. The transition from a child’s to adolescent spirituality remains a significant topic that needs much further consideration and research. Nevertheless, research studies suggest that most children will eventually end up with the same sort of spirituality/religiosity that is evident in their parents (Smith & Denton, 2005; Mason et al. 2007). As summarised on the back cover of Smith & Denton’s (2005) report on the US national survey of youth and religion “young people from every corner of the culture . . . echo their parents’ religiosity to an astonishing degree”.

As children mature through adolescence, for many of them, their cultural religious meanings seem to fade into the background as they become more autonomous in their thinking and more self-reliant in their behaviour. They may then identify more readily with negative views of religion in the culture. But it is not that they are consciously putting their religion aside or even becoming anti-religious. Rather, religious meanings are just eclipsed by more immediate cultural meanings about lifestyle, feel-good, looks, friendship and entertainment. As Smith & Denton (2005) noted:
LIFE TO THE FULL

In the ecology of . . . adolescents’ lives, religion clearly operates in a social-structurally weaker position, competing for time, energy, and attention and often losing against other, more dominant demands and commitments, particularly school, sports, television, and other electronic media. . . Religion simply occupies a largely losing structural position when it comes to most adolescents’ obligations, schedules, routines and habits. When it comes to institutions possessing opportunities to form the lives of youth, religion is not among the more advantaged players. (p. 161)

The apparent decline in ‘school uniform’ religiosity does not mean that primary school religious education has failed – neither should blame be attributed to the secondary school. There are cultural and developmental influences at work that cannot be superseded and neutralised by school religious education. What was done in primary school in the way of acquainting children with their religious tradition was valuable in its own right; and it may well leave an enduring imprint in their human spirituality. Similarly, secondary religious education is not at fault for undoing the good work done in the primary school. Here too, even where there may be little interest in studying religion, there could be a valuable, but not necessarily identifiable, contribution to young people’s spiritual development.

It is worth considering that children may build up an attractive experience and image of what religion is like for a child, and if this is not updated as they grow older, they may gradually detach from their childhood view of religion just as they naturally leave childhood behind. This interpretation needs further investigation. If this is true to some extent, then their ultimate view of religion (and the Church) will be influenced mainly by their perception of religion itself and not of religious education.

Conclusion

This chapter proposed that, in the light of significant change in the landscape of contemporary spirituality, there is need for a ‘big picture’ re-orientation of Catholic school religious education to be more relevant to young people’s spirituality, whether or not they become active in Catholic parish life. Teaching to hand on the Catholic tradition should retain its prominent place because, for all young Catholics, access to the spiritual resources of the Church is a birthright. However, especially at secondary level, religious traditions should be taught with more problem-posing, student-centred, research-oriented content and pedagogy.

The component that needs strengthening both in normative Catholic religious education documents and in classroom practice is the critical interpretation and evaluation of cultural meanings – helping young people become more discerning of the shaping influence that cultural meanings have on thinking and behaviour. This can help them probe the spiritual and moral dimension to life in times when it can easily be obscured in a society preoccupied with lifestyle and individual well-being, where the dominant, and relatively unquestioned mood is that this can be achieved happily through excessive consumerism.

In this way, Catholic schools can offer their students unconditionally a religious education that enhances their spirituality. It can help them develop skills that will assist in charting their way meaningfully through the maze of cultural meanings in society. In addition, this approach may be the best way of presenting the viable option of a more formal and ongoing engagement with the Church after they leave school.

This critical approach is consistent with developments in the general curriculum where increasingly there are opportunities for pupils to study values-related issues.

A critical evaluative approach is not new to Catholic religious education; as noted earlier, it has had a long history in evangelisation and Catholic social teaching – but this was applied mainly in adult education. It now needs more prominence in school religious education. A more human focus is not necessarily replacing or neglecting the religious dimension. It actually has a strong New Testament basis. The Gospel accounts show that the historical Jesus was especially concerned with the lives and social situation of the ‘little people’ – the marginalised and the poor. Central to Jesus’ praxis was addressing the social and religious problems that people faced. If anything, he is pictured as more concerned about people’s basic welfare and human spirituality than with formal religiosity. It would seem incongruous to think of Jesus concentrating a lot of attention on how to improve on the poor synagogue attendance of the Jewish youth of his time! His overriding concern for people’s human spirituality was reflected in John’s gospel as follows “I have come that they may have life, and life to the full” (John, 10:10).

Finally, it is helpful to see that the proposed re-orientation of religious education is consistent with the constitution of Australian catholic schools. In this country, Catholic schools are not like seminaries that are totally owned and controlled by the Catholic Church (even though some have expectations of the schools as if they were exclusively ecclesiastical institutions C/f chapter 9). Because they are supported mainly by Government funding, they are semi-state schools, constituted as a state-private joint venture in education – comparable with state involvement in the funding of church-sponsored hospitals, social service and aged care facilities. Australian Catholic schools reflect a partnership between the Catholic Church, Government and parents. They therefore have a civic responsibility and accountability to the wider community to educate young citizens. This constitution makes it appropriate that Catholic schools be ‘open-to-all’ and not just for Catholics. The proposed approach to religious education here is congruent with an open-to-all mission. It is basically an open, inquiring study of the spiritual and moral dimension to life, with an understandable emphasis on Catholicism appropriate for a school sponsored by the Catholic Church.
This view challenges thinking that considers that Catholic schools should only enrol students from regular mass-going families. While the schools were originally designed to cater for Catholics, they now include children who are nominally Catholic as well as many who are not Catholic. It is envisaged that some modification could readily be made in content to take into account the presence of children who are not Catholic. While this question needs further attention, it is proposed that most of what should be done in the religion curriculum would be of value for the spirituality of religious and non-religious Catholics, as well as for religious and non-religious young people from other traditions, including non-Christian religions. In studying religious traditions, there could be scope for students who were not Catholic to do their study/research on their own tradition. The components of critical interpretation of culture should be applicable to all students no matter what their religious affiliation. Initial work on these questions has been done in Australia by Welbourne (2003) and Chambers, Grajzzonek & Ryan (2006).

The idea of Catholic religious education enhancing young people’s human spirituality is a valuable expression of the way Catholic schools might contribute to Australian education generally; it provides young Australians with an education that seeks to give special attention to the spiritual/moral dimension. This thinking is a practical example of Catholic schooling making a valued contribution to the common good. Hence, the writings about Catholic schools and the common good are particularly pertinent to the arguments advanced here (Bryk et al. 1993; McLaughlin et al., 1996; Hollenbach, 1996; Donlevy, 2008.).

There is no guarantee that the proposals here will solve the problems completely; there is no formula that will automatically engage students in religious education and transform their spirituality; and how successful the recommended approach might be could not be measured in the short term. Nevertheless, the re-orientation has tried to take serious account of contemporary youth spirituality.

Catholic schools ought to be centres of Catholic culture for the benefit of their staff, students and families. And a prominent part of this Catholic culture should be concerned with the critical interpretation and evaluation of the wider cultural meanings that have a conditioning influence on personal, social life and political life.

References


Chapter 11

Perspective on the Catholic identity of Catholic schools, and educating young people in personal identity development

In recent decades, the terms Catholic mission and identity have been used more frequently to articulate the purposes of both Catholic schools and their religious education. And as a result, new designated religious coordination positions in schools like ‘Director of Catholic Identity’ have been created, along with others highlighting the words ‘mission’ and ‘evangelisation’. It appears that these terms have been introduced often at the expense of the term ‘Religious Education Coordinator’, even though the new roles may not be recognisably different in practice from what was done by the Religious Education Coordinator. Some schools have changed the name of the college specifically to include the word Catholic. In addition, substantial research on the Catholic identity of schools, commenced in Victoria, has been conducted in a number of Australian dioceses.

This chapter seeks to put the contemporary interest in Catholic school identity into perspective, working from a particular view of what constitutes institutional identity, how it might be developed, enhanced and communicated, and how it relates to the process of individual personal identity development. Special attention is given to what is considered an important, but relatively overlooked, task for religious education — how best to educate young people in identity in ways that will resource the development of their personal identity and spirituality.

The main concern here is with religious education and not with Catholic institutional identity. The distinctions and interrelationships between the two need to be clear, noting that the former makes an important contribution to the latter.

This follows up the chapter 9 discussion of problems with the language in the discourse of Catholic school religious education. While making a contribution to the educational mission of the Catholic Church is not in question, it is argued that excessive attention to the term Catholic identity has had a ‘narrowing’ influence at the very time when Catholic schools and religious education should be more expansive and outward-looking in their focus. The analysis is directed towards more discriminating use of the construct Catholic identity in Catholic schooling and religious education.

While not attempting a systematic literature review, the chapter also includes, for the record, a ‘signposting’ of the literature that relates to the question of the Catholic identity of schools.

Phrases that some have used, like “We need to put the ‘Catholic’ back into Catholic education” imply that something Catholic has been lost and it needs to be re-inserted. The presumed problem and solution may not be as simple as such a diagnosis suggests. Rather, it is proposed that the diagnosis elaborated in the previous 10 chapters is closer to identifying the fundamental issues; and hopefully, in noting some potentially helpful steps for addressing them.
Introduction

The construct ‘Catholic identity’ has become increasingly prominent in Australian Catholic educational discourse and school practice. For example, the document Catholic schools at a crossroad by the Catholic bishops of NSW and the ACT (2007, p. 11) was concerned about “reaffirming our commitment to the Catholic identity of our schools and in continuing to demonstrate this clearly in the future”. It stated that school leaders, staff, parents and students should understand and be committed to the Catholic identity and mission of the school. A strong commitment to Catholic identity has been proposed while at the same time there has been some recognition that it is more difficult to communicate a religious identity in Westernised countries today. In 1996, Bishop Robinson, the chair of the Sydney Archdiocesan Catholic Schools Board noted that “There has been a weakening of Catholic identity and culture in Australian society, so that it is more difficult to convey to young people a sense of belonging to the Church.” (Robinson, 1996)

In their recent book Education from a Catholic perspective, McKinney & Sullivan (2013, p. 29) considered that Catholic identity has become a crucial issue: “Maintaining Catholic identity in Catholic educational institutions emerges as the challenge for Catholic education, in a 21st century cultural context that is increasingly ambivalent if not hostile, to religion.”

Over the last decade, the burgeoning of new designated religious role positions in Australian Catholic schools has also reflected greater interest in the Catholic identity or Catholicity of the schools. While not all of the roles included identity specifically, most reflect identity-related concerns about how visibly Catholic the schools should be. The themes of Catholic identity, mission and evangelisation have also become prominent in some Catholic universities.

Table 11.1 Examples of designated religious role positions in Catholic schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Coordination positions that predominated into the 1990s</th>
<th>Some examples of new religious coordination positions that have emerged in the last decade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious Education Coordinator</td>
<td>Director of Catholic identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Principal Religious Education (Queensland)</td>
<td>Assistant principal identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith Development Coordinator (Victoria)</td>
<td>Assistant principal religious education, identity and mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Religious Studies (New Zealand)</td>
<td>Director of mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liturgy Coordinator</td>
<td>Director of mission and Catholic identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retreat Coordinator</td>
<td>Deputy principal mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dean of Mission</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Director or Evangelisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Director of Religious Education and Evangelisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Director of Faith and Outreach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Director of faith and mission</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vice principal faith and mission</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ministry coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Director of spiritual activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family liaison coordinator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Attention has been given to Catholic school identity in the literature (E.g. Heft, 1991; Haldane, 1996; Hugonnet, 1997; Rossiter, 1997a, 1997b; Duminuco, 1999; Groome, 1996, 2002; McKinney, 2008; Sultmann & Brown, 2011). Rossiter (1998), Boeve (2006) and Chia (2013) provided examples of the parallel discussion of the Catholic identity of Catholic universities. Recently, led by the Victorian Catholic school systems, a large scale research project on the Catholic identity of schools has been conducted by Pollefeyt from the Catholic University of Leuven (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010; 2012; Sharkey, 2017).

This chapter seeks to put these developments into perspective. It considers what may be driving the interest in the religious construct Catholic identity. And by looking into the psychological and sociological dimensions to institutional identity, it tries to identify both the strengths and the potential problems with the use of this construct as a central element in the theory and practice of Australian Catholic schooling and religious education. After signposting briefly the literatures related to various aspects of, or perspectives on, Catholic school identity, it proposes ideas/themes that could be given more attention within the discourse of the Catholic identity of schools. It concludes with an outline of the potential contribution of the Catholic school to an education in identity – an approach that can be well accommodated within religious education.

Some sociological background to the interest in institutional religious identity: -

What drives the interest in identity?

Examples of factors precipitating institutional identity anxiety.

Comments on implications for the discourse on the Catholic identity of schools.
Voiced concerns about some perceived crisis in institutional identity can be directed towards changing and strengthening that identity. But the real problem may not be institutional identity per se, but some underlying concerns and anxieties that get projected onto identity. Addressing the institutional identity as the ‘presenting problem’ will then not necessarily resolve the anxieties. Crawford & Rossiter (2006, p. 91) discussed this question, pointing towards what they called the “emotional substrate to identity”. Constructive progress in the building and enhancement of institutional identity requires identification and differentiation of the identity concerns/ anxieties from the components of identity. Sometimes, the concerns may not have a lot to do with the actual identity itself. In other words, it may be ultimately more fruitful to address the anxieties that are driving the special interest in Catholic identity than to address identity itself. Hence it is helpful when trying to appraise the current interest in Catholic identity of schools to take into account the background factors that may have catalysed and possibly fuelled the interest in institutional identity.

