# Contents

**EDITORIAL**
Marian de Souza
The place for religious education in the Australian curriculum

**Peter Mudge**
‘God heals holes in souls’ – Four key themes linked to suffering and vulnerability in the writings of Richard Rohr

**Alice Priest**
Richard Rohr’s ‘Everything belongs’ and enhancing catholic school identity: Holding on and letting go

**Cathy Ota & Mary Pat Vollick**
Inspiring values, skills, confidence and communities – a case study of a social, relational approach to religious education and spirituality in the early years

**Brendan Hyde**
Steering a path along a treacherous course: Children’s voices, colonization and religious education

**A Reflection**
John Sullivan
Succession planning for school and church

**Cultural Interpretation**
Graham Rossiter
“Religious education needs to fight secularism”???

**Peter Mudge**
Richard Rohr Spirituality Resources - Practical suggestions suitable for the beginning through to the more experienced teacher

**BOOK REVIEWS**
Graham Rossiter

Marian de Souza

Richard Rymarz

Robert Crotty
As religious educators we need to recognize that we are at a seminal moment in the history of Australian education where we have the opportunity to contribute to the debate about whether a study of religious beliefs and practices should become part of the core curriculum. Over the past several decades, Australians have realized that their society is now composed of people from many different cultural, religious and spiritual backgrounds but, to date, politicians and policy writers have avoided serious discussions about the implications of such religious and spiritual diversity in relation to the development of learning programs for all Australian children.

In a recent Australian Human Rights document, 2011 *Freedom of religion and belief in 21st century Australia*, there was recognition that Australia has always been a spiritual place and this is reflected in the changing profile from Australian Indigenous people through to contemporary times. However, the authors particularly noted that:

The 20th century has seen the growth and arrival of new traditions in Australia, including Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu, Humanist, Islamic, Sikh and Taoist traditions, as Australia is drawn into Asia – culturally, economically and religiously. The rapid increase in the numbers of settlers migrating to Australia during the 18th and 19th centuries and early 20th century led to mainly inter-Christian rivalry, especially between British Protestants and Irish Catholics. However, since the Second World War, and particularly since the dismantling of the White Australia policy, successive migrant intakes have considerably diversified the Australian population.

The increasing diversity of Australia’s population is revealed in the Census: since the 2001 Census, Chinese has replaced Italian as Australia’s second language after English; Buddhism is now Australia’s second religion after Christianity; Islam continues to grow, its adherents drawn from many countries. The rapidly increasing Indian population is resulting in similar growth of the Hindu and Sikh communities. So, Australia is partly a Christian country, partly a multifaith country, and partly a secularist country. This can make speaking or generalising about religion in Australia complicated. As this report shows, many religious and spiritualist voices mingle with secularist and humanist voices, with little unanimity on issues (Bouma, Cahill, Dellal & Zwartz, 2011, p. 4).

Further, Bouma has written of the strong sense of spirituality that may be found in some secular or civic contexts (Bouma, 2009). This is an important factor that needs consideration when planning and developing religious education programs. Children need to learn about the different belief systems that they may encounter in their everyday. The multi faith/belief nature of Australian society is also recognized in the submission from the Australian Partnership of Religious Organizations (APRO) to Members of the Australian Parliament and Government: *Faith matter. An interfaith agenda for a religiously plural Australia* (2011).

More importantly both these documents recognize the global dimension of religion and belief and the corresponding implications for Australia. They point to the fact that for many Australians today, religious and spiritual beliefs and practices have a significant role so that if young Australians are to become active and valuable citizens of future societies, ones who are able to participate in and contribute to the economic, social and spiritual capital and wellbeing of their communities, both
at the national and global levels, they must also be knowledgeable and have understanding of the different religious and spiritual cultures that compose contemporary Australian society and the associated regional and global dimensions.

It is these issues and concerns that need to be addressed in any contemporary study that aims to educate students about the different religious and spiritual belief systems that are evident in society today and they are, indeed, issues and concerns that religious educators have been grappling with for many years, thereby prompting further study and research to inform the revision of the curriculum on offer. The articles in this issue provide further evidence of how academics and practitioners are attempting to respond to the changing nature of the religious and secular contexts that influence and shape the perceptions, thinking and behavior of their students. The first two articles by Peter Mudge and Alice Priest respectively examine various writings of the Franciscan author Richard Rohr (b.1943) who is well known for his teaching about Christian spirituality in the contemporary world. Mudge argues that Rohr presents a unique voice on spirituality as compared to the writings of many other contemporary authors and theologians. Priest focuses on Rohr’s theory of ‘the lens of grace’ to show that “everything belongs”. This has implications for Catholic schools which have been focused on establishing a Catholic identity. Priest argues that from Rohr’s perspective, Catholic Schools need to “let go” in order to “abide inside of a different identity” since the changing socio-cultural context is as much imbued with the divine now as it has ever been and ever will be.

The next article by Cathy Ota and Mary Pat Vollick describe a project that investigated religious and spiritual education in an early childhood setting in Canada. They offer some practical conclusions for understanding, engaging with and extending religious education and spirituality across early year’s settings in a way that is meaningful, inclusive and enriching for young children. Brendan Hyde also discusses religious education in the early childhood setting but his focus is on viewing religious education through a decolonizing lens. He argues that religious education has often privileged constructed categories of truth (in the form of doctrine), and this effectively silences the spiritual voices of children. Hyde suggests that the use of a dispositional framework and the grounding of religious education in the creative process centred on play is one way forward towards counteracting the colonization of children’s voices. Finally, we have a reflection from John Sullivan on why succession planning is needed for the healthy flourishing of Catholic parishes and schools and outlines twelve elements which may create the conditions in which succession planning has a chance to take root. Additional contributions are from Graham Rossiter on Cultural interpretations and from Peter Mudge who has complemented his article by providing a range of useful resources for practitioner’s section.

The ideas and insights that are offered in this issue are important ones for religious educators in Catholic schools. However, they also reveal the various issues and challenges that are being generated by the nature of society today where different belief systems are seeking to find credibility and an authentic place in the wider society. These are all factors that point to the need for all religious educators to engage with, respond to and contribute to the ongoing debate about whether all Australian children should learn about the different religious and spiritual beliefs and practices that are part of the fabric of contemporary Australian society.

References

Marian de Souza
Editor
‘GOD HEALS HOLES IN SOULS’ – FOUR KEY THEMES LINKED TO SUFFERING AND VULNERABILITY IN THE WRITINGS OF RICHARD ROHR

Abstract

Franciscan lecturer and author Richard Rohr (b.1943) is considered by many to be one of the most challenging and popular Catholic voices commenting on Christian spirituality in today’s world. This article seeks to explore a specific section of his writings on suffering and vulnerability under four key themes – God heals holes in souls; the human soul needs images of God; Jesus as the first non-dual thinker in the West; and Jesus shows us ‘the Way’: paradox, suffering and the Cross. The article also argues that Rohr’s voice and language on spirituality and religion are unique compared to the writings of many other contemporary authors and theologians.

The article draws on a range of Rohr’s writings on the above topics and links them with insights and writings from other authors such as Francis Thompson, Dolores Leckey, Catherine of Genoa, Thomas Aquinas, and Jean-Pierre de Caussade. The article concludes that Rohr provides a rich vocabulary and array of penetrating insights on suffering and vulnerability and at the same time invites his readers to enter into deep reflection on topics such as Jesus as the Divine Physician, the brokenness of human existence, non-dual thinking, and the role of kenosis (self-emptying), paradox and the Cross, all within the context of Christian discipleship.

Introduction

This article explores a range of four theological themes on suffering and vulnerability present in the writings of Franciscan Richard Rohr. It is designed to provide a brief introduction or ‘sampler’ of themes, derived from a range of Rohr’s writings and concerns, for those readers who know little or nothing about his corpus. Hence each theme is discussed in brief to provide readers with an entrée into each topic. This article also argues that Rohr possesses a unique and compelling ‘voice’ in his theological writings – he is able to articulate themes and communicate these effectively to a wide-ranging, international audience, many of whom are Christian, many belonging to other religious traditions, and many belonging to none. It complements an earlier article which traced several Christological themes in Rohr’s writings (Mudge, in press, 2011, pp. 1-12).

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr (b.1943) is founder and animator of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Author of numerous books, he gives retreats and lectures internationally (1996a, back cover). ‘He considers the proclamation of the Gospel to be his primary call, and uses many different platforms to communicate the message. Themes he addresses in service of the Gospel include Scripture as liberation, the integration of action and contemplation, community building, peace and justice issues, male spirituality, the Enneagram, and eco-spirituality’ (Center for Action and Contemplation, 2010, website; refer to the same website for more biographical information about Richard Rohr). Readers interested in pursuing a range of Rohr’s writings and recordings are directed to a separate list of ‘Rohr Resources’ designed to cater for the needs of both beginning and experienced teachers (Mudge, in press, 2011, pp. 1-4).

While this article focuses specifically on Rohr’s writings, it acknowledges at the outset, as Rohr himself does in his own publications, that he is an interpreter, synthesiser and conduit for many other authors and...
academics writing on the themes he elucidates in his presentations. He claims only the privilege of translating these authors for the benefit of a wider audience who would not have the time or expertise to read their original writings. For example, without necessarily endorsing all their conclusions or theories, in his seminal collections *On the Threshold of Transformation* (2010) and *Radical Grace* (1995), Rohr acknowledges contributions such as those of Joseph Martos in the discipline of sacramental theology, Edward Tick on ‘war and the soul’, poets such as T.S. Eliot, William Wordsworth and Mary Oliver on links between theology and the arts, Albert Einstein on physics and cosmology, Carl Jung on psychology, Thomas Merton on spirituality and the East-West dialogue, Joseph Pieper on festivity, and Hienrich Zimmer on mythology. Other scholars from various disciplines are also mentioned throughout this article.

**Rohr’s unique but complementary voice and language**

This article asserts that Rohr possesses a uniquely compelling and challenging theological tone and voice. So although Rohr, in his writings on suffering and vulnerability, draws on many of the insights and some of the technical language of other writers, his concerns, language and focus are quite different from many other contemporary theological and Christological commentators. In other words, whereas Rohr focuses on a range of topics such as: grace and abandonment to God, the false self and ego, the path of descent, contemplative prayer, the cruciform nature of life, and Jesus’ new manifesto for today’s world (the Beatitudes), other commentators treat these same topics in a quite different yet complementary way. In what follows I will focus on excerpts revealing the concerns, theological language and topics of four contemporary writers and theologians: Peter Stanford, Bernard Sesboüé (commenting on Jon Sobrino), Gerald A. Arbuckle, and Richard Lennan.

The *Catholic Herald* (UK) editor Peter Stanford approaches topics similar to those treated by Rohr, yet focused on a more doctrinal exposition, in his book *Catholicism: An Introduction* in relation to Church structures and doctrinal beliefs. One of his sections reads as follows: ‘The Catholic Church shares with other Christian churches the aspiration to model itself on Jesus. ‘He is “the perfect man”, who invites us to become his disciples and follow him’. Stanford continues: ‘Catholicism, moreover, teaches that it is Jesus, not the Pope, who is actually head of the Church and that he continues to dwell on earth in the form of the Catholic Church, until his return in the Second Coming’ (2010, p. 17).

In his commentary on Jon Sobrino’s Christology expressed in his book *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, Bernard Sesboüé makes a number of interesting observations about Sobrino’s theological stances and his particular language. These focus on the image of Christ crucified and Jesus’ preference for the weak, imprisoned, poor and marginalised. ‘Sobrino’, comments Sesboüé, ‘reads Christological faith anew in order to make it relevant to our day. What can the person and mystery of Christ the Redeemer say today to the weak and the small, to all those who have been “crucified” by the injustices of our world…’ (2010, p. 165). Clearly here and, in Sesboüé’s estimation, throughout his Christological writings, Sobrino draws his portrait of Christ in relation to people’s victimhood, God’s partiality to such victims, care for the poor, and possible conversion of the rich and powerful who are in large part responsible for such injustice (2010, passim).

Sobrino’s viewpoint is contrasted with yet complemented by that of anthropologist and theologian Gerald A. Arbuckle, who focuses more on lessons that can be drawn from the social dramas and inculturation issues surrounding Jesus Christ. Arbuckle’s lens on both Jesus Christ and related theological issues differs markedly from Rohr and Sesboüé, witnessed for example by Arbuckle’s claim: ‘As Jesus inaugurates the reign of God through proclaiming the Good News of God’s love for all, healing the sick, welcoming outcasts…, he is in fact at the same time dialectically interacting with cultures and providing us with examples of inculturation’ (2010, p. 152). Whilst Arbuckle focuses on some of Rohr’s favourite themes – the reign of God and Jesus’ ministry to the marginalised – yet he does so within the context of the social and cultural dramas of Jesus’ times.

Another contemporary theologian, Richard Lennan, draws closer perhaps than the above three
commentators to the above named themes and language of Richard Rohr. In a statement that typifies the type of ‘theological raw material’ from which Rohr habitually draws his conclusions, Lennan writes: ‘The foundation [of theology] is not a set of objective statements but rather the subjective reality of the persons who reflect upon their religious experience, and especially on the basic process we call conversion’ (1998, p. 33). Again, while Rohr focuses on metanoia and conversion from biblical and ecclesial perspectives, Lennan casts his theological spotlight in this passage on the subjective reality and religious experience of those undergoing conversion.

Rohr customarily draws upon the work of theologians and anthropologists such as those referred to above – and yet his theological language and concerns are decidedly different. This is reinforced further by even a cursory glance at the four topics on suffering and vulnerability treated in the remainder of this article, as well as by the language and emphases which Rohr uses to illuminate these topics.

1. God heals holes in souls
2. The human soul needs images of God
3. Jesus as the first non-dual thinker in the West (originating from the East)
4. Jesus shows us ‘the Way’ – paradox, suffering and the Cross

An effective and challenging image to commence this article with on the theme of suffering and vulnerability is that of ‘God heals holes in souls’. At a very foundational level, this expression connotes a God who repairs a wound, burn or scar formation in order to restore a person to peace, harmony and wellbeing (Hanks, 1986, p. 706). It also connotes a God who is interested in and ‘meddles with’ the ‘holes’ in our existence – an area throughout our life that has been hidden, hollowed out, a hiding place or burrow in which we habitually hibernate, which in some cases can become our own self-made dungeon or cell (Hanks, 1986, p. 730). Finally, it reverberates with the similar expression ‘hole in the heart’, being ‘a defect of the heart in which there is an abnormal opening in any of the walls dividing the four heart chambers’ (Hanks, 1986, p. 730).

In normal circumstances, from a human perspective, any type of hole, wound or scar is considered a deformity, a shameful feature, something to be covered and ‘fixed up’. However, this is not the case within the divine economy. Like Francis Thompson’s ‘the Hound of Heaven’, God vigorously searches out holes, gaps, weaknesses or wounds so that God may bring healing and fullness of life to each one of them – in God’s own time (cf. Deut 4:29; Prov 20:27; Jer 17:10; Eccles 42:18; Ps 139:1-24; Thompson and Langdale, 2010). It is not due to the avoidance or hiding of our ‘holes in souls’, failings and weaknesses that God comes to us or pronounces us virtuous or worthy, but despite and through these lacunae that God heals us and transforms us into ‘wounded saints’ (Rohr, 2003a, pp. 100-101). During his ministry Jesus was adamant that it is only the sick not the healthy who can profit from the healing touch of a doctor:

When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mk 2:16-17).

Indeed, it is only in this way that God through Jesus is able to heal ‘the soul’, the immaterial part of the human person, the seat of all faculties, and from a Christian perspective ‘the spiritual part of a person, capable of redemption from the power of sin through divine grace’ (Hanks, 1986, p. 1457).

Rohr reinforces these insights elsewhere in his writings. One of his reflections is entitled ‘God fills the gap’. Another publication in one of his Radical Grace magazines concludes with the adage: ‘Broken hearts crack so that God may enter’ (Leckey, 2005, p. 1). In his principal meditation on ‘the hole in the soul’ he addresses the ultimate futility of the Western ‘fix-and-manage mentality’ and the attendant difficulty of surrendering ourselves into the hands of the living God. Rohr reflects that ‘the spiritual wisdom of surrender’ does not come easily. This ‘hole in the soul’ is something than many people ‘cannot understand, fix, change, or control’. In the same text he concludes:
We may still have the power to control our money or fix the obvious problems, but we cannot understand, fix, change, or control the world inside us. These matters teach us the importance and necessity of surrender. These are the holes in our soul whereby we break out, and God breaks through (2010b, p. 98).

2. The human soul needs images of God

Richard Rohr argues persistently throughout his writings that ‘the soul needs images of God’ (2011, p. 86). Such images are not intended for solace and comfort alone, but as a vehicle for challenging those whom God communicates with. In a nutshell – God communicates God’s Self, especially through Jesus Christ, as the vulnerable and suffering one, so that our own human suffering and vulnerability will be healed in and through God.

Rohr also notes that God communicates God’s Self throughout the Jewish Scriptures in a variety of metaphors such as the crossing of the Red Sea, the exodus, the journey through the desert, the pillar of fire, and the Ark of the Covenant (1988, pp. 31ff). Rohr’s approach to the many God images that he refers to (some fifty-eight in total) is underpinned by his own Franciscan motto – Deus Meus et Omnia (‘My God and All Things’) (2001, p. v). This can be taken to mean that God is all in all, and that God is capable of using any image God wishes to communicate God’s Self.

In a similar context, Rohr cites Heinrich Zimmer who said: ‘The best things cannot be talked about, and the second best things are almost always misunderstood’. Rohr comments in the same quote:

The second best things – such as metaphor, symbol, image, story, myth – are those that point to the first best things. All images of God are metaphors, approximations at best, fingers pointing to the moon. Unfortunately we spend far more time fighting about fingers than looking at the moon (2010b, p. 142).

Rohr writes repeatedly about the need for a variety of God images and metaphors (2010b, p. 282). He begins with Catherine of Genoa’s (1447-1510) assumption that ‘My deepest me is God’ (n.d., Workshop, p. 7). In his writings he images God in a variety of creative yet complementary ways. For example, in the one reflection he images God as both a ‘homing device’ and as ‘the spring [welling up] inside’. Rohr reflects:

God planted a little bit of God inside you – we call it the indwelling Holy Spirit (John 14:16-17) – and from that place within you, like a homing device, God seeks and loves God. It is happening to you, through you, toward you, within you, and from you. All you can do is allow the spring inside you to well up (John 4:14) and flow through you’ (2010b, p. 357).

In other writings, Rohr also images God as a ‘brightness’ and ‘Larger Force Field’ (Rohr with Moon, 2010, p. 2), and as a ‘Bright Light’ that melts away illusions and lures us into a bigger world (cf. ‘the Big Picture’) (Rohr with Moon, 2010, p. 3).

Again, using contemporary images based on discoveries in science and physics, Rohr images God elsewhere as a ‘compass and magnetic centre’ (2010b, p. 372) and as the ‘God in me who can see God everywhere’ (2010a, p. 1). In Rohr’s estimation, God is not ‘out there’ separate from us (2003a, p. 118) but operates within and around us with the transforming energy of an electric wire (2011, p. 68). During our spiritual journeys, ‘God searches us, explores our world, and asks us questions’ (Isaiah 55:8-9) (2005a, p. 1). God, moreover, is constantly imaged as One who ‘suffers with us’ (2010b, p. 334), who is veiled or hidden (1994, 4; cf. apophatic images of God), and who waits for ‘vacuums’ to fill with images of God’s own Presence (2010b, p. 81).