Below, seven generic examples of sociological situations that result in a concern about institutional identity will be looked at briefly to see if this throws light on the current special interest in the Catholic identity of schools. For each, some comments on implications will be added, reflecting on how these situations might apply to the interest in Catholic school identity.

1. Times of crisis or institutional failure: A national or institutional failure often triggers identity concerns. For example: The launch of the Russian satellite Sputnik in 1957 caused widespread anxiety about United States and Western technology, education and scientific training; The failure to win the Vietnam war caused considerable angst in the United States – “What is wrong with America?”; The loss of the space shuttles (Challenger in 1986 and Columbia in 2003) prompted soul-searching beyond NASA. One of the most recent examples has been the “Make America Great again” campaign. Political turmoil and even the poor performance of the national or regional sporting team can lead to identity self-searching by the group.

**Implications:** Crisis of Catholic identity in schools? The very title of the NSW/ACT Catholic bishops’ statement Catholic schools at a crossroad (2007) suggests some sort of crisis of identity in Catholic schools. An identity anxiety seemed to underpin the document (it was even more prominent in the first draft). The impression given was that despite the extensive resources invested in Catholic schools, they were not arresting the slide away from parish participation and the decline in Catholic culture. Increasing the mass attendance rates of pupils was included as a key performance indicator of progress for Catholic schools (p. 18). An impression was also given that if Catholic identity was ‘stronger’ and more ‘overt’ in the schools, then this would somehow ‘stick’ – affecting the sense of the personal Catholic identity of pupils in a positive and lasting way.

Rossiter (2010) discussed this question, considering that in practice there was no compelling evidence of any significant identity crisis in Catholic schools, but rather an unrealistic projection of anxiety about crisis in participation in the Catholic Church onto Catholic schools – which were in fact thriving. It was as if the reality of a ‘booming Catholic school system in a declining church’ could not be comprehended and accepted (See Dixon, 2003, for an account of the decline in Catholic Church participation). Hence the issue was not so much about Catholic school identity, but an underlying anxiety that Catholic schools did not seem to be substantially communicating an overt, lasting Catholic identity to their pupils and were not improving their church-going behaviour. In other words, it is not an identity crisis in Catholic schools, but rather an identity crisis for a particular, unrealistic view of what Catholic schools might contribute towards resolving the problem of low engagement in the Catholic Church itself. Boeve (2011), whose theology of ‘interruption’ underpins the Enhancing the Catholic Schools Identity Project referred to earlier, has expanded on the larger issue of communication of faith and religious identity in contemporary secularised society.

One could conclude that a healthy Catholic identity for Catholic schools might exist but which of itself is not naturally capable of ‘producing’ a traditional Catholic identity in pupils. This is because the socio-cultural situation has changed so much and people today are more selective in consciously choosing the identity resources to which they will reference their personal sense of identity; for many, they see no useful place for formal religious components in their identity resources.

**Educating in Catholic identity** It is suggested that the notion of Catholic identity of schools needs to include an understanding of the dynamics of personal identity development and how it can be resourced by institutional identity – and of how this relationship might operate in a pluralist secularised society. In turn, this relates to content and pedagogy for ‘educating’ young people in identity and in trying to ensure that the wisdom of the Catholic religious tradition can be accessed in the process (C/f Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, pp. 228-239).

2. A new or reconstituted institution: This development often calls for a statement of institutional identity, purpose and mission as part of its initial self-presentation to the community outside.

**Implications:** New Catholic schools created without a history rooted in religious order traditions that characterised most Australian Catholic schools needed to articulate identity and mission in Catholic terms. Schools which lost
their traditional religious order staff members also needed some revision to their Catholic identity; often their historical religious roots were reinforced with considerations of the charisma of the religious order which they strived to maintain and further develop (Brien & Hack, 2010, 2011; Lydon, 2009).

3. Change in institutional leadership: People often think that new leadership will resolve crises and give new enthusiasm to the institution. This can range across things like sporting teams, political parties, business corporations and schools, and even a new Pope etc.

**Implications:** Much will depend on the view of Catholic identity of the new leadership. Hence the importance of professional development on this topic.

4. Challenging comparisons with other institutions: Looking at the identity and work of other institutions is often a stimulus to reviewing the identity and mission of one’s own.

**Implications:** Institutions can learn from observing how others conduct their mission and how they articulate their religious identity. This can affect the introduction of Catholic school leadership positions that include the term ‘Catholic identity’ and can promote an interest in the discourse about religious identity.

5. Image consciousness related to advertising: Increasingly, how institutions are perceived in the market place has become a concern of institutional leaders. It has to do with ‘status’ (de Botton, 2004), ‘image’, ‘branding’ and ‘badging’. It is nourished by, and it reinforces a consumerist mentality. Slogan advertising has become ubiquitous – for example: guess what products are being advertised by the following slogans:- The relentless pursuit of perfection, Don’t hold back, Live the pleasure, Born to perform, The power of dreams. (They are car advertisements for Lexus, Jeep, Peugeot, Jaguar and Honda.)

**Implications:** Religious school slogan advertising. Increasingly, schools are devoting attention, funds and salaried positions to marketing and advertising, apparently aligning themselves with business models of operation. The following table shows a recent example of schools’ identity slogan advertising. It would be a difficult task to place the schools concerned as listed below the table in the correct places. Is it possible to distinguish the Catholic, other Christian and state schools on the basis of their slogans?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School advertising slogan</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberating the potential in every learner</td>
<td>Arden School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity, respect, courage and service</td>
<td>Barker College Wahroonga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring creative learning community</td>
<td>Loreto Normanhurst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A love of learning</td>
<td>Meriden Strathfield</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill and honour</td>
<td>Orange Grove public school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigate, develop, reflect</td>
<td>Pymble ladies College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small enough to care, big enough to challenge</td>
<td>Redlands School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn, love, live</td>
<td>St Catherine’s School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let your light shine</td>
<td>St Scholastica’s College Glebe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls make their marks</td>
<td>Waverley College</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Identity advertising slogans for schools:* Arden School, Barker College Wahroonga, Loreto Normanhurst, Meriden Strathfield, Orange Grove public school; Pymble ladies College, Redlands School, St Catherine’s School, St Scholastica’s College Glebe, Waverley College. It can be amusing to put school names into the online automatic Advertising slogan generator and compare these with the above. The site http://thesurrealist.co.uk/slogan.cgi appears to draw on many marketing examples and it randomly generates advertising slogans on request.

*Catholic identity branding and badging.* Australian Catholic University was ‘badged and branded’ as ACU National for a period of less than 10 years before returning to its original name. Just whether this re-badging / re-branding made any real difference to the perceived quality of the educational and research service the university delivered to its students and the wider community would be difficult to determine. This episode also prompts questions about how worthwhile it has been for the mission of Catholic educational institutions to invest heavily in image marketing and public relations activities. Community service institutions like schools and universities can overdo their identification with the consumer marketplace. Where this happens, there is a risk that the educational services they deliver are treated like commercial commodities whose ultimate purpose can appear to be the profitability of the institution rather than the relevance and quality of their service to the community.

The question remains as to what aspects of a school’s identity are important in its self-expression and how might these best be displayed. There are issues in making the school appear to be more of a business, operating according to current commercial marketing thinking and strategies. There is an identifiable hint of narcissism in Facebook-Tweeting behaviour that Catholic schools could well avoid. It is suggested that concentrating more on what can actually be done to educate young people well would be more healthy and productive than a commercial
focus on institutional identity. My view is that the reputation and perceived identity of organisations like schools, hospitals and aged care facilities, as it is for professionals such as doctors, veterinarians and builders, depends more on people’s actual experience with them and on word-of-mouth recommendations, than on slick marketing. Of course it is important for organisations and professionals to have ready information available about the scope of their services. But use of showy marketing and slogan advertising seems to me to be artificial, unnecessary and ineffectual.

6. Confusing personal identity issues with institutional identity, and confusing expectations for different contexts: Sometimes personal identity anxieties are projected onto the institution. This is more likely to be a problem for institutional leaders who tend to have more sway as to the institutional identity that is projected. Also, expectations of identity in different contexts can be mixed up.

Institutional identity problems arising from the action of the leadership: The focus on institutional identity can be driven by the idiosyncratic concerns of its leaders. Because of the power they exert over the operation of staff members, their view of what the institution’s identity should look like can be very influential. – for better or worse. The personal needs and interests of the institutional leaders may have a disproportionate effect on identity-promoting strategies and activities. Two examples arising from discussions with colleagues are noted. Firstly, there is the ESIT syndrome – the Executive Slide into Inconsequential Trivialities. This occurs where CEO and/or executive staff appear to be preoccupied with minor externals, while what are regarded as glaring issues by many of the other staff seem to go by unnoticed as if these were of little or no consequence. Secondly, the SIS syndrome. The Seduction by Image and Status syndrome was also referred to as the Coffee-table book / Facebook Preoccupation. It is about inordinate attention given to what the key leaders think the institutions should look like; and these days this can be the image hopefully projected on Facebook.

Confusing the Identity related expectations of different contexts: A classic example of this problem is evident in the widespread expectation that schools should solve society’s problems. Over the years, this thinking has contributed to the overcrowding of the school curriculum with a range of initiatives related to social problems. For example education programs related to:- Aids, peace, bullying, smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, obesity etc. It is not that the school cannot make a limited but valuable educational contribution to the community’s efforts to address social problems; but it is a problem where there is an ‘over-expectation’ of the school to bring about social change by itself.

Implications: Leadership problems: There is a perennial need for school leaders who are focused on resourcing and enhancing the educational process; this makes the most effective contribution to the school’s Catholic identity. Where leaders may be side-tracked to some extent by personal ambition, status, executive perks or unhelpful idiosyncratic preoccupations, the school community suffers and its mission is inhibited.

Confusion of contexts: The Joint partnership context. One of the problems with concerns about the Catholic identity of schools is that the identity expectations of Catholic schools may be more appropriate for a Catholic seminary or theological college than for a school. In the former, the institution is fully owned and operated by the church, and the religiously committed participants freely choose to participate in the institution. But schools are primarily civil institutions for the handing on the intellectual culture to children and adolescents, where attendance is compulsory. They can contribute to the church’s mission; but it is unrealistic to think of them as if they were primarily theologically focused ecclesiastical institutions with an evangelising potential like that of a seminary.

As noted in chapter 1, Catholic schools in Australia are semi-state schools and not exclusively ecclesiastical structures, and this needs to be reflected in the identity and mission expectations that are proposed for them. They are constituted and funded through a joint venture partnership between state, church and community (parents). This sort of partnership with the state is also evident in the government funding of Catholic health and welfare agencies, Catholic hospitals and Catholic aged care. But these institutions are not expected to change significantly the religious practices of their patients and clients in the same way that Catholic schools are often expected to with their students. This has something to do with the success of compulsory schooling for all where there is often too great an expectation put on them to solve society’s problems (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, pp. 255-263).

Religious effectiveness: Unrealistic expectations of the identity and evangelising potential of a civic institution like a school, by contrast with those for a seminary or a religious order, result in unrealistic expectations of religious effectiveness. No matter how many times Catholic school educators point out that whether or not young people will engage with a local Catholic parish is unlikely to depend solely on their Catholic schooling and religious education, there still remain expectations from some in the Catholic community that Catholic schools should produce church-going Catholics somewhat automatically. And if not, “There must be something wrong”. Rather, a different measure of religious effectiveness for schools is needed; the measure should be about the quality of their religious education which gives substantive access to Catholic traditions, but which cannot impose them. In other words, school religious effectiveness is about how well young people are educated religiously, not about their final options as regards active church membership.

7. Creating executive coordinating positions to address identity related issues: At an institutional level, it is not uncommon for a pressing concern to lead to the creation of a new coordinating or leadership position related to the
problem as a step to show that something is being done about it. A new ‘director’ position can be created without much practical clarity as to the real needs and how they might be addressed. The new role may sound important, but at the same time it can have vagueness, uncertainty and jargon about what the role implies in practice. It is also not uncommon to see that the creation of such new positions does not necessarily bring about significant change. Some institutions appear to have created directorial positions that are not productive, but which seem to create superfluous work for others.

**Implications:** New Catholic identity-related leadership positions in schools. The rapid increase in new designated religious role positions in Catholic schools as illustrated earlier in Table 11.1 appears to have been driven at least in part by Catholic identity-related concerns. Even the roles that do not specifically use the term identity still seem to have been affected by a desire to make Catholic qualities and identifiers more prominent. The new terms seem to be used more in secondary schools; and more frequently in independent than in systemic diocesan schools. So far it appears to me that there is no substantial evidence that the burgeoning of new religious identity positions has brought about notable change in the Catholic identity of the schools or their students. Also, while the new jobs have role descriptions, these tend not to clarify in detail what is understood by Catholic institutional identity. In addition, what tends to be missing is a theory of institutional identity and how this might relate to individual personal identity development.

**Signposting the literature and practice related to the Catholic identity of schools**

While there is no need here to review the literature on the Catholic identity of schools, what will be included for the record is a brief signposting of areas of literature that relate in some way to the Catholic identity of schools. Only a few example references will be included for each of the sub-areas.