The God captured across the spectrum of Rohr’s writings is one who opposes greed, violence and self-destruction (2003a, p. 180), and who calls humanity to grow beyond its limited tribal games and shallow security needs (2010b, p. 337). This God who is revealed through multiple images is a God of ‘transformation not elimination [dread and punishment]’ (2010b, p. 332).
For Richard Rohr, in the final analysis, God is beyond human analysis and comprehension. According to St. Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274) the ultimate knowledge of God is ‘to know that we do not know’ (cited in 2002, p. 4). This is supported by the perspective of a Jewish rabbi whom Rohr heard on one occasion: “Don’t use the name of God [since] we don’t know what we are talking about. [God is] always beyond, beyond, beyond and any box you build will be too small a box” (2009a, p. 16).

3. Jesus as the first non-dual thinker in the West (emerging from the East)
The challenge to live a life characterised by ‘non-dual thinking’ is both comforting and discomfiting. The thought of following the first non-dual thinker in the West (who emerged originally from the East) is both comforting (being united with the Way of the Master) and discomfiting – it challenges us, as we shall see in this section, to be vulnerable and to embrace suffering within ourselves, in Christ, with others, and in the context of the entire cosmos (the Cosmic Christ).

It must be said at the outset of this section that ‘non-dual thinking’ is a slippery and multivalent term across Rohr’s writings. On the one hand it contains its standard denotative meaning of the split between ‘two natures’ or ‘two approaches’ to reality (Hanks, 1986, p. 470). On the other hand, it assumes a more specific meaning within the ambit of religion and spirituality as one unified approach which accepts that ‘everything belongs’ within reality and existence, even within irony, conflict and paradox. Non-dual thinking is capable of making the mature transition from information to transformation, from the analytical mindset to synthesis, from ‘either/or’ to ‘both/and’, and from consumerism and materialism to a life of presence and mysticism (refer to 2009b, p. 12 where Rohr equates non-dual thinking to ‘contemplation’ and ‘prayer’). In one passage on male initiation, Rohr contextualises non-dual thinking within the foibles and vulnerability of the human journey:

Part of being an adult is a man’s ability to trust himself. He looks with wiser vision on the mistakes he’s made, the wrong turns, the false starts, and a hundred other small and large defeats he’s suffered. If he can accept himself and claim all that he’s learned from what he’s done well – and not so well – he begins to understand that there are no easy answers. Most scholars in the field are agreeing that we move from very dualistic thinking when we are young to increasingly non-dual thinking as we mature – from the mere knowledge of facts and information to the synthesis called wisdom (2010b, p. 267).

Rohr also frames non-dual thinking as ‘a way of seeing that refuses to eliminate the negative, the problematic, the threatening parts of everything’ (2009b, p. 131). Non-dual thinking accepts that ‘everything belongs’ in the scheme of things (reality, human existence, the cosmos) and that this radical stance ‘demands some degree of real attachment from yourself. The non-dual contemplative mind holds truth humbly, knowing that if it is true, it is its own best argument’ (2009b, p. 131).

The principal limitation, even danger, of dualistic thinking is its trenchant inability to accept and work with this belief that ‘everything belongs’. The dual mind divides the perceived right from the wrong, orthodox from unorthodox, and orthodoxy from orthopraxis. It lacks what Rohr calls the ‘software’ to process ‘the really big questions: death, love, infinity, suffering and God’ (2010b, p. 361).

The dualistic mind provides the person with momentary and delusive sanity and safety from the Divine Presence or the power of the present moment, also referred to by Rohr as the sacramentality of everyday life (cf. the ‘sacrament of the present moment’, in de Caussade, 1989, passim). In this context, Ward reflects: ‘...God is present in every situation, clearly or obscurely, under the disguise of something he wishes us to do, bear or enjoy for his sake...De Caussade spoke of each passing moment as being the veil of God and so also, when scrutinized and interpreted by faith, the unveiling of God.’ He continues: ‘He gave the term “the sacrament of the present moment” to this understanding of time and continually expounded the Christian life as an active and passive co-operation with God moment by moment’ (1984, p. 82). Rohr reflects with regard to the power of this present moment: ‘But to address our religious and social problems in any creative or finally helpful way, we also need something more, something bigger, and something much better’ (2009b, p. 133). Rohr calls this ‘something more’ the ‘mind of Christ’ (1 Cor 2:16), ‘the contemplative mind’ or a ‘non-dualistic way of greeting the moment’ (2009b, p. 133).
Rohr argues that there is an emerging consensus among scholars and spiritual observers ‘that conversion or enlightenment moves forward step by step from almost totally dualistic thinking to non-dual thinking at the highest levels’ (2009b, p. 62). Non-dual thinking, conversion or enlightenment can also be understood as ‘a higher way of seeing’, ‘prayer’, or ‘contemplation’. In addition, Rohr refers to it as ‘being present to each other’ or ‘living in the naked now’ (2009b, p. 63).

In the final analysis non-dual or non-polarity thinking ‘teaches you how to hold creative tensions, how to live with paradox and contradictions, and how not to run from mystery and therefore how to practice what religions teach as necessary: compassion, mercy, loving-kindness, patience, forgiveness, and humility’ (2009b, p. 132).

4. Jesus shows us ‘the Way’ – paradox, suffering and the Cross

What essential piece of wisdom allows us to comprehend the mysteries and absurdities of life – particularly those scarifying ones that reside at the core of suffering and vulnerability – paradox, pain and the Cross? Chathanatt provides a compelling response to this question with his pithy summary of four influential world views: ‘Socrates said, “Know yourself”. Marcus Aurelius said, “Control yourself”. Other oriental sages said, “Give yourself”. Jesus said, “Deny yourself”’ (2009, 24 October entry). Jesus’ exhortation ‘Deny yourself’ is an invitation to consider the ultimately life-giving pathway of transformation through prayer, suffering, paradox, descent and humiliation – all summed up in one key concept – the Cross.

Richard Rohr has identified two ways to live out this pathway of transformation: ‘...the path of prayer to get rid of ego, and the path of suffering...For Rohr, the image of Jesus on a crucifix is a constant reminder of how much the world hates love. To follow Jesus we must be both forgiving and inclusive (exclusion is unforgiveness),...We have to experience that core teaching at an inner transformational level’ (Rohr, 2007, p. 2).

Elsewhere in his writings, Rohr gives a parallel description of the two pathways or disciplines that allow us through God’s grace to authentically live the spiritual or mystical life: ‘There are two spiritual disciplines that keep me honest and growing: contemplative prayer and the perspective from the bottom’ (1993, p. 96).

Both prayer and ‘the perspective from the bottom’ (also referred to by Rohr as ‘the view from the bottom’ or ‘view from the margins’; 2010b, pp. 88, 94) are symbiotic, intertwined realities. Prayer can be understood as a receptivity to God’s grace whereby we empty ourselves of self-serving agendas (the ‘ego’) and allow our human presence to be lured into the Divine Presence (Rohr, 2003a, p. 31).

The ‘perspective from the bottom’ is associated elsewhere by Rohr with ‘kenosis’ (the self-emptying of Christ; cf. Phil 2:7), and the ‘path of descent’. Rohr describes this language of descent as the ‘theme of themes’ in the Bible. He also labels it variously as ‘powerlessness’, ‘the bias from the bottom’, ‘the way of the Cross’, or ‘vulnerability’ (2003b, back cover; 2003a, pp. 181-182).

In the final analysis, Rohr asserts, the Cross of Christ acts like a channel of grace that invites us to a pathway of kenosis or self-emptying. God’s grace calls us to take up the Cross in the form of that ‘difficulty, privation, persecution, and misunderstanding that comes into one’s life when one attempts to live the Reign of God
in this world – not just the sufferings and hardships’ (Carney and Spahn, 1994, pp. 65-66). Elsewhere in the same article, he equates the taking up of the Cross with ‘our obedience to the price of truth and love’, as ‘the necessary price to break through the world’s lies and promises, and ultimately as commitment to a life of “doing the truth”’ (Carney and Spahn, 1994, p. 66).

Rohr also questions our willingness to recognise and embrace transformation which calls us to an uncomfortable living-out of kenosis, suffering and vulnerability. He cites the now Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801-1890), who once said:

“My parish at Littlemore wanted nothing more from me than to be left alone.” [Rohr comments] In that common church situation, no real transformation or growth of persons is going to happen. Such people are too well defended with dogmas and certitudes. Religious people have a very difficult time changing because God is always on their side. Mediators and negotiators who work with groups say that church groups are often the very hardest groups to change. I have seen this to be true myself (Rohr, 2005b, Track 3).

In order to understand the scope and complexities of this Rohrian universe of suffering, it is instructive to present some of his key themes and sub-themes on that topic in the form of a mind map (see Figure 1 on page 11), which is able to list key words, scripture quotes, family of words, and other associations, and thus show visually a whole cluster of meanings that Rohr associates with ‘suffering’. The mind map included below links ‘suffering’ to a number of interconnected themes such as – transformation, the Cross, the Sacred Wound, darkness, the way of descent, vulnerability and compassion.

Conclusions

Richard Rohr represents a unique, contemporary theological voice that raises challenging and relevant issues for teachers and others in the modern world. The purpose of this article has been to break open four of his key themes related to suffering and vulnerability for those who have not encountered them.

In examining these four themes – God heals holes in souls; The human soul needs images of God; Jesus as a non-dual thinker; and Jesus shows us the way: paradox, suffering and the Cross – this article has presented an integrated overview of Rohr’s approach to related subtopics such as: healing wounds, Jesus as the Divine Physician, brokenness at the heart of human existence, the myriad and subversive images of God, the confronting stance of non-dual thinking, and the kernel of Gospel and Pauline theology – kenosis, suffering, weakness, paradox, and the Cross.

In addressing this range of themes and sub-themes across the broad canvas of Rohr’s writings, this article has also raised key issues relevant to ongoing teacher reflection such as:

- Broken hearts crack so that God may enter
- God strives to give us multiple images so that we can ‘fall in love’ with God
- God is beyond, beyond, beyond any box that a person can build; and
- The place in each person’s life of transformative qualities such as – compassion, mercy, loving-kindness, patience, forgiveness, and humility?
Much of what Rohr has taught in relation to suffering and vulnerability can be summed up in one of his favourite quotes from the Jewish Scriptures (cf. ‘beyond our comfort zone’ in 2003a, pp. 52-55). It is a passage which testifies to his conviction that the God who enters through the holes or cracks in the soul also heals its wounds and leaves the wounded person with a divine blessing (cf. Jacob who was re-named Israel by God in Gen 32:22-32). The prophet Isaiah images this healing action of God as both a sanctuary...
and a rock which one stumbles over or strikes one’s foot against. This discomforting encounter with God is the source of all true and lasting personal and communal transformation:

[God] will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against, for both houses of Israel [God] will become a rock one stumbles over – a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem (Isa 8:14; cf. Mt 11:30; 16:24; and Acts 4:11).

References


Rohr, R. (n.d.). Workshop for Spiritual Directors, Days 1, 2, and 3. [Article]. Albuquerque, NM: CAC.


*Dr. Peter Mudge is a Lecturer in Religious Education and Spirituality at the Broken Bay Institute, Diocese of Broken Bay. He specialises in religious education, spirituality and transformative Catholic pedagogy. His research interests include – religious education, spirituality, sacred space, connected knowing, transformative pedagogies, and the role of the arts and spirituality in religious education. He has received formal training in drawing and painting which he pursues in his art studio.*

A selection of his copyright-free art images can be found at: [www.flickr.com/photos/ceoreals/sets](http://www.flickr.com/photos/ceoreals/sets)

His contact email is: pmudge@bbi.catholic.edu.au
Alice Priest*

RICHARD ROHR’S ‘EVERYTHING BELONGS’ AND ENHANCING CATHOLIC SCHOOL IDENTITY: HOLDING ON AND LETTING GO

Abstract

Since the turn of the third millennium the changing cultural and educational context in Australia, and beyond, has raised anew the question of Catholic identity – “the nature and distinctive characteristics of a school which would present itself as Catholic” (CCE, 1997, n.4). Catholic schools are preoccupied with the challenge of identifying and then enhancing those traits. More often than not, the starting point has been to see the Catholic Church, and its schools, as losing ground to an ungodly secularisation. In an attempt to enhance Catholic Identity there is an inclination to hold on ever more tightly to what we think we are and what we think we need to be, over and against the secular. The Franciscan Richard Rohr, one of the world’s most sought-after teachers of spirituality and spiritual direction, presents an alternative view and an alternative way. He draws on the lens of grace to show that “everything belongs”, revealing that the changing socio-cultural context is as much imbued with the divine now as it has ever been and ever will be. Rohr points a way for Catholic Schools that is about “letting go” in order to “abide inside of a different identity” (1999).

In January 2010 I made my way to Albuquerque, New Mexico, to attend a Conference led by the Franciscan Richard Rohr. One afternoon with a little free time I wandered through Old Town and bought a small artwork. It’s typically New Mexico in its form, colour and light - a simple screen-print of a door in a pueblo outer wall. In front of the door, leaning on the wall is a traditional wooden ladder, a kiva. The ladder’s top rungs rise above the wall, pointing into the blue sky – it’s a ladder to nowhere.

The image spoke to me of Rohr’s theology of radical grace. Later that afternoon, back at the conference, I had the opportunity to meet Richard Rohr and to show him the print. He signed the back, “To those letting go of the ladder.”

During that conference, as at many other times and in many other places, Rohr lamented the insidious creation, out of the gospel, of a false framework of progress, a spirituality of ascent - the ladder of perfection.¹ Such a ladder is used to describe how one may ascend into heaven by first renouncing the world and finally ending up in heaven with God. Attainment-focused ladder spirituality – where God and God’s love is striven for, merited or achieved according to ‘the correct requirements’ - is for Rohr the antithesis of radical grace. His own ideas, which echo the theology of writers like John Climacus and Bernard of Clairvaux, turn the traditional concept of ‘ascent’ on its head. Rohr understands that grace is the absolutely free, unmerited “gratuitous gift” of God given by Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit which draws all into the life and love of God (cf. The Holy See, 2008, n.423, p. 128). The ladder-like spirituality of perfection and ascent divides secular and sacred, us from them, the sinners from the saints, the worthy from the unworthy. It insists upon climbing hierarchies, achieving, formulas, rules and regulations, purity codes and moral achievement contests to earn God’s love. It is a spirituality whereby not everyone and everything belongs.

Radical Grace insists that everything does in fact belong. When ‘everything belongs’, as Rohr understands it in his text (2003) of this name, there can be no more “dualistic thinking”, us and them, “which demand[s]
'in' people and 'out' people, victors and victims. In God’s reign ‘everything belongs,’ even the broken and poor parts” (2003, p.16). It is what Rohr calls “mature religion” wherein “the secular becomes sacred. There are no longer two worlds. We no longer have to leave the secular world to find sacred space because they’ve come together” (2003, p.159). Holiness is not climbing a ladder to God by escaping or renouncing the world but opening doors in the walls of our ‘secular’ world, of our lives, of our hearts, to discover God residing therein. Radical Grace means we are invited to return, not earn, God’s love. Radical grace calls us to let go of the ladder of ascent and to go outside the walls within which we have neatly boxed God (in our ideologies, even in our Catholic schools and parishes) to see God equally and always present on the other side too.

We have long been measuring out Catholic identity by our ‘progress’ upon the classical spiritual ladder. This means that, as Rohr warns, we may have some things to ‘unlearn’ (2003, p. 29). Ladder spirituality of punishment and reward is still very much a part of how we see ourselves as ‘good Catholics’, and how we measure our Catholic identity. To let go of that is thus a deep challenge to our sense of ourselves. This letting go, however, will enable us to grasp a greater truth: that we are called to elevation through, with and in Love’s ineffable, unfathomable descent and encompassing of us all here on the ground.

Identity formation in a plural context

As the ground around us shifts and cracks – cultural, social, political, economic and religious - the simple question of identity, how to be Catholic in the 21st Century, has become urgent. At present, Catholic Schools, Health care providers, Catholic Social Services and Parishes are employing leaders of ‘Catholic identity’ and undertaking programs and professional development on knowing and being who we are as Catholics. The temptation is to reconfessionalise our identity, to raise another Roman Catholic ladder, to hold on more tightly than ever to the formulas of our faith (of our Fathers), and to climb piously above the shifting, messy secular milieu of our times and our pluralising Catholic school populations. Mostly, we are terrified of letting go. If we are to let go, how will we know who we are?

The Catholic Church more broadly has also turned its attention very specifically to this question of the identity of the Catholic School. The Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE, 1997) recognised that “On the threshold of the third millennium education faces new challenges which are the result of a new socio-political and cultural context” (n.1). As it did twenty years earlier, the CCE exhorted Catholic Schools to again “focus attention on the nature and distinctive characteristics of a school which would present itself as Catholic” (n.4), and to strengthen those characteristics (n.8).

In 1997, the Church surmised that the Catholic School was “undoubtedly a sensitive meeting-point for the problems which besie[d the]… restless end of the millennium” (CCE, n.6). It understood these ‘problems’ to be:

First and foremost, ...a crisis of values ... . The extreme pluralism pervading contemporary society... . Rapid structural changes, profound technical innovations and the globalization of the economy ... . The phenomena of multiculturalism and an increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious society is at the same time an enrichment and a source of further problems. To this we must add...a growing marginalization of the Christian faith. (CCE, 1997, n.1)

This mentality of ‘besiegement’ was heightened by the CCE’s understanding that the fundamental educational activity of Catholic schools begins with the premise that the “original characteristic” of the Catholic School as a “genuine instrument of the Church” (n.11) “is to be a school for all” (n.7). Thus it was with both anxiety and “firm resolve” (n.16) that the Church looked into the shifting vista of the new landscape, attempting “to take the new cultural situation in her stride” (n.16).

It is clear that, to borrow Richard Rohr’s analogy with Jonah, Catholic Education has been ‘spat up’ on a new socio-cultural shore where it must newly understand its call (1999, p.44). It is an uncomfortable place
where the Church must see entirely differently, “with eyes not our own” (p.58). The challenge is one of recontextualisation, knowing how to be sincerely Catholic in our identity and sincerely ‘for all’ in the new context of pluralism, while at the same time heeding the kind of caution David Quinn more recently made in *The Irish Catholic* (2010, Sept 30): “Schools need to remember that if they try to be all things to all people they end up being nothing to anyone in particular.”

Rohr illuminates a vision by which the mentality of besiegement and the sense of sacred ground being lost to the rise of secularism and pluralism can be let go. In its place is the glimpsing of ‘radical grace’ at work in all things. To find our way to a centre that holds in the shifting socio-cultural sands, Rohr shows a way to see ‘with God’s eyes’ wherein there is no sacred and secular divide. It is now that we best understand Rohr’s alternative to letting go of the achievement ladder when he recounts the story of Jacob who has a dream of “a ladder between heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending” (Gen 28:12). The startling revelation of Jacob’s ladder vision is that God is not contained to one side and unavailable to the other, and certainly not relegated to the top end of a rank-runged ladder. “Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!” (Gen 28:16) Jacob says of his own earthly place of stones and sunsets (v.11). “This place” is here, precisely in our “extreme shifting values, pluralism, rapid structural changes, profound technical innovation, multi-cultural and multi-religious society, even in shifting faith” (CCE, 1997 n.1). It’s still hard to believe, just as it was for Jacob. As Rohr reminds us, it was “almost an abomination” “for a Jewish person to think that God was in a place other than the tent of a meeting or the temple in Jerusalem” (2004, p. 121).

Around the same time that the CCE was formulating its response to the challenges raised by the third millennium, Gerard Holohan (now Bishop of Bunbury) was writing on behalf of the Australian National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC, 1999) regarding the challenges of religious education. The aim was to newly “assist teachers... to appreciate those criteria which govern the presentation of the Christian message” (p.3). This message is of God’s grace, “Divine Revelation ...the continuing and dynamic process by which God communicates personally to human beings” (p.10).

Holohan’s monograph contains a wonderful insight into the agency of radical grace, set almost as an aside at the conclusion of the section on Revelation:

"[I]t is important to emphasize here that Australian children and young people are experiencing their self communicating Creator [grace] today, whether they realise this or not, even before they enter a Catholic school. They are having experiences of God also outside their parishes. How family and parish catechesis, and religious education in and outside the Catholic school, need to build upon these experiences is beyond the scope of this discussion. This is an area needing much further reflection and research. (1999, p.12)

A decade has passed. This emphasis must no longer be an aside, a concluding point, or beyond the scope of our present discussion, reflection and research. Here is the starting place, the bedrock of all of our grappling with the question of Catholic Identity and Religious Education. To recontextualise our Christian faith means we must find Christ already present in the contemporary context, not exclude or impose Christ upon it.

**Being Catholic in the midst of cultural and religious plurality**

Being an authentically Catholic school today, in the midst of cultural and religious plurality, open in enrolment to people of other or no faith, means learning to see ourselves differently. It does not, however, mean ‘everything belongs’ in an ‘anything goes’ sense. Rohr is well aware of the liberal problem of a relinquishing of boundaries in “the immense desire to please everybody”, which results in speaking only in “supreme generalities, which lapses into emptiness” (1994b, D5T2). But he’s equally concerned by the problem of conservative boundary keeping and defending that may help define who we are as Catholics, but puts others down, beyond or outside (2003, p.22). He marks the way forward with several Scriptural

---

16  *Journal of Religious Education* 59(2) 2011
images, beginning with the “dragnet pulling in both old and new”. In this story, “[Jesus] preserves the best of what we call conservative and the best of what we call progressive” (p.42).

Rohr also recalls the imagery of the “wheat and weeds”, which Christ insists must “grow together” rather than be plucked out and separated. He recalls the leaven and salt, those “who have appropriated the mystery in themselves” and become agents of elevation and transformation within a larger mix (plurality) (2003, p.123). This is the present context of Catholic Schools – progressive and conservative, old and new, belief and non-belief, a pluralist mix. Rohr’s thinking says we can let go of the expectation that all will profess the Gospel of Christ. Most people, he says, are “not necessarily ill-willed; they just have no idea where the Gospel is coming from” (2003, p.111). We can let go of this expectation, safe in the knowledge that God is calling everything and everyone to God’s self. The leaven, the salt, “these few are enough to keep the world from its path toward greed, violence and self-destruction” (2003, p.180).

Undoubtedly, we have ‘these few’ educators in each of our Catholic Schools right now who are also enough. For enhancing Catholic School Identity, this does not mean letting go of a formal program of Religious Education, but calmly entering into this new context with faith in God’s unlimited gratuity. The Great Mystery – the paschal pattern - is at work. It is the pattern to which all things ‘conform’ (Phil 3:10), not a straight ladder of upward progress, but rather a parabola of ascent and descent, a path of transformation – of dying and rising – “that we [all of creation] must live through” (2003, p.165).

We are called towards a Catholic identity in which we are at once sure of ourselves while being at least minimally self-critical of our own religious traditions and less threatened by those of others. We can respect all religions equally, but not apply our faith equally to them. As Rohr states, “‘I have faith in the person and the love and the Gospel of Jesus Christ’, a Christian must say, or how are you a Christian?” (1994b, DST6). An authentic Catholic identity in a pluralist context does not “apologise for Christ” while being “at the same time utterly connected to everybody else in a compassionate and caring way” (2009, p.137). Letting go of narrow ladder spirituality calls us to be dialogical, engaged with each other as different, but truly understanding that we are equally graced. As Swindler explicates in his seminal ‘Dialogue Decalogue’ (1984), this means knowing better who we are as authentic members of our tradition, being able to define ourselves, but being open to “continually deepen, expand and modify [our] self-definition” through dialogue with others so that ultimately, both partners in the dialogue better become who they are as members all belonging to the one mysterious body of God. In Rohr’s terms, this is a Catholic identity wherein “healthy religion and true contemplation lead to calmly held boundaries, which neither need to be defended constantly nor abdicated in the name of ‘friendship’” (2003, p.29).

**Holding on to identity with Christ - Evangelisation**

Catholic Schools must hold on to evangelisation by illuminating in Christianity one of the many paths that lead to God, grounded not self-righteously in the conviction that it is the only way, or the superior way, but in and with the commonly held conviction of seekers and searchers who are unafraid to explain that they believe that Jesus reveals the nature and purpose of humanity. That Jesus is the human revelation of God, that Jesus lived explicitly the pattern of life, death and resurrection that is the eternal pattern of all things (Rohr, 2003, p.165). Catholic identity is marked by hope and faith in the values of Jesus – love, forgiveness, compassion and surrender, as eternal truths that one can trust in and base one’s life upon. It believes that as for Jesus who lived in awakening to his being “one with God” (Jn10:30) - God incarnate, so it is that everything that “lives and moves and has its being” is part of the one Body of God, struggling towards awareness (Rohr 1994b, DST7).

It’s an electrifying vision and Rohr is clear that ‘letting go’ of all notions of religion “for the sake of social order...and social controls” (2003, p.30) will feel like losing everything. Indeed, Rohr warns that “It will feel like dying. ...You have to learn how to inhabit a different place, to abide inside of a ‘different’” (1999). Most certainly, the Church, as it has looked into the third millennium through the door of the Catholic School, has felt that way. The Congregation for Catholic Education exhorts, “It is not merely a question of
adaptation, but of missionary thrust, the fundamental duty to evangelize, to go towards men and women wherever they are, so that they may receive the gift of salvation” (1997, n.3). This approach, however, would have us draw the divide again – Catholic and non-Catholic, them and us – and set about anxiously defending the boundaries of God’s grace. Rohr’s teaching would suggest we resist this temptation. For him, “the following of Jesus is not a ‘salvation scheme’” in that sense (2003, p.179). The way must be “calmly” holding “the tension of opposites” (p.24) as a means to “traveling the road of healthy religion” (p.23) within this new socio-cultural landscape of seeming contradictions and certain plurality.

**Catholic identity as seeing with sacramental vision**

Extrapolating from Rohr’s *everything belongs* perspective we must, in this plural context, enhance our Catholic identity by seeing more sacramentally and ‘holding on’ a little less rigidly to the Sacramental. “Unless all of life becomes sacramental, the signs in churches don’t usually go very deep” (2004, p.123). We must begin with the certainty that with God, ‘You’re in’, regardless of sacramental status. Rohr reminds us, “My starting point is that we’re already there” (2003, p.29). You cannot be anything but “in” with God, part of God’s family, God’s body. The implication of this is that we must better teach that participation in the Catholic sacraments, for example, helps Catholics live what they believe, but doesn’t make them believers or change their entitlements before God. As Rohr so simply states, “God likes you before you do the rituals. God doesn’t need them, but we need them” (2003, p.89). The sacramental rites name, claim, express, and hold us accountable to our belief and our Catholic identity; accordingly, they call us to shift our vision and transform our lives and world. They tell us who we are without telling anybody else who they are not.

Catholic identity measured exclusively by the ladder of attainment, spirituality, engages us in becoming more religious and confuses membership, attendance and belonging to a group with belonging to God. Catholic identity measured by participation in radical grace through Jesus, engages us in becoming more human:

> We are not human beings trying to become more spiritual. You are already spiritual beings and the profound question is how to become more human. I believe that’s why Jesus came as a human being, not to teach us how to go to heaven... [but] to teach us how to be a human being... on this earth, ...in this world. (2004, T3)

We must hold on to the disciplines of our faith, offered through the life of the Church and Catholic School, and use them to forge our Catholic identity, in and only as much as they help us to see and to be fully alive. What do we want 21st century students of Catholic Schools to be able to attain but this vision? Rohr asserts that this is the central question of the Gospel:

> Can you see the image of Christ in the least of your brothers and sisters? Jesus uses that as his only description of the final judgment [Mt 25]. Nothing about commandments, nothing about church attendance, nothing about papal infallibility: simply a matter of our ability to see. ...When we see the image of God where we don’t want to see the image of God, then we see...with eyes not our own. (2003, p.58)

**Religious Education when ‘everything belongs’**

Catholic Religious Education, like the Catholic schools who propose it, is also presently searching for its identity in a new context. One of the local Australian characteristics of the 21st century landscape is that our Catholic schools have never been so full, while our Churches have never been so empty. Holding on and letting go is perhaps another way of describing this phenomenon of choosing Catholic Education while not necessarily choosing a personal Catholic identity or prioritising a Religious Education program of studies within that choice. If this is the context Religious Education finds itself in, it must find a way to recontextualise its *raison d’être* within this “the tension of opposites” (Rohr, 2003, p.24).
The questions that need to be asked in relation to what a 21st-century Catholic Religious Education curriculum should look like in Australia centre on its purpose. What are its aims, its rationale, its desired student attainments if we let go of ladder-measured theologies? What is our 21st Century understanding and collective vision of the Kingdom of God presently emerging amongst us?

From the Ladder of Perfection to the Cross of Paradox

US tennis champion Andre Agassi revealed in his recent autobiography, Open, that he was interminably frustrated by Michael Chang, overtly Christian, who

> Every time he beats someone, he points to the sky. He thanks God – credits God – for the win, which offends me. That God should take sides in a tennis match, that God should side against me, that God should be in Chang’s box, feels ludicrous and insulting. (Agassi, 2009, p.118)

Agassi simply knew that not to be true. Everything belongs, both sides of the net, both winning and losing. The task is to deliver a Religious Education curriculum wherein we sincerely develop in our students both the knowledge and their own intuition that God is not only present on one side of the court. They need to learn that ‘sin’ is the painful experience by which we can know that “death is a part of life, and failure is a part of victory. Opposites collide and unite, and everything belongs” (Rohr, 2003, p.159). Religious educators need access to living contemporary examples of where faith has been appropriated and recontextualised in our times and milieu. Drawing again on Agassi, who clearly emerges by his own hand as both saint and sinner,

> Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself.
> I never knew this was an acceptable point of view. Now I steer by it. Now it’s my North Star. And that’s what I’ll tell the students. Life is a tennis match between polar opposites. Winning and losing, love and hate, open and closed. It helps us to recognise that painful fact early. Then recognise the polar opposites within yourself, and if you can’t embrace them, or reconcile them, at least accept them and move on. (Agassi, 2009, p384-5)

We teach this paradox and Paschal mystery in our Religious Education curriculum, but we tend to teach it as belonging in a particular way to Jesus, the only son of God. We teach about it as a religious fact to be learnt, ‘...was crucified, died and was buried. On the third day he rose again.’ We must teach that the paschal mystery is the central mystery of our life too. Rohr powerfully insists,

> [As] Paula D’Arcy puts it, “God comes to us disguised as our life.” Everything belongs; God uses everything. There are no dead ends. There is no wasted energy. Everything is recycled. Sin history and salvation history are two sides of one coin. (Rohr, 2003, p.130)

Religious Education which takes students off the ladder of perfection and into the Cross of paradox, will better equip them for coming to see that all of their life, belief and unbelief, love and failure to love, is part of the Great Mystery of salvation at work in the here and now, and not simply a test of faith for heavenly reward. Exchanges such as the following, which recently occurred in a secondary Religious Education classroom, are lamentably common:

> What is the central proposition of Christianity?
> Salvation from sin, Miss. Jesus died to save us from our sins.
> And what is the Christian idea of being saved?
> Heaven, Miss. Being saved means going to heaven.
> And do you want to be saved?
> Oh yeah. I’m not really Catholic, Miss. Whatever.

Salvation, in this sense, is like the kiva ladder in the New Mexico print – decorative, removed from meaningful context, going no place anyone is much interested in.

More than a decade ago Rossiter understood “the urgent need for more in-depth research on students'
perception of the role of religion in giving people meaning in life and on their perceptions of the content of religious education” (Rossiter, 1999, p.12). More recently, it was reported in the UK Catholic Herald (Greaves, Feb 3, 2011) that Pope Benedict XVI has, as a prelude to World Youth Day 2011, urged young people to study “with passion and perseverance!” a youth catechism called ‘Youcat’. The Pope’s Youcat foreword states: “Some people tell me that the youth of today are not interested in the catechism, but I do not believe this statement and I am certain that I am right. They are not as superficial as they are accused of being; young people want to know what life really is about” (Youcat, p. 9).

Young people do want to know what life is really about, yet doctrinal answers to life’s ultimate questions are likely to be seen by young people as irrelevant, and there is a tendency in the Church to answer young people’s questions about the meaning of their life in highly doctrinal terms. The similarly heralded youth catechism produced for World Youth day 2008 in Sydney, widely distributed to secondary students, was an impossible ‘sell’ with young people themselves. Valuably intended as a vademecum – a pocket reference for young Catholics, gift boxes of Compendiums were sent, for example, to western Sydney schools in the wake of World Youth Day 2008, often accompanied with extensive suggested teaching scaffolds to help students and teachers better connect with the complex content. The Compendium’s language, tone and illustrations were far removed from the student’s regular terms of reference and promptly found their way to the bottom of lockers, dusty reference shelves, or onto the pile of World Youth Day relics.

From the 2008 World Youth Day edition of the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

44. What is the central mystery of Christian faith and life?
The central mystery of Christian faith and life is the mystery of the Most Blessed Trinity. Christians are baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Next question.

Going towards a less dogmatic and more recontextualising engagement with the content of our faith means holding on to the questions but letting go of such tightly boxed answers. This criticism, as Rossiter puts it, “does not mean abandoning formal religious content, but adding more balance with a complementary focus on issues of meaning, purpose and values, and through teaching/learning which tries to highlight the meaning dimension of what is taught about religious traditions” (Rossiter, 1999, p.11).

Our lives, not only our catechisms, have to hand on the central mystery of Christian life and faith. Rohr is certain “That’s what our lives are for: to hand on the mystery to those who are coming after us, which means we have to appropriate the mystery ourselves” (2003, p.123). That’s the purpose of Catholic Religious Education. It is passing on the mystery of the eternal paschal pattern, of the relationship between all things, of the enduring truth of love, forgiveness, compassion and surrender, not only as we have learnt it but as we have lived it.

From an Answering to a Questioning RE Pedagogy

To this end, our Religious Education curriculum might helpfully be enhanced by an increasingly questioning pedagogy rather than the traditional answering (catechism-style) pedagogies, powered by rich enduring or ultimate questions as defined by Clyde Crews:

We all carry mysteries around inside of us. This is part of both the freight and the fragility of being human….Among the myriad questions that confront us there are certain queries that are of ultimate concern, that deal with the meaning of life, of our own experience, and of God. The questioning process is a basic part of theological reflection. (Crews, 1986, p.3)

Over the course of many years St Francis of Assisi is understood to have spent nights on his knees simply repeating the same simple prayer, consisting of two enduring questions, “God, who are you?”
And God, who am I?”

The answers proffered by Youcat seem woefully inadequate in the face of such fervent questioning.

The use of Enduring or Ultimate Questions in curriculum design is particularly consistent with the principle of ‘everything belongs’, recontextualising, and being more catholic — according to the whole. The Religious Education curriculum no longer stands aside from the ‘regular’, ‘secular’ curriculum but sees all disciplines, all experiences, all of life, as being part of the revelation of the body of God, part of the path to truth. The goal is the serious pursuit of ultimate questions as they have been considered by Catholic Tradition, and in history by philosophy, religion, literature, the arts, and sciences. The enduring or ultimate answers, as far as the students are concerned, are not and cannot be merely handed over by teachers, digested by students, and fed back on examinations. Students are asked to “become aware of the major responses of the western world and then to search their own” (Crews, 1986, pp.4-5). Students must be presented with the universally searching, restless human heart, and Religious Education curriculum should begin with the vision of Christianity, and Catholicism, not as a climbing ladder but as a spirituality, a way of that heart, a mystical path.

To return to our opening image of the kiva ladder against the pueblo wall, to enhance our Catholic identity we must ‘see again’ our context and enter deeply into it through the door of Christ, rather than climbing self-righteously above it. This means we must abandon our upwardly mobile religious climbing, letting go of all fear and holding on to a real belief in our present landscape as our most sacred ground.

The authentic foundation of all true religion is the rediscovery of the defaced image of God inside of the human person, inside of this world, in what will always feel like the naked and empty now. This is the ladder to heaven, and it is everywhere. (Rohr, 2004, p.125)

For Catholic Schools doing the work of enhancing Catholic identity a decade into the third millennium, Rohr marks a move from weariness to anticipation. The beginning is recasting the eye of appreciative inquiry into the agency of grace at work in everything and everyone, and to work through, with and in that towards its loving elevation. More signs, ritual and belief statements, while also belonging, will, in isolation, take us up the ladder to nowhere.

References:


Bourgeault, C., Finley, J., & Rohr, R. (2010, Jan 19-22). Following the Mystics through the Narrow Gate; Seeing God in all things and all things in God. Conference of the Center for Contemplation and Action. Albuquerque, NM.


Holohan, G. (1999). Australian Religious Education – Facing the Challenges. Published on behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference Education Committee by the National Catholic Education Commission.
Rohr, R. (1994b). Rebuild the Church. (Spoken Word Audio) NM: St Anthony Messenger Press. 5 Discs.

1 Rohr is most explicit about his understanding of the ‘ladder of perfection’ in, Rohr R (1997) The Spirituality of Imperfection. CD. St. Anthony Messenger Press / Franciscan Comm. 68 mins
2 Rohr, R. (1994b) Rebuild the Church is a 5 disc spoken word audio text. Citation is made by Disk and Track number (Dn.,Tn.) here and hereafter.
3 Rohr, R. (2004) Contemplative Prayer is a 1 disc spoken word audio text. Citation is made by Track number (Tn.) here and hereafter.
4 For further reference, Clyde Crews in, Ultimate Questions: a theological primer, provides an excellent list of ‘Universally Familiar Ultimate or Enduring Questions’ that could helpfully scaffold the major lines of enquiry of an ‘everything belongs’ RE Curriculum.

The author would like to gratefully acknowledge the contribution of Dr Peter Mudge, who generously shared his knowledge of Rohr’s work on grace, and provided detailed comments on the manuscript.

* For the past three years Alice Priest has been working as an Education Officer, Secondary Religious Education, in the Catholic Education Offices of Sandhurst and Parramatta. She has worked and studied nationally and internationally in the fields of Catholic Education, Interfaith Relations and Youth Ministry. She was an inaugural recipient of the Council for Australian Catholic Women’s (CACW) Interfaith Fellowship in 2006.