In looking at the language usage that shows a notable rise in the prominence of the theme Catholic identity for Catholic schools since 2000, it is important to think about the extent to which the change was the result of a new and relatively spontaneous interest, or whether it was required by authorities. And the material in the first part of the chapter may help as background when interpreting the various reasons why the changes occurred.

Initially, the term ‘Catholicity’ appeared in the literature, seeking to explore what being a Catholic institution meant in practice. It described how Catholic the institution looked as well as the qualities and characteristics that were thought to be distinctive of Catholicism (Rossiter, 1997a; Bezzina & Wilson, 1998; Sullivan, 2000). Gradually the term Catholic identity tended to replace Catholicity (Brennan, 2001; Sharkey, 2002; Rymarz, 2007). A search of the archives of the *Journal of Religious Education* shows that since 1997 the word ‘Catholicity’ appeared in 21 articles whereas ‘Catholic identity’ appeared in 41. The more generic term ‘religious identity’ appeared in 63 articles, but in many of these instances, it was referring to the personal religious identity of individuals and not institutions.

**Theological qualities of Catholicism** One approach to the Catholic identity of schools focused on qualities thought to be distinctive of Catholicism (E.g., Groome, 1996, 2002). It started with a relatively abstract theological analysis, concentrating on the spirituality of Catholicism in general. It proposed a normative theological definition of Catholic identity. Operational identity could then be evaluated in terms of how well it measured up to the ideal qualities – but measuring performance on such qualities was problematic.

Prominent in the proposed characteristics of Catholicism were its community, liturgical and sacramental qualities, commitment to social justice, and a diverse range of theologies and endeavours allowing for adaptation to different cultural settings. While this approach proposed a theology of identity, one of its potential problems was its ‘sociologically distance’ from the school. It is primarily a static understanding of identity that logically proves the institution is Catholic, and it can tend to stay at the stage of theological analysis of Catholicism and not be anchored sufficiently in actual school practice, and in the qualities of the school that affect those who work in it.

**Mission and identity of Catholic schools** Australians Jim and Therese D’Orsa have contributed a number of recent publications on the mission and identity of Catholic schools in the Mission and Education series (2012, 2013A, 2013B, 2015). The major theme running through their work has been theology of the mission of Catholic schools. They considered that mission could take multiple directions, depending on whose needs it was designed to address, and these could be pursued with a number of dialogue partners such as church and state. They have addressed issues in the various overlapping areas of Catholic identity, Catholic educational leadership, evangelisation, spiritual/religious traditions in schools, teacher professional and spiritual development, and Catholic curriculum. They are currently preparing a volume on pedagogy that is considered to be congruent with a Catholic philosophy of education.

Congruent with their writings, and also a part of the Mission and Education series, was the volume by Gowdie (2017) on the spiritual and professional development of educators.

Mission is not exclusively a religious word in the way it is used with respect to the purposes and commitments of institutions. There is a large literature on the theology of the mission of the Christian church and of Christians as individuals.
One of the notable differences between the words mission and identity is that the former is more ‘outwards’ looking. From this perspective, the identity of an institution is implied in what it ‘does’ for people. Its identity will be evident in its actions. From this perspective, social justice, volunteer and community engagement activities emphasise the mission dimension to Catholic schooling. Rymarz (2016) illustrated a practical approach in proposing how a school might aspire to be ‘authentically’ Catholic.

As noted in chapter 9, there is no question that, from an ecclesiastical perspective, the Catholic school makes a valuable contribution to the Catholic Church’s overall mission. And this is explained in writings about the theology of mission. However, caution was suggested to avoid thinking and language that stated that the exclusive purpose of Catholic schools was to fulfil the Catholic Church’s mission. This is not congruent with, and it neglects the importance of, both the constitution of Australian Catholic schools as semi-state schools funded by governments, and their civic contribution to community education.

**Distinctiveness and inclusiveness:** Sullivan (2000) considered that there was a need for balance between the distinctive religious aspects of Catholic identity, and a significant inclusiveness. This would have implications for enrolment policies. Chambers *et al.* (2006), Chambers (2012, 2015) and Donlevy (2008) gave attention to the identity implications of having a legitimate, and valued place for pupils who were not Catholic. Chia (2013) took up the same theme looking at the place of Catholic schools and universities in multi-religious societies.

**Special Catholic character of schools:** In New Zealand, when Catholic schools became incorporated into the public school system, they were required to demonstrate their ‘special character’ as a key indicator of their distinctiveness. This was needed to show that they were sufficiently different from public schools to justify separate state funding. Consequently, New Zealand Catholic schools went through the challenging task of articulating a Catholic identity that was still consistent with being state funded.

Much can be learned from the New Zealand Catholic school experience. Wanden (2011) charted the history of developments in his doctoral thesis. Van der Nest (2015) and Smith & Van der Nest (2016) looked into the question of Catholic identity with principal focus on implications for the role of the school Director of Religious Studies. (DRS was the NZ equivalent of the Australian Religious Education Coordinator REC). Having a religion curriculum with attention to Catholicism across all school years was a principal item in the special Catholic character.

**Catholic curriculum and pedagogy:** The first issue of volume 5 of the journal *International Studies in Catholic Education* addressed the theme “Can there be a Catholic curriculum?” This topic has figured in the literature of Catholic school identity for a long time – for example the late Barry Dwyer’s book *Catholic schools at the crossroads* (Dwyer, 1986; Davis, 1999). Dwyer spoke about “evangelising the curriculum” as a way of including content and pedagogy that reflected Catholic interests in helping pupils to be informed religiously and to learn how to think critically. The topic is best understood as an evaluation of curriculum and pedagogy to see whether they reflect a range of Catholic values and principles – especially social justice (Riley & Danner-McDonald, 2013). This could also be described as checking that the curriculum was consistent with a Catholic philosophy of education. Care is needed with use of the term ‘Catholic curriculum’ to avoid misinterpretation as meaning ‘Catholic maths, Catholic science and Catholic geography’ etc., which does not make sense.


As for the caution proposed above for use of the term Catholic curriculum, care is also needed with respect to the term Catholic pedagogy. It explores the importance of pedagogies that reflect Catholic principles and philosophy of education.

**‘Permeation’ of Catholic identity:** The idea of ‘permeation’ of Catholic identity in a school was developed from the age old Christian ideal for personal spirituality where it was hoped that all aspects of the everyday lives of individuals would be inspired and enhanced by their faith. The permeation of gospel values in the personal life of the Christian was projected onto Catholic institutions. Archbishop Miller, when Secretary of the Roman Congregation for Catholic Education, articulated this as:

> the gospel of Jesus Christ and his very person are to inspire and guide the Catholic school in every dimension of its life and activity – its philosophy of education, its curriculum, its community life, its selection of teachers, and even its physical environment (Miller 2006, p. 3).

A recent Australian interpretation mirrored this as follows:

> Where Catholic identity and mission permeate a school, they will be evident in all its aspects – its governance, leadership, organisation, programs, administration and overall culture. The relationships between leaders, staff and students, and the nature of the education, pastoral care and community life will reflect the Christian inspiration of the schooling (McMullen, 2012, p. 21).
Permeation of gospel values has been used either explicitly or implicitly to distinguish Catholic schools from others (Buetow, 1988; Groome, 1996; Miller, 2007) and also it is implied in some of the discussions of a Catholic curriculum. But when the phrase ‘permeation of Catholic identity’ is used, there is not the same clarity because what is understood by Catholic identity is more ambiguous and diverse. Rymarz (2013A, 2013B) looked at issues with the use of the phrase permeation of Catholic identity in Canadian Catholic schools.

In my professional opinion, the permeation theory for Catholic identity in a school is good at expressing a moral ideal; but it can become problematic when there is a tendency to presume that permeation actually exists by theological definition, rather than something that has to be worked at continually, acknowledging that human institutions often fall short of the ideal. My concern is about where the use of permeation language gives the impression of some smugness and moral superiority – hence my disquiet when it is used as a distinguishing features of Catholic schools. For example, state schools could equally claim that they are ‘permeated’ with the values of respect and care for individuals, with all aspects of the school life enhancing student learning. When talking about the desired qualities of Catholic schools, there is a need to balance the ideal of Christian values permeation with acknowledgment of the natural limitations to achieving it. This can help avoid projecting an unrealistic assumption about how prominent Catholic identity markers are – a projection that sets up Catholic schools for criticism about the gap between rhetoric and reality.

**Key religious leadership roles in schools** Research has been done in articles and doctoral studies on the roles of key religious leadership personnel in Catholic schools. This has focused mainly on the role of Religious Education Coordinator (Faith Development Coordinator or Assistant Principal Religious Education) (c/f Crotty, 1998, 2005, 2011; Engebretson, 1998; Fleming, 2001, 2003; Buchanan, 2007; Rymarz, 2006). Bezzina and Wilson (1998) looked at religious leadership beyond this specific role – merging into the literature of Catholic educational leadership. Parts of this literature also explored the pivotal role of school principals with respect to the Catholic identity and the religious dimension of the schools.

**Catholic school religious education** Having a special place for religious education in the curriculum has long been a distinguishing feature of Catholic schools, both in Australia and elsewhere (Catholic Bishops of NSW & ACT, 2007). It also has a pre-eminent place in the idea of a ‘Catholic curriculum’. It is beyond the scope here to identify where and how the extensive literature on Catholic school religious education touches on the Catholic identity of the institution.

**Catholic educational leadership** This field also has its own extensive literature which refers variably to Catholic identity-related issues. Some example references are Bracken (2000) and Brennan (2001).

**Evangelisation (New evangelisation) and mission of the church** Evangelisation has long been a key theme much written about with reference to Catholic religious education and schooling, and church ministry. Gascoigne (1995) considered its relationship with religious identity. Sharkey’s (2002) article is an example of writing that focuses on the evangelising role of the Catholic school, including ‘New’ evangelisation and on the contribution of the Catholic school to the mission of the church. Rymarz (2010, 2012) addressed New evangelisation in particular, considering the challenges it posed for Catholic schooling.

**Responding to the challenge of secularisation** As suggested earlier, one of the driving forces behind the interest in Catholic school identity was trying to address secularisation – that is the phenomenon of secularity and not the ideology of secularism as such (Arthur, 2009, Rossiter, 2011). Rossiter (2010) described the secularising process in some detail with a view to a more positive and constructive approach to it in Catholic school religious education. The extensive literature on secularisation will not be referred to here.

**Distinctive religious charm** Lydon (2009) and Brien & Hack (2010, 2011) considered the significance of historical religious charisms for Catholic school identity. This applied to schools that originally were conducted by religious orders and which have endeavoured to maintain some sense of historical continuity with the distinctive spirituality and mission of their founding religious orders. Sometimes new schools without any religious order tradition will choose a distinctive historical religious spirituality with which to align their identity.

**Liturgy and prayer** The liturgical and prayer identity is an important component of a school’s Catholic identity (Rossier, 2006). Generally, Catholic schools have a good record on liturgy and prayer.

**Student response to institutional Catholic identity** Extensive writings on youth spirituality suggest that contemporary young people are not using much in the way of religious elements in their construction of personal identity (E.g. Smith & Denton, 2005; Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Hughes, 2007; Mason et al. 2007). How personal identity development relates to institutional identity will be considered later in the chapter.

**Measuring and assessing institutional Catholic identity** Personal religious identity: The research paper of Curran & Francis (1996) demonstrated the perennial difficulty in devising quantitative measures of personal religious identity. No matter how statistically reliable the study’s 12 item scale was, a close look at the items suggests that their link with a rich concept of personal religious identity is problematic, mainly because the latter is so complex. For example, three of the 12 items in the scale were “I think that religious sisters are good people”, “I think we should have fewer masses at school”, and “I sometimes pray to a saint” (Curran & Francis, 1996, p. 386). What a participant thinks about when
answering questions like these will hardly give a significant insight into their personal identity. Hence there is a ‘conceptual enhancement’ occurring in the interpretation of identity from somewhat limited and at times questionable ‘identity markers’ in the questionnaire items.

**Institutional religious identity:** This same problem tends to arise to some extent in research concerned with measuring and assessing institutional Catholic identity (c/f Sultmann & Brown, 2011; Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010, 2012; Sharkey, 2015, 2017).

Pollefeyt and Bouwens headed the Enhancing the Catholic Identity of Schools Project (ECSI) which has been implemented in many Catholic schools in Australia. Because of its significance as the most extensive research program conducted in Australian Catholic schools, as well as its international coverage, more will be said about it later in the chapter. The ECSI provided a way of interpreting how school communities presented in terms of their spirituality, in relation to the preferred style which was theological and symbolic, contrasting with simpler, more literal spirituality and with secular spirituality. It also helped show where they stood with respect to secularisation, and proposed how schools might ‘recontextualise’ through a challenging critical Christian dialogue with culture.

**Some ideas/themes that could be given more emphasis in the discourse on the Catholic identity of Catholic schools**

**Appraising the various components to the construct ‘Catholic identity’ of schools**

The NSW ACT bishops’ statement (2007, p. 14) on Catholic schooling states

At application for enrolment, at admission, and on other appropriate occasions, parents and students are reminded of the Catholic identity and mission of the school and of the expectation that they will assist in that mission.