Contact: priestalice@hotmail.com
Cathy Ota & Mary Pat Vollick*

INSPIRING VALUES, SKILLS, CONFIDENCE AND COMMUNITIES – A CASE STUDY OF A SOCIAL, RELATIONAL APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE EARLY YEARS

Abstract

This article presents a case study from an early years setting in Canada. Exploring our experiences of implementing a project across a whole setting for all staff and children from 6 months upwards, over the last 3 years, our article is presented from the two different perspectives of the two authors; Mary Pat as the Executive Director of the setting and Cathy as the trainer and co-founder of the Working With Others program. Considering our journey together of the project’s implementation and its impact on both children and staff, we offer some practical conclusions for understanding, engaging with and extending religious education and spirituality across early years settings in a way that is meaningful, inclusive and enriching for young children.

Introduction

This article considers the interplay of religious education and spirituality within early childhood settings and how it can be practically interwoven in classroom practice and the ethos of a setting with young children. Our discussion and reflections are drawn from research and the implementation of the Working With Others (WWO) approach in a Canadian early years setting over the last 3 years. The WWO approach is not specifically designed to be a programme to develop either religious education or spirituality. Nevertheless, we feel that in exploring the impact of the approach in this setting for both the staff team and children, we are able to highlight practical ways in which young children’s spirituality and religious education can be understood, acknowledged and supported.

Our use of the terms and concepts of spirituality and religious education is deliberately fluid and flexible. The understanding of spirituality we use in this article is informed by previous work (Ota, 2001, 2006; Ota & Berdondini, 2007) and encompasses relationships with others, engagement with the world around us and our own identity and sense of self. It also incorporates the theme of ‘everyday spirituality’ as described by Jane Bone in her own early years research (2005). By this we mean the spirituality that is expressed through the minutiae and experience of our day to day lives. As a further point of note we also acknowledge our own perspective on young children as individuals with their own experiences, knowledge and understanding and expression of spirituality. This means that our process of developing the project and writing this article has involved both a listening to and listening for spirituality – by this we mean we have remained open to expect the unexpected, to try and not be limited by our own preconceived notions of what young children can or can’t do, say or experience.

Setting the scene – Mount Hamilton Baptist Day Care “Pumpkin Patch”

Pumpkin Patch Day Care Centre was established 35 years ago as a small community outreach of Mount Hamilton Baptist Church in Hamilton, Ontario in Canada. Growing exponentially over the years the centre now has 24 fulltime staff (the majority of whom are Registered Early Childhood Educators) and 130 children aged between 6 months and 12 years attending on a daily basis. There are 9 different classrooms organized by age.
The Christian foundation of the centre has not excluded anyone from attending; children come from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds and various religions. Religious education or what is described by the directors at the centre as ‘Christian content’ is incorporated into daily activities. Although the centre is not dogmatic in their teaching, a conscious effort is made to ensure the children are exposed to key Christian ideas. These include but are not limited to the following; God loves you, We are all God’s Children, Christians Love and Care for others and Forgiveness.

Setting the scene – Working With Others

The Working With Others programme has been developed out of research in the UK which took place in schools and early years settings between 2000 and 2006. The approach provides a practical, responsive, practitioner focused programme of training and support for schools and early years providers. It teaches children effective groupwork and teamwork skills and enhances social skills, emotional literacy and thinking skills. Focusing on how to build trust, communication and problem solving with children, it is a practical, responsive approach (see Kutnick, Ota & Berdondini, 2007; Ota, 2007; Ota & Berdondini, 2006).

The Working With Others approach recognises the importance of relationships as key to providing a safe, secure and accessible learning environment for all children. Its training and support for practitioners is framed around 4 fundamental areas:

1. Enhancing trust, communication and problem solving skills – it encourages and helps practitioners progress through a process of building and reinforcing each of these skills so that they can develop safe and inclusive relationships between their children.

2. Using pre- and de-briefing with children - practitioners are supported in developing an open style of facilitative conversation with children that discusses the ‘how’ of working together as well as the content of their task. Through this children are:
   a. introduced to the vocabulary of working together
   b. more aware of the impact of what they do and say on others
   c. encouraged to take ownership and responsibility for their learning and behaviour
   d. taught to reflect and think about different strategies for interacting and working with peers - what they might do differently next time, how they might respond to specific challenges in future.

3. Planning for collaborative and cooperative activities – practitioners are encouraged to reconsider and extend how they organise and plan for group activities; how groups are composed, how tasks are structured to encourage interdependency and cooperation together and how to balance the challenge of working together with the demands of the task itself.

4. Ongoing support and supervision for staff – in asking practitioners to reflect on and change their practice, the WWO programme introduces the key principles of the program to staff and offers a step by step approach to incorporating it as part of an individual’s repertoire in the classroom. Our experience to date working with over 300 schools and early years settings, is that to enable success and confidence, time has to be given to practitioners to ‘give it a go’ and then, through supervision and peer support, be encouraged to think about what they might do differently next time. The positive response of children and a growing confidence and understanding of what they are doing is then a great motivator for staff to become more creative and inventive in their use of the approach with their children.

After hearing about the programme and its research, Pumpkin Patch were interested to find out whether Working With Others (WWO) could help them by providing a practical, hands on way of addressing the social interactive piece for children and staff as an integrated, whole setting approach. As Mary Pat, Executive Director of the setting, reflected after the first year:
Much of our interest in the WWO project resulted from our on-going struggle to find an effective way to teach social skills to young children. We always felt that we had so much more to learn in this area.

(Presentation to Pumpkin Patch parents, April 2008)

After initial conversations and meetings Pumpkin Patch and WWO both committed to an initial 12 month program of training and support to implement the WWO approach across all their classes, working with all staff and children.

The Practicalities of Implementation

Cathy

As part of the original UK research team and co-founder of Working With Others, in the first year of implementation I joined the team at Pumpkin Patch in Canada for a week every 3 months to provide: whole staff training, class observations, supervision for each class and forward planning and review with the leadership team. This amounted to a total of all staff receiving over 21 hours of in-service training through half days on Saturdays and staff meetings. In between my visits Mary Pat (Executive Director) and Sue Dorotea (Program Supervisor) with their leadership team provided further support for staff.

At initial training sessions with staff I introduced the WWO approach, doing the same trust and communication activities that I was asking them to try with their children. Through experiencing these for themselves I firmly believe that practitioners are able to not only ‘learn’ the activity but that a felt, deeper level of learning also takes place and they have greater sensitivity and empathy for what they are asking of their own children when they play it with them.

In our initial training session I also asked staff to think about what key skills or behaviours would make a significant difference to how their children experienced coming to Pumpkin Patch, how they got on with each other and the key skills that would also make doing their jobs easier. At a staff meeting towards the end of my first visit we worked together for an hour to identify as a whole team the three Working With Others goals that they wanted to achieve with their children over the first 12 months. Through a process of working together, discussing and negotiating, the staff team finally agreed on their goals and these were expressed as ‘I can’ statements:

I can take turns in a group;
I can understand people’s emotions through their body language;
I can see how my behaviour affects others.

These three statements have provided a valuable framework for staff over time for discussing, making sense of and implementing the WWO approach. Our training and work together over the months and years since has continued to focus on these statements; thinking carefully across different age ranges about the skills, vocabulary and behaviours that lie behind them and how as adults in the classroom we can recognize, support and enhance them in all children.

Mary Pat

At Pumpkin Patch we implemented the program with staff under the broad umbrella of looking at how we could knit the sensitivity, awareness and relationships between children, of all ages at the centre. At training session days and half days, alongside regular staff and team meetings, we agreed, together, the next steps for moving forward and extending what we were doing, at the same time responding to what each teacher felt their children were able to cope with. The kind of things everyone agreed to try were:

- short trust exercises in the classroom
- having a go at pre- and de-briefing children when they done an activity together
- encouraging children to use each other’s names
- coming up with activities to encourage turn taking
- using random grouping to build and develop inclusive, positive relationships
- recognising the importance of labeling for developing vocabulary
- using our circle time activities to develop communication skills
- modelling skills
- focusing on developing and extending emotional vocabulary and literacy
- developing independent activities where children could transfer their skills.

_Cathy_

Throughout the training and implementation of Working With Others we were careful not to assume what kind of support or help staff would need. We therefore needed to make time to have conversations with them, build trusting and developing a climate of professional dialogue so that they were able to share with us and each other not only their successes, but also areas they were finding challenging and difficult.

We used a variety of methods to enable this to happen so that we could include all personalities and styles across the large staff team. This included structuring different activities in training sessions as well as collecting written evaluations, questionnaires and feedback comments from staff. Through this we were able to identify specific areas that staff felt unsure about and less secure in. Among the areas of concern highlighted by staff were specific behaviours and abilities in children, as well how to bring the approach to the young babies and toddlers who had more limited verbal communication skills. Alongside the focus on children and what was happening in the classrooms, issues around working as part of a staff team also emerged. I want to be clear that from the very outset of meeting the team at Pumpkin Patch I found the staff team to be supportive, friendly, warm and genuinely caring towards each other. They took their roles and responsibilities with the children in their care seriously and gave careful thought to what they said and did, working hard at modeling and living the same values, skills and behaviours that they wanted to encourage in the children. Nevertheless, in any team conflict and difference of opinion and approach is a reality. For the staff at Pumpkin Patch managing conflict and feeling able and confident to address difficult situations with colleagues was one focus that was repeatedly raised. In response to this we adapted our training and input to also explore the dynamics of the staff team and we spent time considering the importance of effective and assertive communication as well as valuing the diversity and range of personality types across the team.

In continuing to develop and respond to the needs and issues raised by staff over time the programme evolved in a variety of ways that we had not foreseen in the beginning. Being open to this meant, I feel, that our input and support was more relevant and helpful and was able to ensure that change in practice was embedded and sustained in the longer term. It also meant that longer term impact was not just visible in the children but also in the relationships between staff who reported that they were happier, more relaxed and more confident in working with a wider range of colleagues.

_A few reflections on what was difficult with implementation_

_Mary Pat_

As we embarked on implementation of WWO there were some aspects of the programme that were harder for us to take on board as a whole setting. On the surface WWO seems simple and yet it was difficult for some of the staff to understand it on a deeper level. As I have come to understand and appreciate, WWO requires the teachers to be reflective practitioners and re-think how they go about setting up the classroom in order to provide more opportunities for children to practice their skills. For example, rather than
providing each child with their own set of materials for creative art we moved to having small groups of
children set up with a project equipped with just one set of materials to be shared. This apparently simple
reorganization provided an opportunity for children to build their skills of communication, problem solving,
negotiation and collaboration.

General classroom practice: through setting up more opportunities for children to work collaboratively
together, teachers were challenged to give up certain aspects of control in their classrooms and allow
interactions between children to occasionally breakdown, thus creating an opportunity for the learning to
take place. It was hard for staff to step back long enough for this to happen and there is clearly a
professional judgment to be made to know when to step in so that children do not get unnecessarily
distressed. However, we all came to better appreciate that when teachers facilitate every moment of
every situation it reduces the amount of learning that can take place or the space for the young child to be
an independent learner who can take responsibility for their own actions and others.

Using the pre- and de-briefing: this introduced a more facilitative approach in the classrooms, especially
with the older children. Pre and de-briefing is a different kind of conversation in the classroom, certainly to
what we were used to and, in my experience, in many early years environments; it is a longer term learning
process to evolve it as part of the fabric of the learning environment. We found that because of their age
our young children inevitably only could engage for very short amounts of time and if we wanted them to
remember enough to think about what they had just done we had to do it immediately, in the
moment, using lots of labeling and saying things like, ‘I noticed that...what do you think...?’ The children
were very quick to adapt and get used to being asked how they liked activities and working with a friend
and soon moved on from nonverbal feedback, such as giving a thumbs up or down, to being able to talk
about what they liked, how they felt and come up with creative ideas about what they could do differently
next time.

Infants and toddlers: in the beginning it was difficult to figure out how to use the WWO method with
infants and toddlers, that is children in our setting under 2.5 years of age, particularly the non-verbal
children. Through experimentation and observation we were able to come up with a number of ways to
build a foundation for the successful development of social skills and group work skills. Some of the
strategies we developed were;

• modelling with one adult and one child and then moving to encouraging two children to do
activities together independently from an adult. For example, this worked successfully and fairly
quickly with the action song ‘row, row, row your boat’. Very quickly, with our encouragement, the
children soon spontaneously chose each other rather than an adult.
• lots of labeling and using names.
• putting up a low level mirror to encourage the children to look at themselves and then each other,
with lots of labeling and making faces.

Impact on Children

Cathy and Mary Pat

Within the first year we were already seeing a difference in the interactions between children across the
setting and three years later our video data, staff questionnaires and classroom observations, as well as
feedback from parents and visitors to the setting, presented a picture that showed a wide range of
noticeable impact for all ages of children.

Collecting and watching a range of video clips of children in organized games and free play from across the
age ranges proved to be an especially valuable way of fostering conversations between staff about what
the children were learning and noticing the skills they were developing. This echoes and confirms research with the same age range of children in New Zealand where video was also identified as a valuable tool for understanding and creating a window for learning and affirming, as Jane Bone explains,

The video became another narrative text, a means of telling new stories about the children in the centre, and a way of affirming to the teachers that opportunities were given for children to have quiet reflective experiences and allow for the parents to see their children through different eyes. (2005, 307-317)

Considering the broad range of data collected we can summarize the impact we have noted across the following key areas;

1. **Children’s awareness of others and behaviour towards each other is changed** – alongside general feedback from staff and their observations of interactions in the classrooms, the ‘accident book’ shows a significantly reduced number of entries, especially around aggressive acts from one child to another. As these quotes from staff, collected from a March 2008 questionnaire, illustrate;

   The classroom is calm, children are helping each other, and they are concerned about sad / crying friends.

   Children show willingness to help friend who is frustrated.

   Children are demonstrating more empathy and compassion towards each other.

   There is less conflict overall with the infants; children recognize other children’s names/faces.

   I see empathy between the children on a regular basis.

   Children are actually able to recognize when a friend needs a hug or is in need of help.

   I think the biggest change that I have seen is the increased awareness between children and their peers. I am very impressed at how in tune the toddlers have become of the feelings and needs of the children around them. I am seeing various attempts to comfort, assist in dressing, finding a toy, or sharing a toy with a peer.

   I find with WWO, there is a lot of positive peer pressure. The children seem proud to help each other.

   I have realized that it’s possible even at such a young age to support and develop peer interactions and problem solving skills. I never realized how capable toddlers were of such interactions before.

2. **Children’s communication skills are improved** – this includes verbal and nonverbal communication for all the children, from the youngest to the older ones.

   The children’s communication skills have grown significantly. Most children are communicating more openly.

   Children are able to play together with lots of conversation and minimal teacher assistance.

   One of the biggest changes in our classroom is how most of the children express themselves with others. Negative behaviours have decreased.

3. **Children are more confident and resilient** – one way this is evident is the calmer, smoother transition
for children when moving to a new class and when a new child arrives to a class. Other feedback from staff that illustrates this includes examples such as,

Children who used to cry and get frustrated now ask for help from peer or teacher.

It’s nice to see introverted children come out of their shells and talk to us and their peers more.

4. **Children are more independent** – as some of the comments above demonstrate, we have also observed how children have developed greater ability to regulate themselves and each other independently from the adult. As a result staff across the setting generally report that they have more time to step back and observe their class;

The teacher doesn’t have as much to do as children are helping each other (more time for observations).

The children [in preschool] now ask peers for help first before asking the teacher.

Children are eagerly offering that help when it is needed.

The children are much more capable of being responsible for themselves, their peers and their classroom than I ever gave them (2.5 to 3.5 year olds) credit for.

After WWO I find I am staying back a bit more and letting children take more of the lead.

These comments also show how the implementation of WWO with children has also impacted on staff: how they see themselves professionally, their role in the children’s learning and development and their own professional practice. Alongside this there were a number of other areas of impact on the staff team that we had not initially expected.

**Impact on Staff**

*Cathy and Mary Pat*

In our ongoing conversations, meetings and feedback collected from staff there has been a consistent message that many staff recognize how this experience has encouraged them to re-evaluate their expectations of what children can do at different ages and how they can best support and help them in their learning and development;

In WWO I am quite surprised to find that what I previously thought was not possible i.e. the children 2.5 to 3.5 years of age learning to problem solve to work with each other with very minimal teacher intervention, has actually come about easily and very nicely. For the most part I no longer “referee” my children. I enjoy them and share in their enthusiasm and success.

I find that I have underestimated infants. You are always told that they are self-centered, but since WWO they love to share, and they’re quite proud when they do an act of kindness or turn taking. It’s wonderful to see. I see more awareness in the babies of each other.

My biggest challenge was translating the WWO activities to toddler mindset and abilities. Once the ball started rolling, it became easier to implement.

In addition to changing professional practice in the classroom with children, this project has also changed relationships in the staff team. We feel the experience has encouraged greater honesty, clearer communication and more risk taking, developing a climate of reflective practice and enhanced teamwork.
and collaboration. This hasn’t always been an easy journey but it is one we have shared together, one step at a time. The following selection of written comments from staff evaluations and questionnaires show how their perspectives and approach to being part of a team has changed and developed;

My biggest area of change is observing and listening to my peers’ verbal and non verbal cues and respecting them, being aware of my peers’ personal preference on communicating their needs and wants, and their teaching styles.

Working with a team, depending on coworkers for help, asking questions.

My understanding of my coworkers teaching styles and understanding that everyone is different and will do things differently.

I am better able to understand my strengths and weaknesses.

I have grown by being able to ask for help when I need it, as well as be supported by coworkers.

I have realized that each one of us (staff) has strengths that we bring to the team. I now look for that in others and look to see where my strengths can be best used so that we work well together.

Implications for Developing Staff and Professional Practice

Cathy and Mary Pat

Our shared experience over the last few years and conversations together have helped us understand and appreciate better that if we want to support staff, create an inclusive environment for both staff and children and successfully sustain and embed change in our setting, our style and method of approach needs to incorporate the following key principles:

1. On-going training and reflection is key for the adults as much as it is for the children, particularly as new staff join the team and co-worker pairs change.

2. It is very important for adults to experience what we are expecting of children. They increase empathy and compassion for the children when they can relate it back to their own personal experience. Activities with the staff as a team take place on a monthly basis to support their continued growth and development.

3. The more we reflect, the more we notice the limiting beliefs that we put on ourselves and the children.

4. Staff need to increase their ability and confidence to speak up and address issues as they arise.

5. Reflective practice is critical in the success of WWO. Once staff start to really notice and understand the changes in the children then they are more likely to continue and take WWO to a deeper level for both the children and themselves.

6. Staff have conversations at their monthly team meetings to review the previous month and plan their upcoming activities including pre and de-brief discussions.

Reflections on what this says about religious education and spirituality

So how does this fit with religious education and spirituality? Through our project we have developed the curriculum, the opportunities the children have to work together and how they learn about and experience
inclusive, accepting, positive social relationships, across all ages, including children and staff. In recognizing the value of each individual and explicitly, practically engaging them as belonging to our community we see this as fundamentally what could be described as a spiritual venture. Within the context of a Christian Early Years setting it provides a vehicle for living, teaching and expressing the values that underpin the community.

*Mary Pat*

The children in my group have a strong sense of belonging, and seem to care about each other a lot more than previous years before. WWO is a really great educational program for anyone. It is a privilege to be a part of it. (Staff survey, March 2008)

As an early years settings grounded in a Christian foundation and ethos I see that WWO has developed our Christian community beyond where we were. The children are learning and experiencing important lessons about relating to others and existing in relationship (Gerhardt, 2004), as well as being encouraged to become ‘social beings’ with gentleness and understanding to others. In addition to this, the pre and de-briefing enables appreciation of others and responsibility for one’s actions as core to the WWO approach and this can be applied to any activity and situation to enhance the learning and enable people to take responsibility for their own outcomes.

Trust as a key principle is also now better understood, appreciated and unpicked as a core value for creating an environment that is inclusive and welcoming for all, a place where people can make mistakes and have the permission to change, explore and learn. In our efforts to live and understand this better we have found that trust develops faster and is sustained between staff and children and child to child. For me this genuine acceptance of each other and how everyone interacts is a practical way of living out our Christian ethos and values, modeling it for the children in our day to day living.

As director of my setting my board entrusts me to uphold and support its Christian foundation and provide an environment where every child feels loved and connected. In reflecting on how WWO has supported this, my observations and thoughts have focused on the different aspects of what we are trying to achieve through our religious education. For me it encompasses the broad range of religion, morality, social development, citizenship, thinking skills, creativity and the child’s understanding of themselves and the world around them. So how have we extended this through WWO?

- **Religion** - In providing an explicit framework and method for teaching about relating to others with respect, acceptance and tolerance I can see how WWO can work well and fit with a religious environment as the skills that are being taught and learnt support Christian values and religious development. My personal experience and, I guess, bias, suggests that some “religious” people can recite what they should be doing but are not able to put it into daily practice. WWO creates a method for practising and learning from actions in a very tangible way.

- **Morality** – as part of engaging with religious values and translating them for young children to experience, recognise and learn, WWO supports the development of good moral values. It teaches the vocabulary, communication and thinking skills so that children can stop and be reflective about what they are doing. Pre-brief sets the stage, sets the group up for success by reminding children and adults what is expected and the skills to be used. The de-brief after an activity asks them to think about what went well, not so well and what they could do differently next time. They take responsibility! Throughout this process individuals and the group notice the impact that they are having on others; it supports learning right from wrong and how to treat other people with respect.

- **Spirituality** – if relationality and “felt connection” is one fundamental way of understanding spirituality, then spirituality is completely supported and enhanced by WWO practice. In our experience as we have intentionally built trust in our group and created a safe environment, then
people have felt a sense of belonging, a safe space to participate, try new things, make mistakes and see them as a learning opportunity that allows creative juices to flow.

- **Social Development** - Once trust has been established with the group then people feel safe to express their opinions in an atmosphere where they will be heard and respected. They also learn to listen to others and WWO creates an ethos and environment where people can work with anyone else in the room. Young children learn to understand what respect for others looks and sounds like and they are able to work and play with more than just their “best friend” as they get to know others in the group and recognize what each other’s strengths are. The consistent use of WWO activities with the 6 to 12 year old children has resulted for us in a decrease in bullying and an increase in socially acceptable behaviours, particularly in the girls. Many staff have acknowledged a decrease in the “attitude” being displayed by some of the girls.

- **Citizenship** – Over the course of our project we see our children becoming more inclusive as a cohesive community who are more co-dependent on each other rather than needing the teacher for everything. Even with very young children of 2 years old we have seen them become more aware of and sensitive to other’s needs as well as their own and being able to respond appropriately, demonstrating empathy when someone else is upset and more willing to take action to support someone in need.

By providing children with opportunities at a young age to learn social responsibility, cooperation and collaboration, it becomes a way of life for them and over a longer period of years the skills appear embedded in who they are. The use of de-briefing is crucial here as it creates the space to stop and slow children down long enough to reflect on how things went. What was the impact of the activity on themselves and others? Here children have permission to try and be different and change, they learn strategies and the language to engage with others and take responsibility for themselves and the world around them.

We are greatly encouraged by our results to date and see ourselves as creating the leaders of tomorrow! We have watched children build skills, independence and confidence to the point where they can initiate and run activities on their own and other children are happy to join in with them. They are also willing to stop and help someone in need and also ask when they need assistance, both skills that many adults often find challenging.

- **Thinking skills and creativity** – again we have found the pre and debriefing to be important here in increasing the children’s vocabulary and understanding of social skills and group work skills. In being more relaxed, open to listening to others and working together, creativity has been greatly enhanced through more effective group work. Through this the children have also developed more complex skills such as compromise and negotiation. When a group of people work together on a project and share ideas the outcome is often richer than it would have been otherwise. This has proven to be true in our experience even with children as young as 4 years of age.

- **How children engage with and see the world around them and relationships** – this very general area is for us very much entwined as part of religious education and fostering children’s spirituality. We have consistently noticed a big difference in the atmospheres of classrooms who implement WWO versus those who do not and this is confirmed by visitors to the centre who continue to comment on the difference in the atmosphere in our centre versus others.

With WWO as a general principle for learning and relating to others the atmosphere is calmer and children are much more independent, solving their differences with peers without the assistance of adults, demonstrating much better communication skills both expressively and receptively. Beyond individual classrooms our setting as a whole community is also supported and enhanced. We see that children who have established trust with peers and adults in the setting can adapt easier to
change and get along well with other children including those from different classrooms. Children are also confident to speak to adults as well as their peers, welcoming visitors to the centre and calling other children’s parents by name.

In relation to my experience from the Canadian context of early years provision my observations are that there are programs available that are designed to try and enhance character building in children such as *Roots of Empathy* and *Virtues*. My concern with these is that I think they are only able to go so far as they are missing the “how to” component. For me WWO succeeds in providing this extra piece.

**Some Conclusions**

*Mary Pat*

I have noticed that whatever we emphasize / reinforce is what we will get more of. Providing children with opportunities to build their social and group work skills and then following up by de-briefing and incorporating the learning into future activities is what will really reinforce the learning. If we add in some discussion about moral values, Christian teachings or virtues along the way, then we have the opportunity to really do some character building with long term outcomes.

Emphasizing inclusion as it does, WWO levels the playing field for all children. All children are accepted regardless of socio-economic status, race, colour, ethnicity or religion. Children learn to build trust, accept, play with and work with all other children, including those with special needs. Everyone gets to experience a sense of belonging.

*Cathy*

The diverse range of impact and ideas from what we have learnt and observed at Pumpkin Patch over the last few years gives tangible evidence to what young children are capable of socially and developmentally. It also points to ways in which we as adults can support, encourage and extend these skills and growth. As well as pointing to what is possible it also shows how easily, despite our best intentions, we can stifle the young children in our care. With time for adults to reflect and make sense of what they are doing and why, we provide valuable space for enabling confident practitioners who are better prepared to take risks and more able to trust their children and become partners with them in their growing understanding and awareness of themselves and the world around them.

**Acknowledgements and Thanks**

Cathy and Mary Pat acknowledge the generous and valuable contribution of all the children, families, board members, wider community and staff at Pumpkin Patch which has enabled this work and article. All of these people have helped us take our own risks, build relationships and learn and grow together in understanding. In particular we both thank Sue Dorotea – without her continued support, professionalism, insights and friendship none of this would have been possible.

**References**


*Dr Cathy Ota is the trainer and co-founder of the Working With Others program. She is also a Co-Editor of International Journal of Children’s Spirituality.

*Mary Pat Vollick is the Executive Director of the Mount Hamilton Baptist Day Care “Pumpkin Patch”.

Brendan Hyde*

STEERING A PATH ALONG A TREACHEROUS COURSE: CHILDREN’S VOICES, COLONIZATION AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Abstract

There is a growing body of literature in relation to the need to reconceptualise knowledge, policy, theory and action about childhood and education. However, such notions have infrequently been given serious consideration in religious education in Catholic schools. This paper views religious education in the early years’ context of the Catholic school through a decolonizing lens, noting the way in which religious education has often privileged constructed categories of truth (in the form of doctrine), the power of which effectively silences the spiritual voices of children. In drawing upon the notion of shared vantage points, it suggests some decolonial possibilities for religious education in terms of utilizing a dispositional framework and by grounding religious education in the creative process centred on play.

...one must steer carefully between two ancient and deceptive rocks that guard the narrow passage into the open sea that lies beyond ordinary experience. The sharp rocks of blasphemy (thinking that one is God and can know what every individual child needs...) are on one side. On the other side are the dangerous rocks of idolatry (teaching religious language as an end in itself as if it were to be worshipped instead of God).

(Berryman, 1985, p. 127)

Introduction

When it comes to religious education in faith schools, classroom practitioners, either consciously or unconsciously, find themselves in a double bind. Firstly, contemporary education in western culture is predominantly based on a system generated by and responsive to the European context and culture of the 19th century (de Souza, 2011). As an institutionalised system of schooling, education is concerned not so much with learning that enables the individual to make meaning from and to enlighten experience as it is with the dissemination of inherited bodies of knowledge and skills that relate to professional utility and values that are socially cohesive (Erricker, 2001). In this sense, education is a colonizing construct since it privileges particular kinds of knowledge at the expense of other kinds of knowledge, and creates a “subject people” (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 84) – the students – who are viewed as lacking and in need of control by those who have generated the knowledge. And just as the context and culture of 19th century Europe sought to divide and conquer through its colonizing project, education generated by such a system similarly compartmentalises knowledge and exerts power over students.

Secondly, religions, as institutional structures that conserve and maintain tradition, act as political bodies that are concerned with matters beyond the faith of individuals. They have their focus on the construction of social values and conceptual representations of the world, according to the particular religious tradition (Erricker, 2001). It too is a colonizing concept since it seeks to control its adherents – who are also viewed as lacking and in need of salvation – through constructed categories of truth, usually represented in the form of doctrine, dogma and creeds. Thus, when these two institutionalised forms come together as religious education, the classroom practitioner potentially finds her or himself in a precarious position, engaged in an act which seeks to privilege a particular kind of knowledge (as expressed in the doctrines and
creeds of that particular religious tradition) over other ways of knowing, and in doing so, effectively controls and silences the voices of the subject people – the students.

Steering a path between these two positions is the challenge which confronts the religious educator. Positioning one’s self as God by claiming to know what every child needs – the sharp rocks of blasphemy (Berryman, 1985) – reflects much of the colonizing features of both contemporary western education and religion, in as much as religion becomes the panacea for what children need in order to live good Christian lives and to thus be saved. The teacher then “dispenses” this to the children through the various approaches outlined in diocesan syllabi. Teaching religious language as an end in itself – the dangerous rocks of idolatry – stifles children’s voices as they become entangled in propositional statements and formulae, albeit that an array of contemporary approaches to learning and teaching are utilised to lead children to an understanding of these statements and formulae. Both positions seek to exert power, to dominate and to silence the voices of dissent, in particular and in this instance, the spiritual voices of children.

It is nonetheless the contention of this paper that, when some of the tenets of decolonizing thought are considered, religious education may be undertaken in ways which seek to reclaim and honour the spiritual voices of children. Further, this may be achieved in ways which also respect the orthodoxy of the religious tradition. The following section considers the notion of colonization and how this concept might be applied to religious education. The purpose is to highlight the ways in which religious education has exerted power over children, treating them as a subject people, in order to then view this learning area through a decolonizing lens which may reclaim the voices of children and yet remain faithful to the orthodoxy of the tradition. In doing so, it is necessary to indicate at the outset that the issue at stake – honouring and foregrounding the voices of children in religious education – is complex. As is the case with all constructs, colonization (and hence, decolonization) has its limitations when applied to this issue. However, the notion of decolonization is useful in highlighting some of the ways in which children’s voices may have been silenced through the process of religious education, and for posing some possibilities in terms of how those voices might be reclaimed, foregrounded, and honoured.

**Colonization**

In attempting to describe terms such as colonization, postcolonization, decolonization, and the like, it is necessary to note that such descriptions and definitions themselves invoke the kinds of images that are challenged by postcolonial critique, those being “an enlightenment/modernist dualism...a colonialist scientific heritage...and a way of organizing thought that is alien to many people around the globe” (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 13). However, it is necessary to address and to offer a description which articulates how the author intends to apply such terms to religious education.

Colonization is a concept which has tended to be associated with the physical taking over or settling of land by a so-called dominant nation, the intentions of which were to civilize, exploit, establish an empire, and to create imperialist structures (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). For example, the British colonized Australia, and the Portuguese colonized Brazil with such aims in mind. It is also a concept that tends to be associated with the past and with conquests that no longer occur. However, as Swadener and Mutua (2007) caution, when colonization is limited only to its geopolitical and historical experience, many similar experiences whose impacts on marginalised people all over the world are consistent “with those produced at the site of geohistorical colonialism” (p. 186) are missed. There remain today many unchallenged legacies of colonialism, typically expressed in the fixing of socially constructed categories as truth.

The notion of colonization has often been associated with indigenous contexts, and its history has been well documented in terms of its effect (see for example, Battiste, 2000; Smith, 2001) and in terms of research agendas (Vidich & Lyman, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). However, Swadener and Mutua (2007) also stress the importance of extending the concept of colonization beyond indigenous contexts, thereby recognising its representation as being more than a spatial-temporal experience. Such a broadening of context understands colonization as a way of “representing, producing/inscribing, and consuming the Other through silencing and denial of agency” (p. 191) which stretches beyond the geo-spatial and historical
experiences. That is to say, the process of colonization is recognised as being at work whenever particular structures seek to silence specific groups of people, such as children, through the ways they construct and consume knowledge and experiences about such groups.

Children, society, and colonization

In recent years, the child’s voice has been on the political agenda, and in particular brought to the fore by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It gave children the right to participate in decisions which affect them (Article 12), the right to freedom of expression (Article 13), and the right to thought, conscience and religion (Article 14) (Handley, 2005). Today, children are increasingly heard in both formal and informal contexts, including opinions in matters of teaching (Wood, 2003), health, family separation and child protection. In general terms, children now have more opportunities to express their views and to shape their experiences than ever before in history (Adams, Hyde, & Woolley, 2008).

Yet when it comes to religious and spiritual matters in western culture, children’s voices are effectually silenced. Much has been written about this in terms of society’s silencing of children’s spiritual voices, the mechanisms by which this achieved, and how the spiritual voices of children might be reclaimed (see for example, Adams, 2010; Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008; Hay with Nye, 2006; Scott, 2004). Western society regards spiritual matters as a taboo topic. The silencing is then brought about by western culture’s attitude towards the spiritual, which incorporates a lack of empathy with children and how they experience and perceive the world. In short, children learn not to speak about their spiritual lives because it is not considered to be an acceptable topic of conversation.

While to some extent the way in which children’s spiritual voices have been silenced may apply to religious education, it may also be attributable to the particular structures that actively seek to silence the voices of the participants (children) through the ways in which they construct and consume knowledge and experiences about children. In religious education the learners, albeit unintentionally – although some would argue intentionally (see for example Géron, 2006) – are treated as a “subject people” (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 84) who are viewed as lacking and in need of control by those who have generated the knowledge. As such, this silencing and denial of agency amounts to colonization. A particular kind of knowledge – typically cognitive and expressed in the form of doctrines and creeds – is privileged over other ways of knowing, including the experience of the learners themselves. In doing so, the voices of the Other – the students – are effectively controlled and silenced. This form of colonization begins in fact with the very documents which have been produced to guide classroom religious educators in their practice.

Religious education, Church and school documents, and colonization

Grajczonek (2008) examined the intertextuality and alignment among Church, local diocesan and school religious education documents. While the focus of much of her work was concerned with the extent to which diocesan directives and the classroom RE program reflected and authentically translated the official Church policy in relation to religious education, significant aspects of her study also revealed the extent to which these documents and syllabi perpetuate the colonization of the learners. Using a process adapted from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Grajczonek analyses a number of statements from such documents, examining who and what participants are placed in the foreground agent positions of the text, the processes and circumstances with which the foregrounded agents are linked, as well as what participants are in recipient positions noting what is done to them and by whom.

While space does not permit a detailed discussion, the third step in Grajczonek’s (2008) adaptation of the SFL process – a consideration of what participants are in recipient positions and what is being done to them and by whom – does indicate that these documents tend to place children in the passive voice. That is, children are acted upon by the Church, by the school, by teachers, and by parents, and are associated with circumstances that seek to develop faith. This can be seen in an extract taken from the Church document titled The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School (1988). This document states “As young people come to a better knowledge of the Church they belong to, they will learn to love it with filial affection; this has obvious consequences for life, for apostolate, and for a Christian vision of the world” (n.
Similarly, the document titled *The Catholic School* (1977), in articulating the Catholic school’s role in the importance and need for catechetical instruction, states that “Here young people are helped to grow towards maturity in faith” (n. 51). Rather than viewing children as having agency and their own voice, these two documents perceive them as being recipients, and as being acted upon by those who will assist them in their maturing of faith – assuming that these children do, in fact, have faith.

Another instance may be found in one particular school’s policy document which formed a part of Grajczonek’s (2008) study. This document stated that “children are guided in understanding the uniqueness and centrality of God in their lives” (p. 7). In other words, children in this document are largely constructed as recipients, subject to the school, teachers, parents and the parish. They are also associated with circumstances that seek to develop their faith, and they are presumed to be members of their local parish community.

In each of the above instances, children are viewed as a subject people (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). By constructing children as being recipients and by associating them with circumstances that presume and seek to develop faith, their voices have been silenced and they have been denied agency. They are not viewed as being active participants who are able to understand their world and act upon it (Waller, 2005). Nor are they viewed as having already successfully managed interactions with their peers and with adults, and as being capable of pursuing agendas of their own (Ansell, 2005; MacNaughton, Smith & Davis, 2007). Instead they are perceived as lacking in some way by those who have generated the knowledge. In effect, this amounts to colonization in its most blatant form.

**Viewing religious education through a decolonizing lens: reconceptualising religious education as decolonial practice**

Viewed from a postcolonial perspective, religious education may then be seen as a discursive practice that creates unequal power structures. Those who possess the privileged knowledge (as expressed in one particular privileged form) attain power over the learners, who are viewed as lacking and, in ecclesial terms, in need of salvation. It is, however, the contention of this paper that religious education can engage in and employ decolonising practices which honour the agency and voices of the Other – the learners.

Although viewed and interpreted variously (see for example Eze, 1997; Spivak, 1999), decolonization essentially concerns the process of valuing, reclaiming, and foregrounding the voices of those who are silenced through colonizing practices (Swadener & Mutua, 2007), in this instance, children. More than this, it raises questions in terms of agency and how the marginalised are capable of interrupting or resisting the dominant discourses (Subeda & Daza, 2008; see also Goodson & Deakin Crick, 2009). It concerns questions of privilege, and of the centering of privilege (Rogers & Swadener, 1999). However, decolonization does not consist of a neat set of simple solutions. There can be no one model for decolonial practice, since, as Cannella and Viruru (2004) note, such a model would in fact be likely to colonize. Those who attempt to create such models would create for themselves positions as colonizers. Rather, decolonial practice must hold in tension a series of polar opposites. It must be emergent while at the same time planned. It must be individual while at the same time community-based. Further, it must “recognise dominant discourses while at the same time turning them upside down” (p. 124).