This tends to presume that the Catholic identity of a school is something clear cut, self-evident and well understood. But in reality it is diffuse and complex. ‘Which’ mode of being Catholic and which aspect of identity does it mean? The Catholic identity of the school in Rockdale, Sydney conducted by the St Pius X Latin Mass society (founded by Archbishop Lefebvre in 1970) is different from that presumed in the average Sydney diocesan Catholic school; and this would probably be different again from that of Tangara or Redfield colleges run by the Opus Dei movement. But if you were a student in these schools successively, what differences would you notice and how important would you perceive them to be? And how obvious or not would any perceived differences relate to the distinctive religious identity of the schools? Is it possible that you could find there were few if any significant religious differences, apart from variations in organisation and discipline? The point to be made here is that differences in the religious identity of Catholic schools cannot be presumed – they need to be carefully identified and articulated.

The notion of the Catholic identity of schools is naturally problematic because of the diversity of views about what it means to be Catholic and the complexity of institutional identity, let alone the difficulties in working out how the ‘development’ of an institutional religious identity might translate into the operation of a school. It is suggested that this ambiguity can be overcome to some extent by breaking up the Catholic identity of schools into a number of components, each of which is easier to describe and appraise. This clarification is also crucial for any attempts to develop and enhance the school’s Catholic identity.

Some proposed sub-identities are listed below as an initial attempt to cover the relevant components:-

**Different aspects / components of the religious (Catholic) identity of a school; The various ways in which religion and the spiritual enter into the school’s self-understanding, self-expression and daily operation**

1. **Ownership and funding of the school**
   1.1 Official Church ownership and governance.
   1.2 Key leadership positions appointed by church educational authorities or governing board.
   1.3 Catholic name of the school.
   1.4 Not a ‘community of faith’ in the same sense as a voluntary religious community (E.g. parish, religious order), but can expect Catholic liturgy and religious education and other expressions of links with a Catholic heritage.
   1.5 Funded by State and Federal governments implying an accountability to the Australian community through government education authorities whose role it is to ensure that state standards for school education are met.

2. **Buildings and physical structure, and architecture**
   2.1 Chapel, prayer/quiet rooms, religious art, religious motto.

3. **Public life of the school**
   3.1 **Theological and educational self-definition**
How the school defines itself theologically in relation to its Catholic purposes. E.g. it is concerned with educating young people in the faith tradition; to a limited extent, it contributes to the wider mission of the Catholic Church.

How the school defines itself educationally – achieving the best possible secular education,

3.2 **Liturgical and prayer identity**
Celebrations of Eucharist at special events.

3.3 **Prayers and religious music and singing at various times and at public gatherings.**

3.4 **Values identity** (See also under ethos)
Christian values intentionally referred to in public statements, official documentation etc. as an expression of the sorts of values it is hoped will be evident in the school’s operation as well as the personal values it might encourage in its staff and students.

3.5 **Distinctive religious charism**
The particular history, values and themes that the historical religious tradition of the founding religious order emphasised. If there is no particular religious order tradition to the school, it can articulate and initiate its own founding tradition. Just operationalising the standard Catholic diocesan purposes for schools amounts to articulating a religious identity for the school.

3.6 **Enrolment policy**
How religious elements are included in the enrolment policy.

3.7 **Ministry to parents**
Sometimes there are programs that reach out to parents to help foster relationships with local Catholic parishes.

4. **The school curriculum** That is, all of the intentional ways in which the institution’s educational aims are advanced.

4.1 **The religion curriculum** including activities like retreats and various pedagogies. The theological identity of the religious education program would initially be implied in the diocesan religion curriculum.

4.2. **Components to an education in identity.** What is done in the religion curriculum that relates to educating young people in the development of personal identity.

4.3 **Various ways in which values related content is handled across the curriculum.**

4.4 **Youth ministry.** Special attention may be given to ministry to youth within the school and in extracurricular activities; this can include peer youth ministry.

4.5 **Any religious aspects to pastoral care and guidance.**

5. **Ethos and culture of the school**
For each of these aspects there is the normative/intentional ethos and the actual/operational ethos that is experienced as the reality. This begins with written and verbal reference to the values that are intended to underpin the life and curriculum of the school and which it is hoped both staff and students will uphold.

5.1 **Operational values:** The Christian ideals of justice, love, sanctity of the individual, personal freedom, care for individuals, and responsible stewardship for the environment are proposed to inform the operation of the institution.

5.2 **Academic values:** Ideals like academic excellence, intellectual freedom, inquiry, critical thinking etc.

5.3 **Commitment values:** The code of ethics of academic and general staff; commitment to individuals and to the community. Complemented by a student code of conduct/ethics.

6. **The school’s organisational and administrative operation**

6.1 How just and caring is the school as experienced in its teaching and organisational life. This is the moral identity of the school. Here too there may be contrast between the intentional and actual moral identity.

What is not included in this list is the personal spirituality and identity of the students and teachers. It is proposed that these not be confused with the institution’s spirituality and identity, even though it is desirable to have a good relationship between the two.

More sense can be made of the notion Catholic identity of schools when it is related specifically to the different components noted above. These components are more readily evaluated and enhanced than if the approach is just to the general construct Catholic identity.

What is suggested above is not a definitive list of the parts to Catholic school identity, but only one example of a list. Other arrangements could equally be developed to cover all of what a school community considers to be parts of its religious identity.

**Personal identity development in relation to institutional identity**

It is proposed that the discourse on the Catholic identity of schools needs to include an understanding of how personal and institutional identities are related. Here, brief reference will be made to an earlier detailed discussion of the topic in Crawford & Rossiter (2006, pp. 89-170).
Firstly, personal identity needs an educational working definition. A basic psychological definition is proposed that can be developed into a view of personal religious identity when referenced to a religious culture.

**Personal identity** is defined as the *process* in which individuals draw on both internal physical and mental resources, as well as external, cultural identity resources, for their self-understanding and self-expression.

This view includes both a sense of subjective ‘identity permanence’ and the capacity to change and develop. For most, identity will remain fairly stable, with gradual modifications across the life cycle resulting from experience; this applies especially to those whose self-understanding is confirmed positively by others. For some, the self-hypothesis may at times be insecure. While some may try to change aspects of their identity in response to new circumstances, including education, others may resist change, consciously reinforcing their established self-image.

This notion of both process and content in identity suggests that it makes use of external elements of culture (family life, heroes and heroines, peers, religion, school, artefacts, work, lifestyle, leisure, television, consumer products, social media), in relationship with internal elements (needs, beliefs, values, ideals, attitudes, emotions and moods), to fashion the ‘internal clothing’ of individuals through which they identify and understand their own characteristics as a person. It is meshed with their sense of individuality and uniqueness. When individuals think about their identity, these self-defining elements come to mind as reference points.

From this perspective, identity health can be regarded as a harmonious balance between internal and external identity resources. It is proposed as a value judgment that personal identity should be based primarily on internal resources like beliefs, values and commitments. These can be thought of as spiritual identity resources; they may or may not include religious elements. Too great an identification with externals weakens individuals’ autonomy and makes them slaves to expectations from outside, rather than being inner-directed. However, it would be unrealistic to expect people to be so spiritually strong and independent as to rely exclusively on their own internal resources for identity and meaning. It would be even more unrealistic to expect this of children and adolescents.

External reference points and links with culture (family, peers, cultural groups, film and television, social media) are often fundamentally important for personal identity. It is a basic part of the human condition to need the help of others, and access to cultural resources, for making sense of life, for achieving a worthwhile sense of self, and for the experience of happiness and fulfilment. Identity development and maintenance have an important interpersonal component. Some identity problems may be interpreted as too great a dependence on externals, or too much dependence on internals. Identity is displayed by what individuals think of themselves and what they do to express themselves.

A healthy identity is mainly self-validated. It does not need to be continually propped up somewhat artificially by externals, such as the approval of others or identity-related consumerism (c/f chapters 6 and 7). Also, a healthy identity does not require too much energy for its maintenance, allowing for personal energies to be directed outwards and not tied up in self-analysis and self-assurance.

**Institutional identity as a reference point for personal identity development**

**Institutional identity** can be defined in parallel with that of personal identity as the self-understanding and self-expression of the institution. It too is a process and it involves interaction between the historical cultural identity resources of the institution and the activities of its members who might be expected to live out the ideals and aspirations formulated for the institution. It is comparatively easier to articulate the identity of an institution like a business or sporting club; but for a religion with two thousand years of history and culture, it is a much more complex task. And this complexity also affects the identity of religious institutions like schools, hospitals, aged care facilities etc.

One of the key functions of the religious institution is to resource the lives and identity development of its members. There will be differences according to the nature of the institution. At one point the family has a key role in communicating a basic sense of human meaning and purpose as well as personal identity. Religious and community agencies can make a valuable contribution as key identity reference points for individuals. National, regional, city as well as ethnic and cultural groupings can also contribute to individual identity development through their identity resources and traditions. Even sporting organisations and clubs as well as friendship groups can contribute towards a personal identity. What is a concern is that film, television and social media have now become probably the most significant moral and spiritual reference points in the culture for both identity and spirituality.

The interactions between personal and institutional identity parallel those between personal and community meanings as discussed by Crawford & Rossiter (2006, pp. 23-88).

This basic, generic picture of identity is expanded when applied to a religion. Here there will be theology, scriptures, rituals, liturgies, religious history, educational institutions etc., in the mix of the cultural identity resources. For example: The Judeo-Christian scriptures are an identity resource for Catholicism and Catholic schools. In the operation of Catholic school theological identity, the scriptures are identity resource content. How the school staff and
students use the scriptures in expressing the school’s spirituality, and how the scriptures figure in classroom religious education make up the process part of religious identity.

Given that a Catholic school is a civic educational institution, one might expect that a significant educational role would be a key aspect of its institutional religious identity. This means educating with respect to Catholic identity, or educating young people in identity with special attention to the way that they are given access to Catholic identity resources.

**What it means to educate in identity**

The notion of education in identity is a particularly valuable one for a religious school as it orients the institution’s religious identity resources towards the personal identity development of its pupils. The first response that the phrase ‘education in identity’ commonly brings to mind is its association with the intention of a group to transmit a particular social identity to the young. Religious schools make this intention explicit. But it does not translate into success automatically. People these days in Westernised countries have a much more significant say in their personal identity development than they did in the past. Ultimately the students in Catholic schools will make their own free response as to how much of the religious identity displayed in school and church they are going to assimilate and adopt. Even a ‘good’ education in Catholic identity will not guarantee that young people will develop and retain an active Catholic religious identity.

Hence a more appropriate and realistic way of approaching education in religious identity is to aim to resource young people’s identity development, especially by giving them educational access to their religious heritage. Catholic schools have long being doing this through religious education programs. But in the current secularised social situation, that is not enough; not all will include active engagement in a parish as a religious component of their identity, even if they internalise a lot of the values and basic human spirituality that they experienced in their Catholic schooling. As explained in chapter 10, something specific also needs to be included in the religion program (or elsewhere in the curriculum) where they can learn how cultural meanings, including both religious heritage and a plethora of meanings from popular culture, affect identity development, and how they might make best use of the identity resources that life offers them. In other words, something needs to be done in the curriculum towards helping young people understand the psychological process of personal identity development.

The first task, giving access to religious heritage both educationally and in terms of experiencing Catholic religious liturgy, prayer and spirituality, is commonly done well in Catholic schools. This is the reason that the so-called crisis in Catholic identity noted earlier was judged to be unfounded. But this is only one cultural input to young people’s identity development; and judging from the steady decline in engagement with Catholic parishes to its current low level, one could conclude that overt elements of Catholics’ religious identity will not figure prominently.

Hence it is proposed that more attention needs to be given to the second aspect of education in identity – skills for a critical evaluation of how contemporary culture, particularly through its seductive consumerism, beautifully and convincingly marketed, can have a shaping influence on identity development. Details of the agenda that need to be addressed here are explained in Crawford & Rossiter (2006, pp. 129-170).

As discussed in chapters 6 and 7, young people can be educated in the direction of seeing how the consumer-advertising-media complex both appeals to, and engenders, a sense of ‘congenital identity deficiency’ which will fuel consumerist buying.

Learning about their religion as well as studying the complex identity-shaping process itself can help young people become better informed about identity development in a way that prompts their own increasingly conscious participation (depending on their age and maturity). While learning about aspects of cultural, ethnic and religious identity, they could become more aware of identity-related issues. This could help them become more reflective about their own identity as linked interactively with heritage and contemporary cultural elements, while avoiding any excessive emphasis on self-analysis.

Once people have experienced democracy and freedom, it is unlikely that the clock can be turned back – nothing will ever stop the majority from wanting a significant say in the construction of their own idiosyncratic meaning, identity and spirituality. Hence a religious education that only tries to communicate a pre-fabricated religious identity and religious practice will not work. Religious education also needs to help resource and empower young people’s own identity-forming processes – to make their DIY identity development more informed and healthy. This requires some understanding of what is involved in identity and spirituality development, and of how cultural meanings can have a shaping influence. Young people need to be set to work to research the issues so that they will be better informed about the potential pitfalls in the various ideologies and cultural practices that can affect their sense of identity.

In concluding this section, it is informative to refer to an article on issues that the Australian Jewish community are having with regard to their education to engender a sense of Jewish identity in young people (Gross & Rutland, 2014).
The similarities with some Catholic identity anxieties are instructive, and in the author’s opinion, this tends to confirm further the case argued above.