These tenets also hold true when viewing religious education through a decolonizing lens. Decolonial practice will not involve a linear trajectory. It is likely to be messy, complex, and context dependent – what is deemed appropriate and effective in one particular context may not hold to be so in another. It will have to hold in tension the dominant and powerful discourse, particularly as expressed in the doctrines and creeds of the Tradition, while at the same time turning these upside down by challenging the dualistic thinking created by constructions of colonizer and colonized (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). In other words, the way forward does, in fact, involve steering a path along a treacherous course.

Adapted from the work of Cannella and Viruru (2004), the following questions may provide a critical disposition from which religious educators in various and diverse contexts might begin to view (or at least to consider) religious education through a decolonizing lens:
• Are religious educators/how are religious educators producing and perpetuating forms of exclusion through practices in this subject area?
• What is the position of privilege that is created by unconscious ways of functioning that is/are Western and/or dominant (for example, knowledge, theories)?
• How can religious educators honour the voices of the participants (the children) without imposing predetermined ideas of saving, as well as who needs saving, from what, and why?
• How can religious education be conceived of in ways which places value on the learner’s experiential ways of knowing?
• Can religious education honour both the creativity of the learners as well as being faithful to the orthodoxy of the Tradition?
• How can religious educators critique their own practice to ensure that power is not generated for one group over another?

To suggest definitive answers to these questions would, as indicated above, serve to position ones’ self as a colonizer. However, Cannella and Viruru (2004) propose the notion of “shared vantage points” (p. 124) which may be created, and which may provide decolonial positions and possibilities in the contemporary educational milieu. With such a view in mind, two possible vantage points are briefly outlined below which may create possibilities for re-thinking the practice of religious education in early years’ contexts.

Learning dispositional frameworks as a corrective to the imposition of standards and learning outcomes

Outcomes-based philosophies, with their emphasis on the achievement of demonstrable competencies, typically measured against benchmarks and “progression points” through some type of standardized testing, have become commonplace in western education, and they have influenced the design of many contemporary religious education syllabi (Ryan, 1998; Welbourne, 2000). Student achievement and progress is defined according to the achievement of specified learning outcomes, which usually focus on cognition to the detriment of other ways of knowing.

When postcolonial critique is applied to the measurement of outcomes-based syllabi, the first point to note is that such syllabi assume particular forms of knowledge, and further, that these can be measured (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). Therefore, those particular forms of knowledge which are deemed to be measurable are privileged, usually to the exclusion of other ways of knowing which, although non-cognitive in nature, are nonetheless valid ways of knowing. Therefore, only those learners who are able to master these particular knowledge forms are privileged. Secondly, thinking within such constructions is deterministic. It serves to create categories into which learners can be placed, and so accepts labelling of the Other a natural occurrence. There are those who succeed. Other learners who do not achieve the specified outcomes are placed into other categories, for example those who are “at risk”, or those who are “in the lower percentile”. Thirdly, the standardized testing which usually results from outcomes based approaches becomes an avenue for “corporate capitalism, and colonialist control through market perspectives, domination, and material resources (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 144). That is to say, the imposition of testing benefits a range of companies who commercially produce and market such materials.

A way forward may be to consider a dispositional framework for learning rather than an outcomes-based approach. Claxton (2008) proposes such a dispositional framework, with a focus on learning rather than thinking, on dispositions rather than skills, on capability rather than attainment, and on infused culture-change. Carr (2001) maintains that learning dispositions comprise a set of participation repertoires from which the learner recognises, selects, edits, responds to, resists, searches for and constructs learning opportunities. Put another way, learning dispositions indicate that a learner is “ready, willing and able to participate in various ways: a combination of inclination, sensitivity to occasion, and the relevant skill and knowledge” (p. 21). Dispositions are a different type of learning from skills and knowledge. They can be thought of as habits of mind, or tendencies to respond to situations in particular ways. In drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Comber (2000) argues that young children bring with them to school their “economic, cultural social, symbolic and linguistic capital and their habitus, sets of dispositions acquired in daily life, that incline people to act in particular ways” (p. 46, my italics). Although children bring these sets
of dispositions with them to school, Claxton (2008) argues that education can and should influence the development of these particular inclinations, as well as influencing the development of the knowledge and skills associated with different curriculum subject areas.

In building upon the work of both Claxton and Carr, Hyde (2010) has applied the notion of a dispositional framework specifically to religious education, and has identified five possible learning dispositions – curiosity, being dialogical, persisting and living with uncertainty, meaning-making, and taking responsibility – which may form a dispositional framework for religious education in Catholic primary schools. In this framework, the focus is not on the outcomes attained by the learners, but rather on the ways in which learners are disposed to learn. It explores the processes by which students learn, and ways in which religious educators can nurture and encourage these processes and dispositions within the learners.

The notion of a dispositional framework (as opposed to an outcomes-based approach) represents one possible decolonial position, or vantage point from which to create possibilities for re-thinking the practice of religious education in early years’ contexts. Such a framework does not attempt to deny agency and voice, since the focus is on the learner and the particular dispositions that she or he brings to the learning context. Several of the questions posed earlier in this paper are considered in the application of such a framework, including those concerning privilege created by particular ways of functioning, and honouring the voices of the participants – the learners who are viewed as already being capable (as opposed to lacking in some way), and who bring with them a set of dispositions to the act of learning, which renders them as being “ready, willing, and able to participate in various ways” (Carr, 2001, p. 21).

**Reconceptualizing religious education in early years’ contexts as a game to be played**

Play-based learning is an accepted practice within early years’ contexts, but is also becoming a more common feature within the primary school curriculum generally. Given its relevance to learning, Berryman and Hyde (2010) argue for the centrality of play in religious education. They maintain that one of the fundamental purposes of religious practices throughout history has been to enable communities of people to creatively cope with existential issues and, in pre-historic and ancient times, to celebrate instances of survival. They draw on the seminal writings of Guardini (1953), who maintains that the liturgy is, in essence an act of play, Rahner (1965) who posits the notion of Deus vere ludens – God who plays, and Miller (1973) who conceives of the notion of theologia ludens – a theology of play, to propose that religious education then ought to centre on play and creativity.

Focusing on the notion of creativity, Berryman and Hyde (2010) suggest the idea of playful orthodoxy in religious education as a means by which to honour both the creativity and playfulness of the learners, as well as the orthodoxy of the religious Tradition. In fact these authors note that the creative process itself consists of a continuum between two opposing tendencies – an expansive, creative tendency and a conserving tendency. These are referred to as “the opening and closing tendencies of the creative process” (p. 39) and in fact are complementary elements of the one process.

The expansive tendency honours the agency and voice of the learner and privileges the learner’s own ways (or predispositions) of knowing. This tendency enables learners to play and to create meaning for themselves in relation to the religious tradition. The conserving tendency represents the orthodoxy of the religious tradition. Such orthodoxy provides the rules and structure which guide the play. All play has rules and structures, even if, as is often the case with young children, these are made up by the players as the play progresses (see for example Brewster, 1971; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Therefore, such orthodoxy is needed, and has a necessary role of the closing tendency in the creative process.

There is no one way in religious education may be reconceptualised as a game to be played. There are many possibilities. One particular approach which has been shown to honour both the opening and closing tendencies in the creative process, and which has been developed and refined over a period spanning more than thirty-five years, is Godly Play. In this particular process, the participants engage and play with the language of the Christian tradition as an art form, the purpose of which is to enable them to discern meaning in relation to issues of meaning and purpose. The Christian language system itself, and the
prepared environment of the Godly Play classroom, which is itself infused with this language system, provide the rules and structures – the orthodoxy – which guide the play.

Viewing religious education as a game to be played also represents a possible decolonial position, or vantage point from which to create possibilities for re-thinking the practice of religious education in early years’ contexts. Questions posed earlier in this paper which are considered in this particular vantage point include the notion of whether religious educators can honour the voices of the participants without imposing predetermined ideas of saving, religious education being conceived of in ways which places value on the learner’s experiential ways of knowing, and religious education honouring both the creativity of the learners as well as being faithful to the orthodoxy of the Tradition.

Conclusion

The treacherous course between the sharp rocks of blasphemy and the dangerous rocks of idolatry pose both significant and complex challenges for the contemporary religious educator. Both represent colonizing projects which may serve to disempower the learners by denying them agency and by silencing their voices. Both view the learners as lacking in some way, and in need of control by those who generate a particular type of knowledge, which is privileged over other ways of knowing, including the experiential knowing of the learners themselves.

Although there may be some limitations in applying the notion of decolonization to education, there are, however, possible shared vantage points which may provide some decolonial positions and opportunities for religious education in the contemporary educational milieu. Those briefly outlined in this paper represent some initial possibilities, for to prescribe them, or to indicate them as definite solutions would in itself amount to colonization – a point with which the author is only too well aware. The hope in presenting them is that they might provoke much needed discussion and debate among both scholars and classroom practitioners in early years’ context so that the voices of children might be valued, reclaimed and foregrounded in religious education.

References


---

1 See also Edward Said’s (1979) seminal work in this area in which he notes that the western representation of the Other as exotic, deviant and different contributed largely to dominating and having power over the Other.

2 The dispositional framework developed emanates from two larger ongoing projects funded by the Victorian Bishops’ Grant for Excellence in Religious Education, and presently involves two Victorian dioceses – the Archdiocese of Melbourne and the Diocese of Sandhurst.

3 The notion of play in the curriculum has now extended beyond the early years’ with play and project-based philosophies having application from Kindergarten/Prep through to Year 6. There are a growing number of primary schools who now utilize the work of Kath Walker (2007) and her notion of a play based curriculum across the entire school as a legitimate means of learning in which the students, in negotiation with their teachers, devise their own play and project-based undertakings.

4 For a comprehensive guide to the Godly Play process, see Berryman (2009). In this work, both the theoretical underpinnings and practicalities of Godly Play are detailed.

---

*Dr Brendan Hyde is a Senior Lecturer in the National School of Religious Education at the Australian Catholic University, Melbourne Campus.*
The following article is offered by John Sullivan, Professor of Christian Education, Hope University, Liverpool, UK who is a long serving member of the Board of the International Consulting Editors for the Journal.

SUCCESSION PLANNING FOR SCHOOL AND CHURCH

Abstract
In the first part of this article I explain why succession planning is a key feature of effective leadership and why it is needed for the healthy flourishing of Catholic parishes and schools. In the second part I outline twelve elements that, when combined, would help to create the conditions in which succession planning has a chance to take root. In this way parishes and schools would move closer to being the kind of learning communities required by the Gospel and thus live out their mission more appropriately.

1. The challenge
On the world’s political scene, it seems clear that many regimes and leaders take little thought for the long-term health of their nations; short-termism bedevils too many political decisions that affect health, the economy, climate, education and social welfare. The next election, the next source of funding, the next ally, the next favourable headline or media presentation – these are to be secured, even though the long-term needs of the people might be neglected in the process. As we have seen recently in Tunisia and Egypt, and also elsewhere, for example in Zimbabwe, leaders remain in power until the very last minute, refusing to leave office when they have clearly lost any popular mandate to rule. Rarely is enough thought given to succession planning, to who will take up next the reins of responsibility, nor to how current initiatives will be sustained in the long run, rather than simply be allowed to run out of steam and then to be replaced completely under new leadership.

So too, in the church, we see in many places a crisis of provision of leadership for the future, both in parishes and in the church’s schools. Many priests are in the twilight years of their role. Despite occasional positive blips, on the whole the supply of incoming priests to serve the people of God is seriously inadequate and unable to step into the shoes of their predecessors. Although various strategies are being tried, with regard to twinning or grouping some parishes and closing others, on the whole, and in comparison with the seriousness with which businesses consider succession planning, the continued flow of staff recruitment and strategies for developing the skills and talent already at their disposal, the Church falls far behind in such matters.

It might be thought that a major task of a parish priest is to help identify the gifts of the people entrusted to his pastoral care, to foster such gifts, to encourage their generous deployment and to help in the process of a coherent ordering and integration of these gifts in service of the common good. Holding onto all the
significant tasks in a parish and having to make all the significant decisions with regard to its functioning is a disastrous approach, one that is likely to leave the clergy burnt-out; at the same time it is an approach that is bound to fail to animate God’s people to respond appropriately to the call of the Gospel and to the needs of their community. In the light of demographic patterns, social and cultural changes, the declining numbers (and increasing age) of clergy, the Church should face up to the challenges of equipping God’s people for new forms of ecclesial life and organization. While we live sub specie aeternitatis, conscious of God’s abiding presence with God’s people, and do not have to jump onto every bandwagon out of panic that we may be left behind or that the Gospel will be rendered out-of-date and irrelevant, nevertheless, it is incumbent on us to read the signs of the time shrewdly and to be prepared to reconsider approaches that might have served us well in the past but which should not be clung onto as idols or obstacles that prevent new ways to respond to God’s call. Engaging the members and potential leaders of the church entails, among other things, giving thought to succession planning. Succession planning is about all the threats on the horizon, but also that new types of leadership and ministry are envisaged and prepared for. It means that invitations are being issued to people to accept responsibility, that support is provided and that resources are properly and equitably available. It also means putting in place many different modes of equipping people, drawing on a wide range of ways to train people, to enhance skills and to evaluate effectiveness. As a learning church, we still have much to learn about learning, about human development, about the effective deployment of human resources and about evaluation of how effective we are in living out our mission.

In Catholic schools in my own country we read constantly that there is a continuing crisis with regard to the numbers of suitably qualified and experienced people coming forward for senior posts, especially at Principal level. Although there often have to be re-advertisements for Headteacher posts in schools, this happens much more frequently in the case of Catholic schools, thereby incurring considerable expense both for adverts and for the selection process. Despite initiatives in various parts of the country, the issue of succession planning remains very high on the agenda.

For more than 25 years, I have believed that it is part of the duty of an educational leader to gradually hand over, in carefully managed stages, more and more elements of his or her portfolio of tasks and roles, to others. Obviously, to do so too quickly would be to abdicate one’s own responsibility and would be damaging to the organization for which one is responsible. However, if one fails to facilitate such handing on, there seem to be at least three possible deleterious side-effects. First, given that part of the role of a leader is to look ahead, to scan the environment, to recognise both challenges and threats on the horizon and to prepare the organization to get ready to face these, to the degree that he or she is bogged down in the day-to-day running of an organization, there is less time available for this necessarily future-oriented dimension of leadership. As a result, both icebergs (that threaten to capsize the vessel) and helpful tides (which might transport it to safer places) might be missed. In this way, leaders fall short of one of their principal duties through insufficient reduction of other duties. Second, if anything happened to them (through illness or accident or other misfortune), and as a result they could no longer function as leaders, the institution would be more vulnerable than it should be (in such an interim period between leaders) to the vagaries of change, external pressures and internal uncertainty or even turmoil. Third, by failing to engage in serious succession planning, the understanding, gifts, level of confidence and readiness of members of the community to take on new roles will be inadequately developed.

I have endeavoured, in my own career, to ensure that when I move on to a new post, there has been a gradual handing on of the baton, a detailed sharing of how and why things have been done in my own particular way, opportunities for colleagues to rehearse, wherever possible, the roles I have carried out – and all this among a range of colleagues, in order to distribute or spread capacity to maintain continuity. Of course, this has to be done in such a way as not to constrain the future, or in order merely to extend one’s legacy. As you prepare to leave it is important to display a humble awareness that one’s leaving may provide an opportunity for the organization to consider if they wish to review the necessity for the post that is being vacated; perhaps it should be discontinued; perhaps it should be modified; perhaps the duties
linked to it need to be re-distributed. Succession planning is also greatly helped by post-holders having the wisdom to judge the best time to step down, when to let go of the reins of office. Although each of us is irreplaceable, none of us is indispensable. Recognizing when one has done what one can and when it is time to allow others the chance to move things forward in their own way – this is a blessing both for the individual and for his or her community.

Another way of making these comments on succession planning is to say that leadership is less about what leaders do themselves and more about what they enable others to do. While leaders must show the way by personal example, holding onto the trappings of office and making all the decisions should not be marked features of their period of office. Instead of asking: what did I achieve? they should ask: how did I help others to grow? Unless Catholic schools can be places where personal and professional growth is encouraged and fostered, they cannot function effectively as contexts where the Gospel is realized, made real. This is also true of the parish.

Succession planning is, of course, not the only element missing that contributes to a situation where Catholic schools and parishes face an uncertain future in terms of leadership and sharing of ministries. There are many factors that cumulatively contribute to a shortage of applicants for senior posts in Catholic schools and a shortage of people coming forward to train for the priesthood and other ministries. With regard to schools, there are many other factors at work, apart from succession planning.

Let me offer some examples of these other factors, before I focus especially on succession planning. I have identified four of these factors in my own context, the UK, and I leave it open to readers to decide whether any of these might be relevant in their own context. First, Catholic school provision of religious education for older teenagers seems patchy: often it fails to excite students about the worth of studying religion and it does not show the bearing of such study on other curriculum areas; nor does it promote a sense of vocation with sufficient conviction. Second, Catholic higher education has been weak in adding value to normal higher education provision, especially in initial teacher education, where meeting the state’s requirements has dominated time and energy, leaving little scope for explicit and in-depth Christian education to be addressed. Weaknesses in Catholic higher education are not helped by the rather remote relationship between bishops and church-affiliated higher education institutions, nor by the apparent lack of interest or engagement in scholarship by bishops. Here what seems required of potential bishops is a safe pair of hands that will not rock the boat or question traditional ways of being church. The low priority given to theological literacy in Catholic higher education contributes in turn to a failure to promote distinctiveness or to adopt confident approaches to staff selection for mission. Third, advanced level provision of continuing professional development in Catholic educational leadership – with honourable exceptions – remains weak in the UK. Sometimes what is on offer is not respectable academically, not distinctively Catholic and it fails to integrate properly the professional/practical, the educational/academic and the spiritual/theological dimensions. Fourth, despite much excellent work in all sectors of the Catholic ‘system’ – in parishes, primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, seminaries, diocesan offices, youth ministry – the various parts of this system are not strongly connected. We lack ways across the system to enthuse, promote, reinforce, support, encourage; we need to get better at celebrating effort, contributions, success, progress and influence; and we need to find ways to learn from good practice wherever it occurs in the Catholic network.

Unfortunately, in some parishes, the galvanising of God’s people to offer their experience, expertise, insights, energy and gifts is stifled or hindered by poor communication between clergy and laity and a failure to challenge lay people to identify and develop their gifts and to harness them for the church. The reality is that many parishioners are better educated than their clergy, exert high levels of responsibility in their daily lives, yet seem to have little influence on the public face or daily life of the church.

2. What might be done?
In part two of this article I outline what seem to me to be some of the principal steps or elements of succession planning for Catholic schools and parishes. While some of these will apply more closely to schools and others will be more appropriate for parishes, I hope there will be sufficient overlap that the
elements identified might have some relevance for both sectors.

First of all, in succession planning there must be clarity about what the role is that is being prepared for. While this might seem to be obvious, such clarity cannot be taken for granted. Making explicit the purposes and functions of leaders or other roles or ministries is a task that some might assume has already been done and that does not need to be revisited. However, unless there is agreement about what is expected of role A, B or C, the community cannot effectively take steps to prepare people to take on this role. There might be new needs to be addressed which require new types of responsibility. Roles that were important in the past might now have become either redundant or of lower priority. Thus succession planning might lead, not simply to planning for replacement, but perhaps also to the development of new roles.

Second, there needs to be clarity about the kinds of knowledge, skills, virtues and qualities that are required for the role or task to be carried out well. These might be similar in kind to those currently being exercised, but not necessarily so, since the context might have changed since current office-holders were appointed and new challenges and opportunities might have arisen. In the world outside of church there will often be careful assessment of the nature of the job and the kinds of capacities needed to fill it adequately, with clear discrimination between qualities, skills or knowledge that are essential and those that are desirable. It is important here to separate out ‘capacity for’ from ‘has experience of’. The former has its focus on the future, on potential, while the latter is fixed on the past and actual achievement, but not on what could be achieved.

Third, there need to models or exemplars of good practice, in order to demonstrate the kind of activity and the quality of activity that is desired. Such models or exemplars might be provided by current office-holders. On the other hand, one might need to go elsewhere to observe the kind of activity that is desirable, or at least to compare current practice ‘back home’ with alternative ways of doing things. This is where better connections across the Catholic ‘system’ can help – by making people aware of where initiatives are being attempted, where pockets of good practice can be identified, where role models can be observed and talked to, so that their experience is drawn upon and their insights properly weighed. Not all good ideas or practices are transferable to other contexts; some ideas or practices that failed in one context should still be considered for elsewhere; and so it is important to seek to identify what in the local context has helped or hindered progress when an initiative has been attempted.

Fourth, a supportive and encouraging professional ethos is vital. Fostering learning, sharing successes and defeats, acknowledging high and low points and questioning about principles and practice – all these play a part in developing the right ethos. Sharing vulnerability is a major high road to personal and professional growth. There is no real learning without risk of falling short. It must feel safe to take such risks; there must be opportunities to share worries; remaining only in our safety zone will prevent growth.

Fifth, each of us benefits from opportunities to practice bite-sized parts of a bigger role than those that we are enacting at the moment. Such rehearsals should be attempted with a safety net (that is, under supervision and with the possibility of being rescued if things go badly wrong). Feedback on our attempts to try out responsibilities beyond our current remit should be provided by more experienced mentors. Prompts for reflection and self-evaluation should be readily available. In a school, teachers might be encouraged to lead an assembly, chair a meeting, be involved in timetabling, observe a selection interview, or try out using a lesson observation pro-forma alongside a more experienced educator as they observe someone else’s classroom practice. A parishioner might be offered a chance to offer a post-communion reflection, lead a mid-week prayer service, chair or act as scribe for a meeting, organise a trip or a social activity or contribute to a welcoming ministry. These opportunities to try out a role should be repeated, rather than experienced as merely a one-off occasion.

Sixth, succession planning depends on there being in place serious attempts at eliciting feedback from those working ‘under’ current office-holders, for example, pupils/students, teachers, other staff,
parishioners. The purpose of such feedback would be, not to be judgemental, but to ascertain what, with regard to current practice, is going well and what is going less well; it can also help in identifying if there are any gaps in provision. Such evaluation should include parties external to the work situation, for example, parents, inspectors (ecclesial and secular), clergy, trustees or others. This feedback should inform step one (above); it will also prove useful for other steps being outlined here.

Seventh, information from the feedback sought in step six should be available to junior staff (in school) or to parishioners in general, so that they can see how their own perceptions and evaluations of how tasks are being carried out are matched, reinforced, extended, contradicted or qualified by those of other parties. When we encounter differing assessments of how roles are being exercised, this can provide quite a jolt and sometimes it constitutes a valuable learning experience. It can open our eyes and deepen our sensitivity to come across perceptions that contrast with what we thought was the case.

Eighth, it would greatly help succession planning if collaborative initiatives could be developed across a diocese, religious order, or local area to foster exchanges of staff, limited secondments, wider sharing and learning (I deliberately avoid the term ‘training’) opportunities. Such exchanges should include opportunities for staff to compare how different institutions establish different priorities and develop different strategies for addressing their mission. They should also foster a spirit of camaraderie among cohorts of potential leaders. What is not wanted here is any encouragement of insistent or competitive individualism.

Ninth, opportunities for mentoring and coaching for individual guidance should be available. These opportunities should be offered carefully because some people might want to experiment with a role or wish to seek advice about what is entailed in taking on a particular task, but at the same time they might want to retain the right not to proceed if it turns out to be too difficult or not what they hoped for. Thus the chance to experiment and the seeking of advice need to take place out of the limelight and with a degree of confidentiality. But it can be made known that members of staff and parishioners with some experience of various roles and tasks can be approached and are willing to serve as mentors or coaches ‘behind the scenes’ and without those seeking them out having to confirm their commitment to taking up such roles afterwards. Mentors and coaches should avoid being too prescriptive or intrusive in how they support those who come for advice or guidance. Their role is to listen, to share experience, to offer but not to impose. ‘This is what works for me ...’ ‘I have found it helpful to ...’ ‘You might want to think about ...’ ‘Suppose you did it this way round ...’ ‘Why do you think it worked out like that?’ ‘How might you tackle that differently next time?’ Their task in mentoring is not to produce clones of themselves but to create the kind of learning space in which mentees can grow into a role in their own way, in safety, with the support of someone with some relevant experience (but who is not necessarily an expert).

Tenth, there needs to be in place in schools and parishes, but also at diocesan level, strategies for identifying potential leaders and encouraging them to access both normal and accelerated learning opportunities. Of course, this cannot happen without there being clarity as to what the role is and also about what are the key qualities, skills and types of knowledge needed to carry it out. Schools, parishes and dioceses need to ask themselves: how will we recognize who might be able to take on particular tasks or who could grow into being a leader in some aspect of our mission? What kinds of signs might tell us who to approach? How do we identify potential? How do we smooth the path for people to respond to our invitation to undertake some formation or learning? What is the role of our community in helping people hear and embrace the call to discipleship in particular ways? If we are to avoid favouritism and if we are to be inclusive, how do we ensure that as many talents as possible are identified, affirmed, and where possible, strengthened and coordinated in service of the community? Who will be responsible for such discernment and how will they go about it? Are procedures transparent and accountable to the community, so that they can be modified, extended or enhanced, as appropriate? Once people have been identified as possible future holders of roles or as potential leaders, what learning opportunities will be made available, by whom, when and where?

48 Journal of Religious Education 59(2) 2011
Eleventh, in order to give credibility and transferability to any learning opportunities, it would greatly help if there was in place a multi-level (and at least partly accredited) framework of advanced academic and professional learning opportunities, catering from induction through to retirement. Such a framework goes beyond the remit or capacity of a particular school or parish. It would need to be arrived at by consultation and collaboration with the wider church (at diocesan or regional level) and probably also with a university, with all working together to ensure that learners experience an integration of intellectual, practical/professional and personal/spiritual dimensions. A framework of accredited learning opportunities, stretching from the most basic skills to very high levels of ministerial formation, would avoid parishes and schools having to invent the wheel over and over again; it would facilitate their drawing upon wider fields of candidates, and it would encourage transferability of learning beyond the local area or context where it was originally gleaned. It would also encourage a climate of learning as integral to the flourishing of the church and its institutions and agencies.

Twelfth, to support all the above, succession planning also benefits from a rigorous yet supportive framework of appraisal, one that facilitates in-depth self-knowledge and self-evaluation in relation to tasks and roles. In the parish context, where many roles and tasks are carried out by unpaid volunteers, the degree of rigour is likely to be considerably less than it should be in the case of paid professionals in the school sector. However, in both cases, appraisal can greatly boost our capacity to grow, to check out how our contribution is being received by others, to identify how we might make improvements in what we do, and to discern what kinds of help we need in doing so. Built into the appraisal process can be a concern for mutuality and reciprocity, underlining the service orientation of roles. Three particularly powerful questions posed by an appraisee to individuals or groups he or she seeks to serve can help here: first, what am I doing that you find helpful? Without knowing the answer to this, one might drop a practice through lack of awareness of how it is being welcomed. Second: what am I doing that you do not find helpful? Again, feedback from this question might indicate which practices should be dropped. Third: what am I not doing that you would find helpful? It is likely that this question would lead to some suggestion that could be taken on board; but even if the appraisee finds that she or he cannot follow up a particular proposal or request, at least they have the chance to explain why not.

***   ***   ***

While we can be confident that God’s Holy Spirit abides with the Church and her schools, and although we can be sure that the gates of hell will not prevail against them, nevertheless, we would be seriously at fault if we failed to do what it is in our power to do to sustain and promote the mission. Equipping people to carry out their roles appropriately, with confidence and joy, but also effectively and wisely, is integral to building a community based on the Gospel. Succession planning - and the steps associated with it that I have outlined above - is a major responsibility of the ecclesial community. Although some of these steps would be difficult for one school or one parish to manage on their own, many other steps are within reach even for individual schools and parishes, do not require high levels of financial, technical or expert resources and they offer the promise of a more involved, more open, more confident, and better informed pilgrim community.
“Religious education needs to fight secularism” ???

This is what the religion teachers were urged to do. The enemy was clearly identified. If only it were that simple – a good old battle between good and evil, to reverse the decline in church participation.

Rather, what is needed is a deeper understanding of this secular, cultural complexity. And then probing its spiritual and moral dimensions can be one of the most valuable tasks that religious education can perform in schools and in other contexts.

Firstly, ‘secularism’ is an anti-religious ideology, and it needs to be distinguished from ‘secularisation’ which is a cultural process with a long history, where religion has become less prominent in personal and social life. It is a reality in Westernised countries that, depending on your point of view, has both positive and negative aspects. A cogent argument that throws light on the issue has been developed by the Belgian theologian, Lieven Boeve (2007, 2011).

Boeve proposed that behind secularisation are three interrelated cultural processes – detraditionalisation, individualisation and pluralisation. Detraditionalisation (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, seeking adherents. Boeve considered that there is an interplay between these cultural processes that affect the way individuals construct personal meaning and identity – with parallels for collective meanings and identities. People take up different stances through the ways 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. The table on the next page, developed from the ideas of Boeve (2011, p. 299) summarises the interactions.

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. In addition to providing access to religious heritage, religious education needs to help resource and empower young people’s own identity-forming processes – to make their DIY identity development more informed and healthy. This needs an understanding of what is involved in identity and spirituality development, and of how cultural meanings can have a shaping influence. This is where interpreting the interactions shown in the table is relevant – firstly for the religious educators themselves. Then young people need to be set to work to research the issues so that they will be better informed about identity development and the potential pitfalls in various ideological strategies that can affect it.

So it appears that ‘fighting against secularism’ is the wrong answer. It is not even the right question! – because it tends to comes from an identity based on ideological traditionalism. As both St Paul and Pope John XXIII would have advised: Religious education needs to ‘read the signs of the times’. There is much that can be learned through researching the issues embedded in the table overleaf, and evaluating what is happening from the standpoint of Gospel values.
The table below helps interpret the interactions between cultural processes (a combination of secularisation, detraditionalisation, individualisation and pluralisation) and ideological strategies for personal and collective identity construction. It shows how the ideological strategies follow different paths in trying to address the same identity-related challenges. All of the ideological responses have flaws and problems. How one might respond constructively to the cultural challenges in contemporary identity construction can be helped by understanding these interactions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideological strategies for dealing with the challenges in the contemporary cultural situation</th>
<th>View of reality, the world and meaning in life in the various ideologies</th>
<th>Main focal point of the ideological strategy and of personal/collective identity construction</th>
<th>Interpretation of how this mode of identity construction helps the individual address or cope with challenges in the culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>The worth and value of the individual take absolute precedence; individuals have the right to be the principal authors of all that happens to them in life. Presumes personal freedom, self-reliance and independence from control by any others or any institution.</td>
<td>The individual</td>
<td>The loss, decline or low plausibility of life-guiding traditional religious world views lead to lifestyles in which no meanings, values, or truth are taken as authoritative (normative) unless endorsed by the individual's own preferences. In other words, individuals themselves have become their own 'touchstone' for authenticity and truth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relativism</td>
<td>No points of view are absolutely valid or true; hence all views are regarded as equally valuable because they all have only a relative, subjective value according to people's differing opinions.</td>
<td>All opinions are more or less equal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nihilism</td>
<td>Life has no objective meaning, purpose of value; hence there are no authoritative meanings; no world views seem to offer anything useful.</td>
<td>Purpose in life is a myth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aestheticism</td>
<td>Relatively exclusive pursuit of beauty and high culture in all their forms.</td>
<td>Beauty you can discover and enjoy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existentialism</td>
<td>Living just for the 'here and now'; quest for 'feel good' experiences.</td>
<td>How you feel at the moment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism</td>
<td>Prejudice against or hatred of other race(s) based on no criteria other than their racial origin.</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Individuals seem to protect themselves from challenges to their views, lifestyle and authority through strategies that bolster their security. They insulate themselves from potential challenges and criticism, from the decline in traditions, from the insecurity of having to construct your own identity, and from the threats posed by others with different views; they do this by withdrawing into a self-securing protective identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism</td>
<td>Strong national identification expressed in a sense of being superior to other nations; may be manifested lead to aggression towards</td>
<td>National identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditionalism</td>
<td>Strong adherence to what are defined as the orthodox view, values and doctrines; often reacting against what are perceived to be liberal views.</td>
<td>Tradition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundamentalism</td>
<td>Strict adherence to a particular set of religious doctrines, typically as a reaction against liberal views; often expressed in a literalist interpretation of sacred writings and doctrines.</td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilitarianism</td>
<td>Value is ultimately determined by what proves to be most useful to the majority; 'the end justifies the means'.</td>
<td>Utility and the economy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Graham Rossiter, Australian Catholic University
Richard Rohr Spirituality Resources
Practical suggestions suitable for the beginning through to the more experienced teacher

Dr. Peter Mudge

Introduction

The purpose of this resources section is to provide a practical guide, ranging from the needs of beginning to more experienced teachers, for accessing the writings and other publications of Franciscan Richard Rohr. This listing extends from his books and articles, through to his CD and audio recordings, podcasts, and journal publications. In addition, it is designed in a self-contained format that offers a brief biography of Richard Rohr and lists his major publications compact enough to be used as a two-page back to back teacher handout.

Richard Rohr is described in one source as follows: 'Richard Rohr, O.F.M. (born in 1943 in Kansas) is a Franciscan friar ordained to the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church in 1970. He is an internationally known inspirational speaker known for his recorded talks and numerous books. Rohr was the founder of the New Jerusalem Community in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1971 and the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1986 where he currently serves as the Founding Director. Scripture as liberation, the integration of action and contemplation, community building, peace and social justice issues, male spirituality, the Enneagram and eco-spirituality are amongst the many themes that he addresses in his writing and preaching. He is best known for his writings on spirituality and his audio and video recordings. One of his most popular recordings is The NEW Great Themes of Scripture. Rohr is a contributing editor and writer for Sojourners Magazine and a contributor to Tikkun Magazine. He was one of several spiritual leaders featured in the 2006 documentary film ONE: The Movie' (Source: Wikipedia site as listed below).

Books and Articles

Beginning teachers:


Experienced teachers (ordered according to year of publication and revision):


**CDs and DVDs (unless otherwise stated, all are available from and published by Men Transforming Men, Brisbane, Australia [site listed below])**

**Beginning teachers:**

Spiritual Life; The Little Way (Therese of Lisieux); the Spiral of Violence; Masculine Spirituality; St Francis; and Gospel readings and homilies (6 CDs).


Experienced teachers (selected list only):


(2003). The Path of Descent (4 CDs). A key theme in Rohr’s writings, particularly his more recent publications. He refers to ‘the language of descent’ as the ‘theme of themes’ in the Bible. Referring to it variously as powerlessness, the bias from the bottom, the way of the cross or vulnerability, Rohr believes that human beings have to be taught how to win by losing, just as Jesus and early Christianity did.


(2004). Scripture as Liberation (7 CDs).


(2005). The Two Major Tasks of the Spiritual Life (1 CD).


(2009). Where You Are is Where I’ll Meet You – A guide for spiritual directors (2 CDs).

(2010). Exploring ‘The Naked Now’ – Learning to see as the mystics see. (2 CDs).

(2010). (with James Finley and Cynthia Bourgeault). Following the Mystics through the Narrow Gate... Seeing God in All Things. (9 CDs).


54 Journal of Religious Education 59(2) 2011
Audio books and pod casts (selected list, available from iTunes or other providers; all downloaded 2010 and all published in Cincinnati, OH by St Anthony Messenger Press)

Beginning teachers:

*Gospel readings and homilies* (each 20-30 mins: subscribe to via iTunes). A good, general introduction to Rohr’s major themes within a homiletic and pastoral context.

*Why be Catholic?* (5 hrs 28 mins).

*A Man’s Approach to God: Four Talks on Male Spirituality* (5 hrs 11 mins).

Experienced teachers:

*Adam’s Return: The five promises of male spirituality* (8 hrs).


*Embracing Christ as Francis Did: In the Church of the Poor* (47 mins).

*Letting Go: A Spirituality of Subtraction* (7 hrs 12 mins).


*Rebuild the Church: Richard Rohr’s Challenge for the New Millennium* (5 hrs 19 mins).

*Richard Rohr on Scripture: Collected Talks, Volume Two* (4 hrs 31 mins).

*Sermon on the Mount* (7 hrs 30 mins).


**CAC Journal**

*Radical Grace* is the publication of the Centre for Action and Contemplation. It addresses issues of contemplation and action through topics on social justice, spirituality, theology, simple and sustainable living. There have been at least 20 issues published since January-March 2006. Themes include – Awareness, Non-Dual Thinking, Practicing Mercy, Renewing the Face of the Earth, Great Suffering and Great Love, and The Spirituality of Work, to name but a few (for the full list of titles, refer to the Radical Grace website below).

**Sources and Recommended Websites (coded B = beginning teachers; E = experienced teachers)**

[all retrieved on 10 October 2010]

Articles by Richard Rohr - [http://www.malespirituality.org/articles_by_richard.htm](http://www.malespirituality.org/articles_by_richard.htm) (E)

Catholic Update Richard Rohr article: Eight Good Reasons for Being a Catholic - [http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac0888.asp](http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac0888.asp) (B)

Christian Voices website on Richard Rohr - [http://www.christian-voices.org.uk/Richard-Rohr.htm](http://www.christian-voices.org.uk/Richard-Rohr.htm)


Further readings from Rohr on Jesus and Paul as Liberators - [http://cacradicalgrace.org/resources/bibliographies.html](http://cacradicalgrace.org/resources/bibliographies.html) (E)

Mustard Seed resources site -
www.cacradicalgrace.org/Merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=CTGY&Category_Code=NR&Store_Code=CFAAC (B)
Radical Grace magazine subscriptions, current and previous editions - www.cacradicalgrace.org/rg/ (E)
Richard Rohr forever searching for elusive meaning, National Catholic Reporter, 2 December 1994 –
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1141/is_n6_v31/ai_15985423/ (B)
Richard Rohr on male spirituality - http://www.malespirituality.org/ (E)
Teaching Our Children to Meditate - http://cacradicalgrace.org/resources/kids_meditation.html (B)
The Free Library interview with Richard Rohr -
http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Don%27t+miss+the+second+half%3B+the+editors+interview+Father+Richard...-a0134385276 (E)

*Dr. Peter Mudge is a Lecturer – Religious Education and Spirituality at the Broken Bay Institute, Diocese of Broken Bay, NSW, Australia. His other areas of interest and research include – sacred space, connected knowing, Studies of Religion, transformative pedagogies, and the role of the arts and spirituality in religious education. He has received formal training in drawing and painting which he pursues in his art studio.