**Catholic school identity related to the joint church-state partnership and contribution to the common good**

As suggested in the implications for issue 6 discussed at the start of the chapter, more attention in the discourse on the Catholic identity of schools should be given to the constitution of Australian Catholic schools as semi-state schools with Catholic sponsorship. Their identity statements need to reflect the partnership between the Catholic Church, Government and parents, acknowledging the schools’ civic responsibility and accountability to the wider community to educate young Australian citizens. This constitution also has a bearing on enrolment policy, justifying a more ‘open-to-all’ approach rather than seeing the schools as just for Catholics. This does not necessarily compromise the emphasis on Catholicism that is appropriate for a school sponsored by the Catholic Church.

Consistent with this partnership basis for Catholic school identity in Australia, is the thinking about the contribution that Catholic schools make to the common good. There is a good literature on this topic and it deserves more attention in relation to the Catholic identity of schools (c/f Bryk et al. 1993; McLaughlin et al., 1996; Hollenbach, 1996; Donlevy, 2008, Williams, 2010).

The idea of Catholic religious education enhancing young people’s identity and spiritual development is a helpful expression of the way Catholic schools might contribute to Australian education generally. This is an example of how Catholic schooling makes a valued contribution to the common good.

**The Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project**

It is relevant here to comment briefly on the Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project (ECSI) because of its size and its significant contribution to the contemporary discourse about the Catholic identity of schools in Australia.

The research project was initially conducted in the schools of the four Victorian dioceses by Didier Pollefeyt assisted by Jan Bouwens from the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, commencing in 2006 (Pollefeyt, 2009, 2011; Pollefeyt and Bouwens, 2010, 2012). Other dioceses are now participating as well. It was also scheduled for implementation in the UK, USA, the Netherlands, Germany and Lithuania.

Because so much has already been written about the project by the researchers and others (E.g. Sharkey, 2017), only a brief summary of its purposes will be given here, together with reflections on the theological underpinnings of the program.

The project was envisaged in two parts.

1. **Assessing** the identity of Catholic educational institutions by means of quantitative and qualitative survey instruments.

2. **Enhancing** the identity of Catholic educational institutions by means of practical-theological instruments, promoting post-critical belief and a recontextualisation of Catholic identity in dialogue with the cultural context. (Pollefeyt, 2011, p. 3.).

With quantitative data from school staff, students and their parents, the survey interpreted the Catholic identity of schools in terms of statistical scales derived from questionnaire items. The items looked at style of spirituality and belief, as well as at thinking about the following issues:- secularisation, affirmation of traditional Catholic identity as in the past (a form of ‘confessionalism’), relationship between faith and culture, values in the culture, and critical values dialogue with pluralistic culture. In addition, they looked at any differences between people’s ideal Catholic identity and perceived reality. The scales were used to profile the responses of participants giving schools and dioceses a picture of the thinking of their own school communities about the Catholic identity of their school as they related to these identity-related issues. In addition, qualitative data on Catholic school identity was collected through the completion of School Identity Portfolios and records of various expressions of Catholic identity.

The preliminary parts of the online survey were concerned with the religious aspects of individuals and of schools:- 1. The religious **Profile Questionnaire**, and 2. The **Doyle questionnaire** which looked at perceived views of the religious aspects of the school. (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2013, pp. 100 – 117).

The core of the research then made use of three multivariate attitude scales for analysing and interpreting perceptions of the Catholic identity of schools.

The first attitude scale, the **Post-critical Belief Scale** developed by by professor Dirk Hutsebaut has been used by Leuven University to describe and characterise people’s spirituality along two axes – 1. How theological and symbolic is their pattern of belief (as opposed to literal belief) and 2. How spiritual/religious it is (whether transcendent or not) (Pollefeyt, 2011, p. 10). This scale generated profiles of the spirituality of the various groups of participants in terms of cognitive belief styles. The proposed ideal is a more symbolic/theological style of belief.
The Melbourne Scale characterised the identity related thinking about Catholic schools according to response to secularisation. The analysis proposed 4 types for profiling the participants; they were originally developed by Professor Lieven Boeve:-

Institutional secularisation Abandoning the effort to maintain Catholicity and going along with the secular culture. Example questionnaire item: “I’d prefer to go to a school where Christianity isn’t too obvious”. Here the relationship between faith and culture tended to mean uncrtical acceptance of contemporary culture as well as a secularised Catholic school.

Institutional re-confessionalisation Opposing secularisation by re-affirming a more traditional Catholicity in earlier more religious times. Example questionnaire item: “I long for a school that wants to be purely Catholic again, just like the old times”. The relationship between faith and culture tended to be an opposition to secularising culture by defensively adopting an antagonistic, overt Catholic stance.

Values education in a Christian perspective Seeks commonality between Christian values and values in the culture. Example questionnaire item: “My ideal school promotes an ethical way of life, because this is the way for students to discover God in their lives.” The dialogue between faith and culture tended to be accommodating – seeing where there was commonality, and stressing the need for good moral values.

Recontextualisation – identity formation in a plural context Critical dialogue between the Catholic tradition and culture, seeking a distinctive spiritual/moral contribution within pluralist, secularised culture. Example questionnaire item: “I’m all for a Catholic school that considers the present day religious and cultural diversity as an opportunity to learn what It means to be really Christian today.” Here the dialogue between faith and culture is envisaged as critical/evaluative. E.g. the religious tradition can challenge the culture to be more human and not so seductive through its consumerist orientation; in doing this, a new Catholic identity in a spiritually plural world can be forged. (Pollefeyt, 2011, p. 14; 2009, pp. 2-5.).

The Victoria scale interprets how the school is perceived to be functioning, particularly as regards the spiritual/moral dimension. The two axes were strength of Christian identity and sense of solidarity or community. The four quadrants of responses were then characterised as follows, as originally developed by Prof Chris Hermans and W. Ter Horst:-

The Monologue school Low on Christian identity but strong on solidarity. This is proposed as the ‘traditional’ Catholic school identity from the past as if it were exclusively for Catholics and led by committed Catholics. The Dialogue school Maximum Christian identity and maximum solidarity. This is proposed as the ideal configuration where Catholicism plays a leadership role in an accepting pluralistic, spiritual environment. The Colourful school Minimum Christian identity but a strong sense of solidarity. This is the relatively secularised, spiritually plural school environment with not much affinity for Catholicism but with a sense of community and a congenial acceptance of diversity. The Colourless school Low on Christian identity and low on solidarity. This is also a relatively secularised, spiritually plural school but with less sense of community and commitment to the welfare of others. (Pollefeyt, 2011, p. 22).

The project has concentrated on the profiling of views about school religious identity (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2013). And the analytical feedback given to schools and dioceses was intended to help them better articulate where the school stood with regard to spirituality and institutional Catholic identity. Taking stock of their situation was a good starting point for schools trying to recontextualise their expression of a Catholic identity. As regards efforts to actively promote a process of recontextualisation of Catholic identity, Pollefeyt (2011, p. 32) proposed the following agenda:-

- Propose the faith to students and teachers who are unfamiliar with it, but nonetheless receptive for it.
- Promote transcendent belief and a Catholic faith identity.
- Offer resistance against relativism and secularisation.
- Take away suspicion, scepticism and fear.
- Give existing values and norms a religious foundation.
- Provide solidarity and community with their deeper religious meaning.
- Make a recontextualised Christian belief meaningful and redeeming for today’s young generation.

The ECSI project has developed recontextualising strategies and professional development as part of its second phase. Pollefeyt’s (2011) convention presentation included a section that looked at example situations which reflected the project’s identity typology in school architecture, religious art and noticeboard/poster displays. The final report noted four groups of interactive, online activities called Practical-Theological Instruments (PTI) that were designed to help familiarise participants with the terminology, ideas and results of the research, and with promoting recontextualisation (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2012, pp. 54-64). In addition, the project website has an automated research generator through which participant groups can select and complete particular questionnaires and get an analysis of their results.

Sharkey (2015, 2017) has written about implications for Catholic school practice in Australia, proposing a recontextualising agenda.

The theology underpinning the ECSI Project The project makes a valuable contribution to describing and interpreting the way Catholic school communities think about religious identity-related issues. Pollefeyt and Bouwens not only presented their results in an informative way, their research reports were like 'works of art'. This showed in the
sophistication and complexity of their statistical analyses that yielded neat, schematic, informative interpretations of trends.

The researchers stated the preferred position as regards Catholic identity to be as follows: “The normative framework of this research is the ideal of the recontextualisation of Catholic identity, based on dialogue with plurality and a symbolic understanding of religion.” (Pollefeyt & Bowens, 2010, p. 193). This signals the distinctive strength of the research in its underlying roots in the Leuven theologian Lieven Boeve’s theology of interruption and recontextualisation (Boeve, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2016).

**Lieven Boeve’s theology of interruption and recontextualisation:** Boeve’s theology is considered to be a wise, insightful and compelling interpretation of the contemporary secularised social situation. His interpretation of contemporary culture makes a valuable contribution to Catholic theology and spirituality, as well having implications for religious education and ministry. He considered that behind secularisation are three interrelated cultural processes – de-traditionalisation, individualisation and pluralisation. De-traditionalisation (overlapping considerably with secularisation) has resulted from a radical disjunction or ‘interruption’ that has occurred in the way that cultural traditions are handed on from one generation to the next; for example, the Christian faith is no longer the taken-for-granted cultural horizon that almost automatically communicated a sense of religious identity to the younger generation. This process is complemented by individualisation where there is now a widely accepted view that individuals should have the principal say in constructing their own personal identity. It needs to be ‘DIY’ rather than institutionally determined. Pluralisation is reflected not only in the plurality of religious views in multi-faith society, but in the multiple meanings about life that are advertised in the culture, seeking adherents.

Boeve considered that there is an interplay between these cultural processes that affects the way individuals construct personal meaning and identity – with parallels for collective, institutional meanings and identities. People take up different stances when they try to address or cope with the challenges. Some of the identity stances taken can be flawed and unhealthy – particularly those that are ideologically based (c/f Rossiter, 2011). Boeve proposed the need for a recontextualised Catholic theology. It calls for an, at times radical, critical dialogue with contemporary culture that challenges Christianity to positively engage in enhancing human life and community. Boeve regarded the extensive breakdown in the traditional ways through which communities hand on their beliefs and values – the primary interruption – as a challenge for Christians to construct a new and deeper relationship with God with the hope that the interruption to the relationship will eventually result in many positive gains. This perspective harmonises well with the interpretations of the changing landscape of spirituality considered in chapters 3-7.

Pollefeyt openly endorsed the Boeve theology underpinning the ECSI project. But one might wonder whether all of the Australian Catholic Church authorities who funded the project were fully aware of how radical the notion of recontextualisation can be; perhaps some may really be more in favour of a re-confessionalisation, but felt that the ECSI might bolster the Catholic identity of schools in opposition to the widespread erosion of parish engagement with the Catholic Church.

**Recontextualisation of Catholic identity: A process going back to Pope John XXIII.** What appears to be significant for the ongoing success of the ECSI is the need to acknowledge that recontextualisation of Catholic identity is not something novel in Australia or in the Catholic Church generally. It has roots in significant movements since the time of Pope John XXIII when he stated

> Today’s world, the needs made plain in the last fifty years, and a deeper understanding of doctrine have brought us to a new situation ... It is not that the Gospel has changed, it is that we have begun to understand it better. Those who have lived as long as I have ... were enabled to compare different cultures and traditions, and know that the moment has come to discern the signs of the times, to seize the opportunity and to look far ahead. (Pope John XXIII, 1963).

More recently this was reinforced by Pope John Paul II

> ... develop your culture with wisdom and prudence, retaining the freedom to criticise what may be called the ‘cultural industry’ remaining all the while deeply concerned with truth … faith will ask culture what values it promotes, what destiny it offers to life, what place it makes for the poor and the dispossessed with whom the Son of Man is identified, how it conceives of sharing, forgiveness and love (Pope John Paul II, 1984)

This same theme is carried through in the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis (Evangelii gaudium, 2013).

> when the networks and means of human communication have made unprecedented advances, we sense the challenge of finding and sharing a “mystique” of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage. Greater possibilities for communication thus turn into greater possibilities for encounter and solidarity for everyone. #87
Therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast. Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father’s infinite mercy. Let us try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved. #23

While Bøeve’s theology makes a distinctive, novel contribution, there is much evidence of theological and pastoral recontextualisation going on in Catholicism and Catholic education since Vatican II and before that, even though the label recontextualisation was not used. These efforts were part of processes variously described as: - Responding to the signs of the times; Making Catholicism more relevant to the contemporary world; Critical dialogue between faith and culture (inculturation); Questing for social justice; Christian humanism and humanistic psychology; Addressing the real personal and spiritual needs of people; Christian praxis; Raising critical consciousness; Evangelisation of culture etc.

Hence the ECSI’s recontextualising agenda needs to be understood as part of a long term movement to try to make Catholic schools and their religious education more personal and relevant for pupils and the families that support them (Rossiter, 1999). One could add here a long list of Catholic religious education scholars and practitioners from Australia and overseas who have contributed in this direction.

As noted in the concluding chapter, the whole trajectory of this book is about recontextualising Catholic religious education. Bøeve’s metaphor is particularly apt for describing what is needed. An alternative title for the book could well have been The recontextualisation of Catholic school religious education.

Recontextualisation and the Lombaerts-Pollefeyt theory for classroom religious education. It is pertinent here to note the theory of classroom religious education out of which Pollefeyt works – ‘hermeneutical communicative competence’ – developed primarily by Herman Lombaerts (Lombaerts, 2000; Pollefeyt, 2008).