A selection of his copyright-free art images can be found at: www.flickr.com/photos/ceoreals/sets

His contact email is: pmudge@bbi.catholic.edu.au

John Sullivan is professor of Christian education at Liverpool Hope University, UK. He has more than twenty years of professional experience in schools as teacher, administrator and inspector, followed by a substantial period working at a university level. He has published widely on religion and education and has been guest lecturer in Australia a number of times.

This is a significant and comprehensive twenty-three chapter, six-part book about the communication of faith written from the perspective of the Christian faith community. Part one of the book, The grammar of faith, including the opening chapters by Sullivan and Astley, consider basic meanings and definitions, as well as principles that might inform activities concerned with the communication of Christian faith. It seeks to combine "concern for distinctiveness (that what is communicated is Christian) with striving towards inclusivity (of people, subject matter, situations). In the process of passing on and receiving, of mutual exchange and reciprocal learning, there will be both conservation and innovation." (p.1)

In the first chapter, Sullivan considers how Christian education needs disciples who are well equipped in their own professional development to work in ever more inclusive contexts. "The formative imperative aims for solidarity with and embeddedness within the Christian tradition and community, while the 'frontier work' opens up disciples to what is beyond. ... An appropriate balance between these two aspects [is always needed]" (p.1). Chapter 2 (well written by UK scholar Jeff Astley) focuses on what is understood by faith, and what is understood by the communication of faith. The book is mainly about educating people in matters of Christian faith in different contexts. This means trying to educate so that the Christian faith tradition itself can be handed on to the next generation; and there is also the hope that this may prompt the deepening of personal faith and commitment – this latter aspect is not 'communicated' in the same way as are knowledge and understanding. The book's diverse chapters are thus open to many nuances and complexities related to 'the faith' (tradition), belief content of faith, its personal commitment dimension and what might be involved in the 'development' of personal faith.

Part two (Baselines) is concerned with the "starting points for communicating faith", for children, adults, in the home and in church life. Part three explores school context, with attention given to the following perspectives – spiritual, curriculum, leadership and pedagogy. The fourth part of the book looks at the higher education context. Part five develops an international perspective, looking at key issues for the Christian communication of faith in diverse national settings including the United States, Africa and Europe. The final sixth part of the book (Aspects of communication) examines some of the psychological and educational processes related to educating in faith. It looks at philosophical, pedagogical and aesthetic dimensions together with consideration of the significance of contemporary cultural meanings and mass media.

John Sullivan made a substantial contribution of 5 chapters and the introduction. His experience and wisdom together with a clear and uncomplicated writing style always make his contributions worth considering. Other writers known to Australasian readers were Lieven Boeve (theology for postmodern
times – underpinning much of the Leuven University identity research project in Australia) and Stephen McKinney (religious education), among others.

This book makes a very valuable contribution to contemporary religious education because of the access it gives to a significant volume of new material concerned with religious education and the handing on of the Christian faith tradition. As such, it will not only be useful for academic study but also for reading and reflection in the local faith community, schools, higher education and in diocesan offices. It has much to offer catechists, teachers, clergy, youth ministers, theologians and diocesan authorities.


In Westernised countries over the last 100 years, with religions no longer taken for granted as having a dominant and relatively unquestioned role as the main life-guiding institutions, public discourse about the spiritual and moral dimensions to life has changed. Increasingly, new constructs are being used to enable coherent community discussion of these dimensions without depending on religious words; there have been many of them: – character, personal development, citizenship, wisdom, resilience, well-being, values, etc. Social and community cohesion is relatively new to this discourse; it stresses that in an accepting, pluralistic, multifaith community there remains the need to promote co-operation, community and tolerance; it is concerned with what helps hold the community together and what promotes harmonious social life.

This 16 chapter collection looks at how religious education, both in public and religious schools, might contribute towards social and community cohesion. Basically it is a question of the contribution of religious education to the common good. In providing both overview and conclusions, Grimmitt's own chapters make use of historical perspective, showing how religious education in UK schools has repeatedly adjusted to address new agenda both from emerging social needs and political requirements. And he suggests that a clarification of its role in contributing to community cohesion helps address the problems created through living in societies where religion is increasingly globalised and politicised. The last 45 page chapter by Grimmitt provides one of the most comprehensive, yet brief overviews of significant developments in British religious education since the 1970s. It is worth having this book just for this chapter alone. The book also includes chapters by well-known British authors Pring, Copley, Gearon, Wright, Baumfield and Rudge – among others.

The sorts of questions that the book addresses include the following:

- What might we understand by social and community cohesion and why is it important for societies today?
- How might education generally and religious education in particular contribute to social and community cohesion?
- How has religious education evolved and morphed over the years to address new educational, social and political agenda?
- Does knowing about religion encourage young people to have positive attitudes to diversity and pluralism?
- Do religious schools help or hinder social and community cohesion?
- What is the relationship between religious education and citizenship education?
- What is the most appropriate contribution that school and religious education might make to the creation of a just and equitable society?
- Does the academic study of religion in schools tend to relativise and domesticate religious traditions by imposing analytical structures for their study and interpretation?
- To what extent might religious education be helpful in combating extremism?

While essentially about British religious education, and while some of the material would not be of
interest to outsiders, this book still has much to offer to Australasian religious educators by prompting reflection about a whole range of issues related to personal development, social life and community—and their relationship with education. As Michael Grimmitt moves into retirement, this book will probably be the last in a long line of very significant publications that have made an invaluable contribution to thinking about religious education in the English-speaking world and beyond.

Graham Rossiter, Australian Catholic University, Sydney


The reflections contained in this book relate to a particular context of Australian society in the first decade of the 21st century. Tom Frame draws on his extensive experience as a minister in the Anglican Church to discuss his perceptions and understandings of the drift from the Christian churches in Australia during the past few decades. He sets out to identify and understand the reasons for the decline in religious belief which has led to unbelief and claims that ‘the interactions between believing, behaving and belonging provide a useful grid within which to explain both the persistence of belief and the drift to unbelief.’ (p. 12)

Frame points out that he is talking about is ‘unbelief’ rather non-belief and argues that atheism is but one form of non-belief. In order to arrive at an accurate definition of unbelief, Frame discusses characteristics of varying stages that move from belief, through non-belief and disbelief to unbelief. He describes unbelief as a default position which may be located somewhere between belief and disbelief: ‘Unbelievers are located between belief and disbelief… religious unbelief is not a denial of God but an inability to believe in God’. (p. 22) It is where the believer is unable to believe because s/he does not have adequate grounds or sufficient justification to believe.

He then identifies four sources of unbelief: intellectual –cognitive where the evidence to promote belief is overshadowed by the evidence against believing. Another source is cultural-ethical where a person may choose not to believe because of personal preference or because the belief is linked to a group with whom they are unable to feel any alliance or allegiance. The third source is ideological where the belief may conflict with an ideology that the person has to a particular political or social movement. Finally, the fourth source of unbelief appears to be related to the third source. It derives from a form of moral, social or political protest where, for instance, the individual links belief to religious teachings that are antithetical to personal freedom or which may encourage adherents to violence.

Frame prepares the ground for his discussions of unbelief by first examining the related concepts of faith, religion and spirituality. He acknowledges that definitions of religion have changed over time and raises some questions as to whether a belief system must have the presence of an ultimate deity in order to qualify as a religion and whether religion is only about beliefs and values or should it also encompass customs and affiliations. His contention is that spirituality, in the western world, has emerged as a protest against religion and it tends to flourish where formal religious allegiance has declined and where religious institutions have lost control of individualized expressions of spirituality. Thus, spirituality must not be confused with religion. Accordingly, Frame offers the following definition of religion:

the performance of certain rituals and customs arising from a specific set of beliefs to which an individual or a community conscientiously subscribes with respect to a deity to which the individual and the community is held morally and conscientiously accountable. Religion involves the assumption of an alignment of a person’s believing, behaving and belonging. (p. 25).

Having set the stage for his research into unbelief, Frame structures his book into four sections. The first deals with the Australian context, both historical and contemporary, which frames the movement from belief to unbelief. He then examines the causes (Section 2) and consequences (Section 3) before drawing
his conclusions in Section 4. In all, Frame has presented his arguments knowledgeably and concisely with detailed discussions of various philosophies and theories to support his views. However, his discussions and arguments are contextualized by and contained within an Anglo/Euro Australian Christian setting. While this is necessary when discussing the first two hundred years of Western Christianity in Australia, there is little or no reference to the belief systems outside this framework that are clearly evident in contemporary Australia. ‘Unbelief’ for Frame is mostly about Anglo/Euro Australians who have drifted from the mainstream Western styled Christian churches into atheism or some other form of non-belief. His discussion, therefore, is pertinent to only a sector of Australian society as it exists in the twenty-first century. Frame contends that the weakness of religion in this country is due to the inability of Australians to perceive the importance attached to religion in other countries (p84). It is unfortunate, then, that he has ignored the importance attached to religion of many new settlers in Australia whose countries of origin are non-European. The religions that have been identified in recent Census figures as fast growing are largely ignored and their levels of belief or unbelief are not referred to. Equally, there is little reference to the Australian Christians whose beliefs and practices originated, for instance, in Asia, Africa, Latin American and the Middle East. Accordingly, Frame fails to acknowledge that new migrants may have an impact on the levels of beliefs and practices within the Christian Churches or, indeed, that a rather conservative form of Christianity may emerge as a result of these beliefs and practices. Nonetheless, Frame’s book will be a useful read for many religious educators in Australian Catholic and Christian schools since it provides some interesting insights into the drift from the mainstream Christian churches that has occurred in the past several decades.

Dr Marian de Souza
Australian Catholic University, Ballarat


This edited volume is the product of a conference held at Liverpool’s Hope University. The theme, Engaging Religious Education, is indicative of both the place of religious education in the curriculum of public and denominational schools in the United Kingdom as well as the evident challenges in teaching it. The book contains eleven chapters with an eclectic range of topics ranging from current controversies such as the implementation of the Prevent Strategy in schools (this aims to prevent al Qaeda influenced terrorism), timeless topics such as the place of Christianity in religious education and new emerging areas such as the new religious movements in religious education. As the volume lacks a coherent theme in this review no attempt will be made to be comprehensive. Rather a number of chapters will be examined.

Hannam provides a chapter on philosophy for teenagers and argues for an inquiry based approach to this. The author’s argument rests on the sound assumption that much RE in contemporary classrooms, especially in the United Kingdom, should have a philosophical base rather than a theological one. This orientation would be able to deal more effectively with the growing numbers of students with little or no religious background and also the religious diversity of schools today. Her proposal for an inquiry based approach to philosophy resonates with those in university or college settings where instructors have a strong philosophical background and where students are enrolling in courses of their own volition. In the school setting, secondary or primary, the basis for inquiry based learning in philosophy or religious education is less sound. This is not to say that it has no place but many of the assumptions that Hannam brings to her argument can be questioned. For instance, there is much recent discussion in the wider use educational literature on the utility of inquiry based models of learning in areas where students have little or no background. Teachers using inquiry based models need to have well developed skills and competencies. A perennial problem with religious education teachers is their lack of content knowledge in theology, scripture, Church history and related areas. This is not as pressing an issue in the United Kingdom as in other places such as Australia or Canada. It is, nonetheless, worth considering. If we add to our list of competencies a familiarity with philosophy then many classroom teachers may find it difficult to use an
inquiry based approach. These models require highly engaged mentoring where the teacher, amongst other things, provides scaffolding for future learning that is very content specific. To illustrate, two key authors that Hannam uses, quite appropriately, in her chapter are Gilbert Ryle and John Dewy. How many RE teachers are familiar with these philosophers and could use their insights to frame their own pedagogical practice?

Stern’s chapter presents a case for a more engaged religious education where students are encouraged to grapple with the fundamental realities of life. He sees these as often neglected in the classroom because they can illicit strong emotions and raise complex theological issues. For Stern, however, this is precisely why they should be raised. These “dangerous” issues rescue RE from a kind a hermetically sealed irrelevance where the things that matter to students are rarely raised. So while the classroom remains safe – from a content point of view – it is also somewhat sterile. Stern argues that for too long educational philosophers and religious educators have denied the reality of issues such as love and death in the lives of students. To engage with these themes in the RE classroom gives the discipline and the whole school a chance to evolve into a more spirited community. Holt presents a chapter on “Beyond the Big Six”. This is an examination of the issues surrounding New Religious Movements and how they are presented in religious education. The big six here are the six major religious faiths which have a privileged place in the current religious education curriculum in the United Kingdom. But what of other communities, should they also be covered in the national curriculum? For instance, in many parts of the country Jehovah’s Witnesses are more numerous than Buddhists. If one of the goals of the national RE syllabus is to increase understanding and assist social cohesion is there a case for including material on religious communities outside the big six? This of course raises the important question of what is the best way to deal with religious diversity in the curriculum.

This volume makes for a very interesting read and represents some of the cutting edge thinking about religious education in the United Kingdom.

Professor Richard Rymarz
St Joseph’s College, University of Alberta, Canada


This is an extremely complex book written by an Anglican minister who, after long involvement in parish life, moved into Clinical Theology (which has an idiosyncratic meaning for him) and counselling. It is hard reading. Just as an example, there are six diagrams at the end of the book (the relevance of which is not immediately clear) and they are among the most intricate I have ever encountered. For Figure 4, I had to resort literally to a magnifying glass, while Figure 6 is sub-titled: ‘A Model correlating the Transitional States, ‘Active’ and ‘Passive’, described by St John of the Cross, with the Theraputic (sic) Integration of the Psychodynamic Roots of Depressive, Hysterical and Paranoid-Schizoid Disorders.’ I am unsure what the title means, why there are two sizes of printing and I certainly cannot understand the configuration of columns, boxes, levels, arrows etc. That is not the only matter I find opaque in the book.

The text refers at length to the writings of Bonhoeffer, Freud, John of the Cross, Jung, Nicholas Lash, Pannenberg, N.T. Wright plus a list of other British theologians. Most of all, it is an attempt to relate and revive the work of Frank Lake (1914-1982) who put forward a ‘psychodynamic therapy’ in contradistinction to better known psychoanalytical practices in the style of Freud and Jung. Forshaw wants to redefine the activity of the Christian Church and its mission as establishing worship groups who extricate themselves from certain defensive behaviours encouraged by religion. In so doing, he wants to reform parish life and have it based on a new version of community life. He sums this up in this paragraph:

Following through these considerations with appropriate rigour will involve the Church in
rethinking her faith and the way it is presented to the world. As far as possible Christianity needs to be set free from unhealthy habits that go with treating it as a ‘religion’, in the sense of a range of cultural activities that can be understood apart from the rest of life, rather than a particular way of being human. (p. 33)

On many occasions the book returns to what Lake had maintained: the sense of God being present to uphold all people as persons is grounded in foetal experience. After this foetal experience, human individuals might fall into ‘extreme conditions of depravity’ but there remains under ‘layers of disorder’ the ‘memory of acute original sensitivity being satisfied by a presence that could only be God’s own personal presence’ (p. 56). Forshaw then describes his counselling method: ‘... the (model) I am proposing, of subject-self and personhood in alternating movement, looks beyond the individual’s task of balancing and integrating a variety of responsibilities, to focus on where the Spirit facilitates personal change (p. 77). This is what psychodynamic therapy is all about.

As an interesting aside, Forshaw argues that the Spirit is ‘characteristically masculine’ (despite ruach being feminine and pneuma being neuter?) , with regard to the other two persons ‘the language does not provide a satisfactory pronoun’ while God is ‘undoubtedly Mother as much as Father’. I have no idea how these reflections could be linked to a theology of the Trinity.

For what it is worth, I am not convinced by the value of Forshaw’s revival of Lake (of whom I had not previously heard). Their attempt to synthesise psychoanalysis and religious activity reminds me of the attempts to make religion and science bedfellows. In both cases, the two are quite different and should be allowed to proceed on their separate ways. Furthermore, I am not impressed with either the scriptural ability of either author or their theological acumen. Forshaw reads Scripture and other theologians for the sole purpose of defending his preconceived thesis. Nor am I impressed with the exclusivity of both Lake and Forshaw as regards Christianity. The only positive way forward from foetal life is via a Christian interpretation of life. I would not like to defend that position. I find the whole exercise of reading this book only mildly interesting as the Christian Church searches for new meaning and new structures in more compelling ways.

Robert Crotty
Emeritus Professor, University of South Australia
JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION is a refereed publication for the academic exploration of the task of religious education in modern society. The journal helps disseminate original writings and research in religious education and catechesis -- and in related areas such as spirituality, theology, moral and faith development, cultural contexts, ministry and schooling. It includes a variety of feature sections -- on contemporary educational issues, book reviews, conferences, resources and practical hints for teachers. Articles for publication on religious education in various contexts and on the related areas noted above, as well as on any of the feature sections are welcome. See the inside back cover for details.

EDITOR: Dr Marian de Souza (Australian Catholic University, Ballarat Campus)
BOOK REVIEW EDITOR: Dr Brendan Hyde (Australian Catholic University, Melbourne Campus)

EDITORIAL BOARD
Professor Marie Emmitt (Dean of Education, Australian Catholic University)
Professor Peta Goldburg rsm (Head, National School of Religious Education, Australian Catholic University, McAuley Campus)
Professor Neil Ormerod (National School of Philosophy and Theology, Australian Catholic University)
Professor Graham Rossiter (National School of Religious Education, Australian Catholic University)
Dr Marian de Souza (Editor, Australian Catholic University, Ballarat Campus)

INTERNATIONAL CONSULTING EDITORS
Dr Kate Adams (Bishop Grosseteste University College, Lincoln, UK)
Professor Emeritus Robert Crotty (University of South Australia)
Associate Professor Peter Hobson (University of New England, Armidale)
Professor Robert Jackson (University of Warwick, United Kingdom)
Professor Terry Lovat (University of Newcastle, New South Wales)
Professor Mary Elizabeth Moore (Emory University, Atlanta, USA)
Dr Myrtle Power (St Paul University, Ottawa, Canada)
Dr Caroline Renehan (St Patrick’s College, Drumcondra, Dublin, Ireland)
Professor Richard Rymarz (St Joseph’s College, University of Alberta)
Professor John Sullivan (Liverpool Hope University College, UK)
Dr Laurie Woods (Australian Catholic University)

EDITORIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Dr Michael Buchanan Australian Catholic University, St Patrick’s Campus
Dr Sandra Carroll Australian Catholic University, Mount Saint Mary Campus
Mr Michael Chambers Australian Catholic University, McAuley Campus
Dr Graham English Australian Catholic University, Mount Saint Mary Campus
Professor Peta Goldburg rsm Australian Catholic University, McAuley Campus
Dr Jan Grajczonka Australian Catholic University, McAuley Campus
Dr Brendan Hyde Australian Catholic University, St Patrick’s Campus
Professor Graham Rossiter, Australian Catholic University, Mount Saint Mary Campus