Lombaerts & Pollefeyt, (2004) made a valuable contribution to religious education theory in highlighting the key place of hermeneutics (or interpretation); they noted:

The art of interpreting the traces of communication is a specifically human quality. It is the alphabet of the human search for understanding the self, the interaction among people, the meaning of life and for establishing the truth. (p. 1).

The hermeneutical communicative competence approach is primarily an intimate, small group, psychological method based on young people’s reviewing their ‘hermeneutical knots’ or issues in the interpretation of meaning and purpose in life. Rossiter (2001) considered that this approach had limited application to the usual religion classrooms where groups of 25 or more students are engaging more in a study of religion than in reflective personal exchanges, even though such exchanges can at times make a valuable contribution when they occur naturally. The hermeneutic communicative approach was felt to be more suitable for small voluntary commitment groups.

Summary conclusion

This chapter drew attention to the need to differentiate the situational causes of identity anxieties from an analysis of Catholic school identity as such. After a brief signposting of the areas of literature that have a bearing on the Catholic identity of schools, the following were proposed as areas that could be given more attention to broaden and enhance the discourse on the Catholic identity of schools.

1. Avoiding the use of the construct ‘Catholic identity’ generically by identifying a range of component sub-identities that can more meaningfully be addressed, and which are more amenable to handling contemporary complexities.
2. Develop an understanding of the relationships between personal and institutional identity development – the psychology and sociology of identity. This includes understanding how individuals construct personal meaning and identity with reference to available cultural meanings.
3. Develop an understanding of the role of the Catholic school in offering an education in identity. From this perspective, the Catholic school needs to be a repository of Catholic culture to which young people have educational access as identity building resources. But this also needs to include studies of the psychology and sociology of contemporary identity development, acknowledging that just providing Catholic identity resources is not sufficient. Catholic schooling, and religious education in particular, can usefully review their role in resourcing the spirituality and identity development of young people. This approach needs to eschew thinking that problems with the identity of Catholic schools are linked with their apparent low efficacy in producing churchgoing Catholics.
4. As semi-state schools with a consequent principal function as civic education institutions, together with accountability to the Australian community, Catholic school identity needs to be framed more from this perspective of joint venture rather than from a perspective which gives the impression that they are exclusively Catholic institutions like seminaries. This proposal involves giving attention to the contribution that Catholic schools make to the common good and to the education of Australian citizens.
Final theological reflection: Identity issues in the New Testament communities and with the historical Jesus

New Testament scholars have shown that there were religious and organisational identity issues in the early Gospel communities (Brown, 1984; Crossan, 1998). For example, this was evident in the community for which the Gospel of Matthew was written. Excluded from the synagogue, these early believers in Jesus needed some sort of scriptural reinforcement and enhancement of who they thought they were as a small believing community (Meier, 1980). Only gradually did the early Christians come to see that their unique faith meant becoming more than a sect within Judaism. The question “Who is the true Israel?” was important for their religious identity; and it remains the same sort of iconic identity question asked by Christian groups ever since. It seems inevitable therefore, that questions will always be asked about what constitutes authentic Catholic identity, and this will be applied to schools as well as to other Catholic institutions. Trying to answer this question in ways that are faithful to the New Testament vision will be an ongoing task. But the focus on religious identity needs to be balanced and not excessive.

The work of New Testament and historical Jesus scholars has peeled back the literary layers in the New Testament, generating portraits of the historical Jesus, contrasted with the Christ of faith who was the primary focus of those scriptures viewed through an Easter, resurrection perspective (Borg, 2006; Crossan, 1991; Meier, 2009). In the light of this scholarship, it is possible to speculate what would the historical Jesus have thought about enhancing institutional religious identity. The answer is probably “very little”. Jesus was involved with addressing the temporal and spiritual needs of the ‘little ones’. He was acutely aware of identity-related issues such as the marginalisation of the poor by the ‘temple system’ and by the prevailing culture of ‘religious purity’ – issues which he courageously addressed. Hence one could propose that Jesus would be likely to see contemporary questions about culture and personal identity as of vital concern and in need of redress; but he would be unlikely to give much attention to institutional identity. Rather he would be expected to be more action-oriented, concerned about what can be done to enhance the personal and spiritual lives of people. In other words, he would be likely to be more focused on mission than on institutional religious identity – more on what we do rather than what we look like (c.f Sullivan, 2011).

A healthy personal identity does not require too much effort for its maintenance, allowing for personal energies to be directed outwards towards engagement with others, and not tied up in self-analysis, self-assurance and in seeking self-validation (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006). One could equally apply this value judgment to a healthy institutional identity. It appears to me that a focus on other constructs like ‘promoting the spiritual/moral development of young people’ and ‘educating young people in identity’ should be further considered and developed to complement the interest in Catholic identity. Such development could be very productive and expressive for the mission of Catholic schools.

References


Melbourne: ECSI Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project.


This part briefly brings the book to a conclusion. It touches again on some of the principal themes that are proposed as important for the progression of Catholic school religious education in the coming decades. It considers that a focus on what it means to educate young Australians spiritually, morally and religiously for the 21st century would be a healthy trajectory to take. In this way, Catholic school religious education might take a leadership role in Australian education by showing in practice what needs to be done as regards the spiritual/moral dimension to the school curriculum.
Chapter 12

Religious Education: Educating and resourcing young people’s spirituality for life in a complex challenging culture

In 1966, the bishops at the Second Vatican Council made a bold, expansive, ecumenical move in issuing their declaration on education. This appeared to be one example of what Pope John XXIII recommended in attending to the ‘signs of the times’, as noted towards the end of the previous chapter. It was a brave move. The Catholic bishops did not ‘own’ the word education — it was more a public domain word. It signified a readiness for dialogue with the world of education, and Christian education in particular. It was more of a catholic (small c) than a Catholic initiative. It was an ‘outwards’ looking trajectory rather than being focused ‘inwards’.

As explained in chapter 9, the retreat from this trajectory into more Catholic Church centred, ecclesiastical language for talking about ministry (including religious education) was considered to be a backward step. And the themes of ‘re-asserting’ Catholic identity and ‘forming’ faith were also considered to be somewhat counterproductive for these times characterised by pervasive secularisation and widespread disinterest in what the Catholic Church had to offer for a meaningful life.

The diagnosis of both contemporary Westernised culture and Catholic school religious education in this book leads to the proposition that the latter needs to return more towards the ‘outwards’ orientation in Vatican II’s declaration on Education. This could be much more relevant and educationally productive for the young people in Catholic schools, and for Catholic educators, than a narrow preoccupation with Catholic identity and mission.

Catholic religious education needs to explain more clearly to the Australian community how it contributes to the spiritual, religious and moral education of young people in a secularised, multi-faith society. Hopefully, this will exercise a leadership role in Australian education, showing what might be entailed in a spiritual/moral dimension to the school curriculum. With by far the bulk of Australian educational resources invested in religious education, Catholic schools could possibly have a pivotal place in showing how an educational ‘resourcing’ of the spirituality of young people in a complex confusing culture, whether they are religious or not, makes a valuable contribution to Australian schooling and thus to the lives of forthcoming generations of Australians.

The arguments put forward here and throughout the book, are consistent with the proposals of Australian researcher Philip Hughes whose most recent publication explores what it means to educate contemporary young people spiritually and morally – *Educating for Purposeful Living in a Post-Traditional Age* (2017).

**Introduction: Problematic expectations of Catholic schools to increase young people’s religiosity**

In the document *Catholic schools at a crossroads*, the Catholic bishops of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory (2007) expressed concern that despite the high level of resources invested in Catholic schools, they were not successful in inclining young Catholics to become regular church goers. Among their recommendations, they called for a ‘new’ evangelisation (Pope John Paul II, 1990, *Redemptoris Missio*) that would help ‘reignite’ young people’s spirituality and improve their engagement with the Church. Similar concerns were also evident in diocesan reviews of
the Catholic identity of schools. From the perspective of maintaining the continuing health of the Catholic Church, this response was understandable. But the issue runs more deeply than religiosity (measure of religious behaviour) – it involves fundamental changes in the landscape of spirituality (chapters 3-7). This thinking underestimates the complexity of the spirituality of contemporary youth – and of adults as well. In addition, it seems to presume that the educational activity of a Catholic school can, by itself, change young people’s spirituality significantly – proposing a simplistic solution to a complex problem.

What the Crossroads document sought was some formula that would reverse the substantial drift away from participation in the Church. The solution was labelled ‘new’ evangelisation. Both the problem as the document’s authors understood it, and the proposed solution, made sense within a particular framework of cultural-religious meanings. For those who shared this outlook, the problem is about how to stop the decline in religiosity and traditional spirituality. But many young people and adult Catholics have no identification with this framework – as if it no longer existed; or it has little influence on their thinking; or, because of their involvement in a Catholic school, they may acknowledge it respectfully, but it has low plausibility and little credibility. As one young teacher said “They’re on a different mental planet from the one I live on” – suggesting a clerical naivety about how the links between religion and spirituality have changed significantly over the past 60 years.

If the majority of young people in Catholic schools are not very religious, then you have a problem of a curriculum that appears to be congruent with the outlook of less than 5% of those who are the recipients of religious education. And I would argue that it is not as relevant to these church-going young people as it could be. The focus on spirituality and on the idea of educating young people spiritually and morally tries to overcome this incongruity and it tries to make religious education more relevant to the clientele.

If Catholic schools are to offer an education in spirituality that is meaningful, then there is a need to understand and acknowledge the changed spiritual situation of young people in an un-prejudiced way. For many, but not all, it is relatively secular, eclectic, subjective, individualistic and self-reliant; there is a strong interest in achieving a desirable lifestyle but little interest in connection with the church. Bishops, clergy and some Catholic education authorities appear to underestimate both the magnitude and the depth of this change.

Religious education needs to focus more on resourcing and enhancing the basic human spirituality of young people – helping them learn how to better negotiate the spiritual and moral complexities of modern life; this should be offered unconditionally – whether or not they will ever participate in church life; and this will be helpful both for those who are involved in a parish and those who are not. Giving attention to religious traditions will always remain an important part of the religious educational process. But to focus relatively exclusively on such teaching is both too narrow and counterproductive – even if institutional maintenance were a principal purpose. It is considered that helping young people learn how to identify, interpret and evaluate contemporary spiritual/moral issues needs to become a more prominent part of religious education, especially in the senior years; and this has implications for both content and pedagogy. To do this is not ‘secularising’ the process but it is trying to be faithful to the Catholic school’s religious mission to contemporary youth.

If this proposed agenda is to be advanced, it will require some level of educational consensus that transcends the particular spiritualities of the educators themselves – whether this be ‘conservative’ or ‘liberal’ etc. In other words, those whose principal concern is promoting church participation as well as those who do not accord this aim the same priority, need to see that the landscape of spirituality has changed so much that a traditional religious education, linked with a religious spirituality, is no longer adequate in Catholic schools. For this reason, this book has given special attention to charting change in spirituality. It sought to develop an interpretation that would be more cogent in persuading Catholic education authorities and religion teachers to see the need for a different pattern of emphasis in religious education.

The book proposed that a relatively secular spirituality has become the norm for many Catholics, both young and old, and therefore it needs to be understood and addressed positively, and not negatively in terms of a deficit model that employs words like secular, un-churched, non-practising, non-traditional or non-religious. Rather than persist with a single unrealistic purpose of trying to re-establish a traditional Catholic religious spirituality and identity for all, Catholic school religious education needs to take a broader approach.

The new ‘mental planet’, or the cultural meanings that affect contemporary spiritualities, needs a more systematic exploration. Such a project was a core task in this book. It should not presume that either the traditional or the new is right and the other wrong. All sets of cultural meanings have both healthy and unhealthy elements that need to be identified and evaluated; this is one of the roles of an education in spirituality and identity. What the book has highlighted as prominent changes in cultural meanings need to be taken into account in any relevant contemporary religious education.

Hopefully, it will be the educators who may find significant learnings about contemporary culture and spirituality in this volume. This would be a starting point for a flow on to school religious education. If the content makes sense to religion teachers then the book will be successful.
Reprising some of the key themes and recommendations in the book

The following summarises key themes and recommendations that were developed across the previous 11 chapters, and especially in chapter 9.

I Building up the critical dimension in the religious education curriculum: Trying to address the needs of contemporary young people to help them chart a constructive path through the maze of contemporary culture.

Firstly, this proposal does not question the important place of educating young people in their religious tradition.

But the complexities and ambiguities of culture today both promote human wellbeing as well as causing harm, leaving casualties in their wake. Religious education is well placed in the Catholic school curriculum to help young people look critically at the shaping influence of culture on people’s beliefs and values. Also it can study the importance of religions in contemporary discourse and world affairs.

It is no longer adequate or relevant to spend practically all the religious education curriculum time studying Catholicism. Adding elements of a critical approach, especially from Year 9 onwards, dealing with a selection of contemporary life issues (personal, social, political, environmental etc.) can help young people ‘interrogate’ their cultural conditioning to discern both the healthy and unhealthy influences. A student-centred, research-oriented pedagogy can empower the students to develop critical skills in studying important issues in an academic way.

Such an approach helps resource their basic human spirituality and can help them better negotiate the complexities of contemporary life and find a more meaningful and satisfying pathway – whether they are formally religious or not. This approach needs more prominence in the secondary religious education curriculum, complementing the important need for young people to study their own religious tradition in an academic way – together with some reference to other religious traditions.

II Taking into account the relatively secular spirituality of young people as a starting point for religious education.

In addition to the importance of knowing how the landscape of spirituality has changed so much, religion teachers need to understand contemporary youth spirituality as the starting point that has to be taken into account when planning religious education. The relatively secular spirituality of most students in Catholic schools needs to be acknowledged and addressed in other than a deficit way.

A good way of drawing attention to this principle is to include here a set of general characteristics of youth spirituality devised by colleague Marisa Crawford. Written in 1990, it has been updated in 2006 and 2018.

Table 12.1 Summary characteristics of youth spirituality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prominent elements in the spirituality of contemporary young people:</th>
<th>Note: This is not a list in any order of priority but a portrait of generic characteristics.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Ideals</td>
<td>As regards direction for living, young people look for guidance in clear statements of ideas and ideals about life and its management. They are very idealistic. But at the same time, many feel autonomous and self-reliant, and not very trusting of authorities. Some may oscillate between being idealistic and not caring. For some, definite, black-and-white answers are needed; others can live comfortably with fuzzy ideas about life by focusing on the here and now and on pursuing a particular lifestyle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Varied sources of spirituality</td>
<td>Young people draw from varied sources in constructing their meaning, purpose and values: family, friends, personal mentors, their own religion, other religions, secular movements, popular culture, social media. Their values can be modelled on prominent people, heroes/heroines and celebrities. Their eclectic spirituality can be affected by magazines, film, television, music and more recently social media and a range of internet activities. They tend not to see any so-called division between the secular and the religious. They may see a spiritual dimension woven through life. Some actively search for meaning and are said to have a ‘hunger’ for spirituality. But the proportion that does this may be small; a much greater number are more concerned with lifestyle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Pressures from the new media</td>
<td>Increasingly over recent years, much of the non-school time of young people is spent engaged with a ‘screen life’ on smart phone, tablet, computer or television. Many cannot walk across an intersection without ‘poring’ on their phone. Who they communicate with via texting and social media appears to be having a profound influence on how they perceive life.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
For some, their screen life is a cause of a permanent low level anxiety about their projected image and media performance. Recently, people have been calling for the banning of smartphones and tablets at school, with a particular interest in reducing bullying. But now, going home at 3:30 pm is no longer the usual means of getting away from bullying at school; many young people carry the bully’s weapon of choice in their own hands and they constantly pay attention to it. That in some instances, bullying has progressed to the point where it has caused child suicides is very disturbing. Young people need to learn that along with the fun and communications available through social media, once they join, they put themselves up for ‘public evaluation’ by others and they open an easy channel to potential manipulation and humiliation.

Many even spend an hour or more with their phone before retiring, upsetting the normal melatonin sleep rhythms, often resulting in physiological and behavioural problems, especially in the mornings. Also, the problem of bullying needs to be understood within the wider cultural context where entertainment from humiliation has become a prominent theme in sit-coms, action films and in so-called reality television – you can laugh at, and take pleasure in the discomfort of others, what the German language calls schadenfreude. Like the common feature in the Big Bang Theory, during conversations individuals can look for opportunities to fire their own ‘zingers’ to put down friends in a fun way. Further, the nasty things that people can say to others on the spur of the moment can now be put on Twitter, a blog or a review and broadcast to the whole world.

How to get young people to critically evaluate their screen life to see what benefits and problems it creates is difficult because the smartphone has become such an icon of individuality and identity that to question its place as an essential vade mecum would be experienced as a personal attack on their identity and integrity.

Another problem is in helping them learn something about the emerging social and political complexities arising from the widespread use of social media. Just how what’s ‘trending’, blogs, bots, trolls and memes etc. have been used to shape people’s thinking needs investigation. Also there is a need to look at these issues from historical perspective. Much has happened in thinking about ways of influencing the collective consciousness since Orwell’s 1984, and Noam Chomsky’s Manufacturing consent. Now people are concerned about questions such as meme wars and cyber terrorism.

4 Being part of a community of faith If they are interested in religion, it will need to appear personalised, and not too prescriptive as regards morality and beliefs. The feeling of being accepted and comfortable within a local faith community is crucial; they need to feel that their needs and interests are being attended to, and they want to have a say in religious affairs. It is not inconsistent for some youth to want to dismiss particular religious beliefs and rules, while at the same time wanting to be part of the community. Some identify with popular pentecostal churches. Many youth have little or no interest in organised religion.

5 Group membership Social and friendship groups often provide a psychological ‘home base’ for adolescents that has a major influence on their thinking and behaviour, especially for girls; the ‘group’ is often their principal ‘interface with the world’. Online ‘chatting’ and their inner circle of SMS or Social Media contacts have become prominent in group communication and identification. There is often some internal conflict between the desire to be an individual while paying the price of conformism for group acceptance. Some may see ethnicity as important while others will dismiss it as irrelevant. Group identification can underpin aggression and violence. Rather than join specifically religious groups, they may prefer to participate in movements with social and environmental concerns such as Amnesty International or protest groups, especially those concerned with improvement of the quality of life. Yet there are a significant number of young people who do want to be part of a religious group. At universities, many but not all of those in religious groups tend to be active in evangelising activities.

6 The prolongation of adolescence While perhaps more individualistic, more aware of lifestyle options and with higher life expectations than their forebears, young people face an increasing period of dependence on family before becoming financially independent and fending for themselves. This situation generates various social and psychological frustrations that impact on personal relationships and group membership. It affects all of the following in complex ways:- a pragmatic and existential approach to life; the urge to travel, often in backpacker format; sexual relationships, especially casual ones; partying, and the use of alcohol and recreational drugs; playing video games; career choice; sense of responsibility; capacity for commitment and long-term relationships; ambivalence
about traditional goals such as settling down, marriage and raising a family. They see life like a ‘degustation menu’ – they can pick and choose from a variety of lifestyle options at will, trying them out. They have many more options than did the precocious ‘baby boomers’ and they are more ready to explore them. Tasting from an extensive range of sporting opportunities is also available for Australia’s sport-hungry teenagers.

Some youth can appear to ‘amble’ along this path feeling reasonably self-centred and comfortable until something dramatic leads to a change in their circumstances or confronts their opportunistic approach to life – an experience that accelerates their development as adults as the world intrudes on their thinking.

The prolongation of adolescence tracks back to those of school age and affects their expectations. Some can adopt the extended adolescent lifestyle well before they leave school, regarding school attendance as an extension of their leisure time with some incidental learning.

7 Cultural plurality Young people value the global aspects of popular culture with which they identify, especially clothing styles and music. But at the same time they are ambivalent about the extensive cultural plurality they experience in Western countries. They are puzzled about how to understand the extraordinary range of belief systems and behaviours in the culture and they may take refuge in closed social groups. Unrest in the world’s trouble spots and the large numbers of refugees have become a concern. Many are puzzled about potential solutions and may wonder if there is no solution. They may worry about potential problems with multiculturalism in their own country and place of domicile.

8 Social and political concerns Compared with the politicised views of youth in the 1960s and 1970s, today’s young people are generally wary of, and disillusioned with, political institutions and large corporations; authority is questioned and not respected. Yet they do little to challenge the status quo, realising that they do not have much political leverage in any case. Rebellion and dissent are expressed through violent and anarchic lyrics in rap and hip-hop. There is a level of acceptance of job insecurity; there is a pervading sense that they will have to be adaptable in employment. Some will be prepared to barter a ‘good’ job for lifestyle options. Still, there is concern about unemployment and exploitative business practices such as problems with economic rationalism and the globalisation of commerce – irresponsible economic activity on the part of the corporate world; ‘fair’ trade rather than ‘free’ trade that masks the production of goods by child labour or sweatshops; casualisation of employment and the deregulation of the Australian workplace. Some young people will not worry too much about these potential threats as long as they do not appear to affect their lifestyle. For others, the gap between hopes for career and a successful life and the reality of possible unemployment is an ongoing source of worry. The threat of unemployment can be distressing when there is a fear that no matter what their educational attainments, they may end up not being able to get a position in their desired area of work. The popular culture tells them that “you can be anything you want”. But reality may fly in the face of this myth, and the conflict between hopes and reality can be painful.

9 Environmental concerns In addition to the increased public acknowledgment of environmental issues, more awareness of these issues is fostered in school subjects such as Science, Geography, Economics, Society and Culture, and Religion – as well as in media awareness programs like Cleanup Australia. The young have an excellent environmental education but this does not always readily translate into actual support by young people; for example, Cleanup Australia usually attracts only a small percentage of youth. But there is in spirit strong support for initiatives that are pro-environment. Some, but not too many, see the inconsistency between pursuing a consumerist lifestyle and being concerned about environmental and consumerist issues. Others are agitating in favour of ecological sustainability and in opposition to environmental degradation.

10 Anxiety about a violent society While earlier generations were anxious about a possible nuclear holocaust, since 9/11, the periodic terrorist attacks in so many countries and the overt efforts of law enforcement to maintain security and public protection have created a backdrop of fear and anxiety, even if this is at a low level. Now there are almost daily reminders of global terrorism. As a result, in perceptibly higher numbers, there is a hardening in prejudice against minorities and those who do not appear to embrace lifestyle and belief systems similar to what they think is the Westernised norm; in turn, this generates contrary antagonism on the part of minority groups. A positive valuing of multiculturalism and a multi-faith community has been diminished as the hopes for a peaceful and tolerant society recede. Other concerns contributing to anxiety are levels of crime, more people in
The above list of characteristics includes a range of social issues that might well be selected for student research as proposed in chapter 10. One of the concerns of youth is their feeling of being powerless in relation to many of the issues. Studying them will not make the problems go away; and it will not necessarily decrease their sense of defencelessness. But some understanding of them, especially with awareness of the complex influences in play, can be helpful in formulating their own personal moral stance. And this can in turn be helpful for their coping, and possibly for seeing what voice and agency they might aspire to.

### III Taking into account students’ disposition towards Religious Education

That the large majority of pupils in Australian Catholic schools are not very religious was borne out in the data considered in chapter 1. In the light of this data, there is an apparent discontinuity between the assumptions within Catholic school religious education (as if all students are or should be regular mass attenders) and the classroom reality. Catholic religious education documentation showed little or no acknowledgement that most Catholic students are not (or will not be) churchgoing. If many of the pupils are not going to reference their personal spirituality to regular church attendance, then this makes it more relevant to attend to the proposal above that increased attention to a critical approach is needed to help resource their spirituality. Whether students have a religious or a secular spirituality, the crucial thing for Catholic schools is whether they are well educated spiritually and religiously.

In tune with the general indifference to religion in secularised Western countries, most of the pupils in Catholic schools do not care much for religious education. They do not see it as a subject that ‘counts’, and while not antagonistic, they do not engage in religious education in the same way they do in subjects like English, Maths and Science. There are no formulae that can change such perceptions significantly; but anything that increases the academic status, as well as perceived relevance, will help.

The inward-looking focus of asserting Catholic identity in religious education exacerbates the problem; it is like ‘Religious Education through a selfie’, where the constant reference to Catholic identity skews the perceptions. The emphasis should be more outward-looking – simply on developing the educational dimension. Having a rationale for religious education in words that explain how it helps educate young people is more likely to win the approval and moral support of students and parents, as well as teachers, than does a rationale that appears to be just about replicating Catholicism.

The more educational the language of religious education, the better it can be perceived as a curriculum area that is relevant to life. This approach is also important for gaining the support of the school staff – both those who teach religion and those who do not.

Some may not want to acknowledge the reality here, but the more the word Catholic is used with reference to religious education, the more the activity is perceived as irrelevant. This is a principal reason why I think that the current emphasis on Catholic identity in relation to religious education is counterproductive – it is not the label that religious education really needs. For example: There appears to be further decline in the academic status of Catholic school religious education as evident in the perceptions of Catholic Studies in some NSW senior secondary schools. It is a Board-endorsed study but does not ‘count’ for tertiary entrance scores (e.g ATAR, Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank) like regular subjects including Studies of Religion. Catholic Studies is often chosen by students (when religion is compulsory but there are options) who prefer the course that makes the lowest demands on time and effort with the least interference in their secular studies. So it attracts both the academically very capable as well as the least capable students. In some instances, it has been taught with the public understanding that there are no assignments, assessment tasks or homework with a short open book examination at the end of the year, while the teachers may feel that they can do anything to keep the students reasonably occupied whether the syllabus is covered or not. There are plans to replace it with a course called Studies in Catholic Thought, which is based on a ‘liberal arts’ approach to the study of Catholicism. It appears to be more academic in content than Catholic Studies. In the draft syllabus, the word Catholic appears 512 times while religion appears 7 times (including 3 references to the board developed course Studies of Religion). I find it difficult to see that this emphasis on Catholicism will be helpful or will make any difference as far as the students are concerned. It will be interesting to see whether this development results in making the option for the fully accredited Studies of Religion more attractive for both Catholic schools in NSW as well as for students.

### IV Simplifying the language of religious education and exercising leadership in Australian education

It is proposed that the best trajectory for Catholic school religious education in the future is to articulate its purposes more in basic educational and psychological language. Confusing ecclesiastical terms like faith formation, faith development, Catholic identity, and new Evangelisation need to be avoided and only used where their meaning is clearly defined and when dealing with ecclesiastical expectations of religious education. In practice, they tend to carry
ill-defined and unrealistic assumptions about religious starting points, goals and processes and this adds unwanted ambiguity and complications to the discussion of religious education. It would be more fruitful to redirect the discourse towards how best to educate young people theologically, in scripture, in personal identity development, and in critical interpretation and evaluation of the shaping influence of culture. In the long run I think this change of focus would also be more successful in disposing students towards the ecclesiastical hopes for Catholic schooling.

This change in focus and language is not only more meaningful and relevant for Catholics, it makes the religious education discourse more accessible to the Australian educational community: it also readily articulates with educational and psychological research. Otherwise, the discourse remains narrowly and idiosyncratically Catholic. If Catholic educators cannot explicate religious education in terms of how it makes a valuable contribution to young people’s education, then they will have nothing meaningful to say to the Australian community about the distinctiveness of Catholic schooling. A focus on constructs like ‘Catholic identity’ and ‘faith formation’ tends to close off the possibility of any wider community dialogue about Catholic religious education. In NSW recently, a significant review of the whole school curriculum has been signalled. At such times, the educational significance of religious education needs to be publicly re-stated and clearly articulated in terms that are relevant to government reviews of education. The subject area religious education has traditionally been the most distinctively religious and Catholic element in Catholic schooling: this principle is in jeopardy if it religious education is projected and talked about as if it were an exclusively ecclesiastical activity, rather than as an important core element in the school curriculum.

In proposing the need to change the key word usage in the discourse of Catholic school religious education, I am not presuming that this is an easy task. This was particularly evident in what appeared at first sight to be a rather simple assessment task that was set for postgraduate religious education students. They were required to write two pages in a letter to parents explaining the nature and purposes of classroom religious education in a Catholic school. But they were not allowed to use any jargon or ecclesiastical words like catechesis, faith development, faith formation, Catholic identity, mission, witness etc. I consider that this task turned out to be the most challenging, at times irritating, but highly valued, much appreciated and rewarding piece of assessment that I have used in classes over a 25 year period teaching at this level. The student feedback and ongoing discussions with educators that it catalysed proved to be very fruitful. Many teachers found that they had become so accustomed to using the standard ecclesiastical terms when talking about religious education that it seemed to prevent them from thinking through carefully and articulating their own understanding of the activity. It stopped them from thinking about what they were doing. While many endorsed the class discussions of the problem of ecclesiastical language in religious education, it was only when they had to explicate the activity in other than those ecclesiastical terms that they really appreciated what the problem was. One of the common issues the task identified was the immediate objectives of classroom religious education being framed in terms so different from those used in all other curriculum areas. For example: Instead of purposes like increasing “knowledge of Catholic theology and teachings” or “capacity to interpret Scripture” some teachers’ objectives proposed “a deep personal relationship with Jesus”, “becoming more prayerful” and “becoming more committed to the Catholic church”. These latter purposes were really ‘long term hopes’ and not ‘assessable teaching objectives’. Such a preoccupation with ‘over the horizon’ hopes rather than on direct purposes and objectives tended to create unrealistic expectations of religious education to change the personal faith and religiosity of students. Such changes can only occur on a much larger stage of life than the classroom, and are influenced by many other factors, not the least being the individual’s own personal freedom and disposition.

In 1978, when researching a review of religious education in schools for the Federal Department of Education (Curriculum Development Centre, Rossiter, 1981), I was interviewed by the Australian Catholic Bishops’ lawyers as a potential ‘witness’ to appear for the church in a High Court case. The constitutionality of state funding of Catholic schools was being challenged by the Council for the Defence Of Government Schools (commonly known as DOGS). I explained how school religious education was a distinctive educational feature of Catholic schooling that could be interpreted as making a valuable contribution to the education of young Australians. It was not an exclusively ‘ecclesiastical’ activity but an educational one and therefore it did not contravene section 116 of the constitution about what might constitute the ‘establishment of a religion’. What I said then is basically the same as the argument proposed above. As it turned out, my testimony was not required. Finally, DOGS lost the case in 1981 even though the argument they proposed had been legally successful in the United States where ‘separating church and state’ still remains the reason for excluding any form of religious education from public schooling: the real issue was not church vs state but the place of religion in education.

Looking back at that time, I think that what many Catholic schools were then saying publicly about religious education was more relevant and meaningful than what some are saying today. This volume speaks out in defence of the term religious education which I think needs restoration and revitalisation. I consider that a lot of the ecclesiastical constructs that have been used as ‘substitutes’ in recent times have not really been helpful and it is time to focus more on religious education.

Catholic schools today would do well to further develop and publicise an educational rationale for religious education because it supports the justification of public funding for private religious schools. Similarly, as noted in chapters 1, 9 and 11, I think that excessive attention to ecclesiastical constructs for explaining religious education (as well as damaging the activity itself) jeopardises the legitimacy of arguments supporting the public funding of Catholic schools,
which are in effect, semi-state schools. Allied to this, is the need for accountability to the civic community; Catholic schools should be able to show how they are contributing to the common good.

Educating young people spiritually and religiously from within a base of their own religious tradition makes a valuable contribution to the education of young Australians. This exercises a leadership role in Australian education showing that a well-rounded schooling needs a subject area that deals directly with the spiritual and moral dimensions to life. As the school system that maintains the largest commitment to religious education in terms of teachers, curriculum and teacher professional development, Catholic schools can demonstrate how a commitment to this dimension of education might take shape. In this way the distinctive contribution of Catholic schooling to Australian education can be explained and justified more meaningfully.

The final words: Educationally resourcing young people’s spirituality and recontextualising Catholic school religious education

If only a few words were to be used here for summarising the trajectory of this book, the following would be chosen.

Educationally resourcing the spirituality and identity of young people to help them negotiate a more meaningful and fulfilling life in a complex and challenging culture. (Hence the title “Life to the full”).

Recontextualising Catholic school religious education to make it more relevant

**Resourcing young people’s spirituality**: Classroom education does not automatically bring about personal change in pupils there and then. But over the years, a good education builds up their knowledge and understanding, and it enhances their critical skills. And this applies especially to religious education which is one learning area in the curriculum that should deal with content specifically about life and its meaning. Hence a good religious education, in any sort of school, can resource young people’s capacity for both self-understanding and a wiser interpretation of what is happening in the unfolding life that they experience. And this presumes the importance of a systematic education in their own religious tradition.

Very conscious of the way that individuality and freedom permeate young people’s life expectations, Brian Hill would add to the above the complementary description of education as “resourcing the choosing self”. Nothing is going to stop young people today from choosing and constructing their own DIY values, identity and spirituality – even if this is not done consciously and reflectively. But education generally, and religious education in particular, may be able to resource their knowledge and wisdom so that they will be more capable of wiser decisions.

No one could dissuade young people from feeling that the mantra “Life to the full” is a taken-for-granted, high priority hope for all. Religious education needs to aim at resourcing their quest to live that dream with more relevant information and decision-making skills.

It is proposed that this description of religious education is eminently suitable for Catholic schools today. It is affirming of the excellent work in religious education currently going on. This description goes directly to the fundamental core of what it means to educate young people spiritually and religiously. And it does this in a way that is not possible in ecclesiastical language that relies exclusively on talk about Catholic identity, faith formation and new evangelisation. It offers a more focused interpretation of both contemporary spirituality and educational possibilities that can enhance the meaningfulness and relevance of religion teaching in Catholic schools. This proposed re-orientation implies a change of emphasis from the ecclesiastical to the educational. It does not exclude or minimise ecclesiastical concerns, but is made in the best interests of the Catholic Church and its mission. As explained in chapter 9, what is needed is a return towards a constructive, creative tension between ecclesiastical and educational interests in religious education; and this stems from the long tradition of the fidelity of Australian Catholic school religious educators.

Young people today are generally not much interested in formal religion. But they are interested in learning about life. If their religious education has something to say about life, in the way of engaging them in an informative study, they will be more inclined to value its purposes and practice. If not, then the low status of religious education and student disinterest will be likely to persist.

This book is not a naïve apologia for what is called ‘progress’, brushing the study of traditions aside. Indeed, it is about calling much of what is labelled ‘progress’ into question, and showing how such scrutiny might fruitfully be a principal task of contemporary religious education. But before this can happen, it needs to be a valued part in the personal education of the teachers first. On this point, the book seeks to be congruent with, and draw teachers’ attention to, the sorts of concerns voiced by some social researchers like Richard Eckersley. It is helpful here to note some of these in the introduction to Eckersley’s website.

A central tenet of modern culture is the belief in progress, the idea that life should get better. Is this the case? If our answer is ‘yes’, we can continue to assume that human history is on the right trajectory, and needs nothing more than periodic course corrections - the task of governments. If the answer is ‘no’, then the most fundamental
assumptions about our way of life – assumptions that have long been broadly agreed and taken for granted – must be re-assessed. The task we face goes far beyond the adjustment of policy levers by government; it demands an open and spirited debate about how we are to live and what matters in our lives.

A good religious education needs to inform and promote such a ‘spirited debate’ about what people think ‘life to the full’ really means and about what matters most in their lives. If Catholic school religious education does not include a strong component in the critical study of contemporary life, then it will appear to most young people as having nothing worthwhile to say.

Recontextualising Catholic religious education: In chapter 11, Lieven Boeve’s theology of interruption and recontextualisation was explained briefly showing how it is new approach to what Pope John XXIII had called ‘responding to the signs of the times’. It stressed the need for systematic interpretation of contemporary culture and its influences, and it challenged the religious tradition to look outwards and engage with that culture in critical dialogue, leading to a reformulated or recontextualised theology.

This same metaphor can be applied to Catholic school religious education. From page 1 of this book, it was the recontextualisation of religious education that was ‘in play’. And a recontextualising agenda was carried through to this last page. This same theme may also be particularly relevant to the personal spirituality of many who teach religious education in Catholic schools. They are seeking to be both faithful to their religious tradition while actively searching for what means to be spiritual and religious in the changed landscape of contemporary spirituality. Hopefully, the content of this book will be a helpful resource not only professionally, but also for their own spiritual journey.

There are in effect many ‘voices’ in the culture telling young people what they should aspire to do to have life to the full. A recontextualised Catholic school religious education could help them learn how to interpret and evaluate this conversation in a wiser fashion. A good religious education cannot automatically make them wiser, but it can inspire them to try to be more wise. On this point, the 2018 NCEC document Framing Paper: Religious Education in Australian Catholic Schools proposed that:

Religious education needs to interpret the signs of the times and to “reread the memory of faith”, recontextualising so that students can engage in an open narrative and dialogue between the Catholic tradition and their personal experiences and contemporary cultural contexts.

It is understandable that religious educators have high hopes that what young people learn through the school religion curriculum will be important for whole lives. Nevertheless, it is likely that many will not remember much of the content they have studied. However, if they have learned ‘how to learn about life’ and if they remember the orientation of their school religious education – that the impact of culture needs to be scrutinised and evaluated – then this may well make a valuable contribution to their wisdom when pursuing life to the full. And I believe that this is the best that can be done in school religious education to dispose them more favourably towards active engagement with the Catholic Church and its two thousand year faith tradition.

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* * * * * * *
This book is about 21st century religious education. It identifies and addresses positively many of the issues in contemporary Catholic school religious education, and it sets a new agenda. While focused on the Australian context, it is relevant to Catholic schooling internationally, and much of its content is also pertinent to religious studies in public education.

While scholarly, and pertinent to the tertiary study of religious education, it will make eminent sense to teachers, especially at secondary level, resonating with their experience and reflecting some of the best thinking and praxis in the field. This is ‘reality-based’ religious education at its best. It should be essential reading for all in Catholic Education leadership.

**What the book is about:** *Life to the full* argues that in addition to educating young people well in their own religious tradition, religious education needs to resource their personal spirituality by helping them to learn how to interpret and appraise the shaping influences of culture. A critical, inquiring, reflective, research-oriented pedagogy has much to offer for young people’s study of contemporary spiritual/moral issues, as well as formal religious content.

It proposes how a Catholic school religious education can be meaningful and relevant to all its pupils, whether they are religious or not. It identifies problems in Catholic religious education that arise from excessive use of ecclesiastical language for articulating its purposes. It proposes a more direct approach to explaining what it means to educate today’s young people spiritually, morally and religiously.

**The author:** Graham Rossiter has had a long career in Catholic religious education both as a teacher and university scholar – having worked in Australian Catholic University for many years and more recently at BBI – The Australian Institute of Theological Education.

Rossiter is aware of the marginalisation of school subjects concerned more with the personal development of students. He argues that religious education should be an academic study, on a par with other curriculum subjects, tailored to different age ranges in primary and secondary education. Its focus should be on *educating* – rather than communicating or changing – personal faith. It should aim to produce informed, critical thinkers about religion as well as being a resource for spiritual development, giving students agency in relation to their own personal development. This challenges those who categorise faith-based religious education and inclusive religious education as incommensurable ‘paradigms’, providing a basis for dialogue and collaboration with those engaged in different contexts and settings. It also makes an important contribution to the literature on spiritual development in educational contexts.

**Robert Jackson,** Emeritus Professor of Religions and Education, University of Warwick, Warwick, UK.

Rossiter draws on a lifetime of teaching experience, familiarity with relevant research, and careful analysis of the empirical evidence of what works with students. He offers historical perspective, conceptual clarity, a sound theology and practical proposals for RE in Catholic schools. Penetratingly insightful in its cultural analysis, and displaying great wisdom about how to engage students in realistic ways, here is a valuable and challenging diagnosis of where we are in RE and how best we might respond. His scrutiny of the field and guidance for how to operate within it have significance and relevance for religious educators across the world.

**John Sullivan,** Emeritus Professor of Christian Education, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK.