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.

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As I begin to write this editorial, I have found myself pondering the different experiences and learning I have accumulated over the year. A highlight of the year, for me, was the opportunity to teach a 2-week course in the Summer Institutes at St Paul’s University, Ottawa on young people and their search for meaning in a contemporary, pluralistic world. I had a class of 34 students, 30 of whom were classroom practitioners in RE from both primary and secondary schools. As most educators will know, teaching is a two-way process, so that each day, while I delivered the program, I also extended my own learning about Catholic religious education in Canada. I found it a deeply enriching experience and was affirmed by the passion, interest and excitement to learn that was displayed by these students. Indeed, they reflected the attitudes and interests of my postgraduate students in Australia who, also, so often give up parts of their weekends and holidays to attend classes to further their own learning in the subject. And, this subject certainly needs the dedication of practitioners such as these, particularly in Australia, given the place of religious education in the broader primary and secondary curricula.

As many know, Australia is in the process of developing a national curriculum and last week, I attended a talk presented by Professor Barry McGaw, Chair of the Board for the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). The title of the talk was The place of Religious Education in the National Curriculum. Few religious educators would be surprised to know that, in fact, the time given to religious education in the one-hour paper was approximately five or six minutes, until question time, that is. What I learnt was that there would definitely be some place allowed for religious education in faith based schools, but there needed to be some creativity in how the subject could be incorporated. Currently, there is opportunity in the history curriculum to teach about people whose lives and actions were inspired by their faith, but it would be in the next range of subjects, which are yet to be developed, that religious education would have to find a ‘fit’. Of these, my own feelings are that one possibility would be in the area of civics and citizenship and, I believe, religious educators are in a strong position to contribute to the dialogue and debate about how this may happen.

The events that have coloured the global social and political contexts in the first decade of this century have generated much divisiveness between different religious groups across the world, including Australia. A corresponding feature has been the work of so many to promote understanding and inclusivity amongst different religious communities at home and abroad. Certainly, religious education is one avenue that may do this and one has to wonder if it should be restricted to faith-based schools, as it largely is in Australia, given the fact that the fabric of Australian society is woven with so many different colours and textures of religious and spiritual cultures. Surely, it is the right of every Australian student to learn, from their early years, about the different beliefs and practices of the people who make up their wider communities so that they may be able to dialogue and engage with them in meaningful ways. Such learning, potentially, may remove actions driven by ignorance and, instead, promote an understanding of Other which should lead to acceptance and inclusivity, the foundational element of a cohesive society and essential characteristics of a good citizens. Indeed, I believe, this should be essential learning for all who live in pluralistic societies in a global world where technology, in different ways, has increased exposure and access to people from cultures and traditions very different from one’s own. Educating students to be good citizens cannot disregard the role of religion in...
people’s lives; hence, the need to develop associated knowledge and understanding. Of course, this is where religious educators have a distinct voice based on their years of academic learning and professional practice. While the teaching of RE in faith-based schools may have faith-based elements that are not relevant to the wider student population, there is also a need to identify and develop knowledge and understanding about the different aspects related to religious diversity. Indeed, the broader application of religious education in a contemporary world should be recognized so that the subject does not continue to be taught in apparent isolation, as something separate to the mainstream curriculum. Instead, it’s potential to inform and enlighten the development of the whole school curriculum should be recognized. I hope, therefore, that the voices of religious educators will be clearly heard in the coming months as the next step of the Australian National Curriculum is planned.

The articles in this issue, certainly, reflect many of the diverse understandings and practices that are evident in Australian society. The first one by Bernadette Mercieca reminds us of the new generation of students in our classrooms. She discusses the impact of technology on their lives and learning experiences and presents a detailed analysis of a teaching strategy that uses ipods to enhance the learning of Year 9 boys. Shane Woods’ article which follows provides an indepth analysis of a planning document from the Catholic Education Office in Western Australia to assist teachers to prepare and celebrate liturgies. Next, Elizabeth Dowling focuses on the teaching of scripture, in particular, the power of the parables. As she says, ‘It is crucial for religious educators to be aware of the confronting nature of parables so that they might assist students to identify the subversive elements in these stories’. Michael Buchanan’s article which follows, describes his research into the impact of peer review on the professional learning of pre-service teachers. He discusses elements from the literature which informed his study and then presents a careful analysis of the findings.

The following article is around the theme of children’s spirituality and religious education. Gerard Stoyles and his colleagues examine the spirituality of the child in the context of the sacramental program in Catholic schools. They conclude that when adults work with children in areas related to children’s spirituality, ‘it is essential that they develop the openness to understand a child’s spiritual world by striving to see that world through the eyes of the child before them’.

The next article reflects clearly, in its title, the diversity of religious education. Richard Rymarz reports on a research project that examined the work of Ukrainian Greek catechists in Alberta, Canada, and highlights the positive features as well as some of the problems that need to be addressed. Following this, John Buchanan points to some of the problems associated with the teaching of different religions from an outsider’s point of view and identifies how one can, without knowing, impose one’s own cultural leanings on the interpretation of another’s practice. This is an important consideration for all religious educators who are involved in the teaching of different religions in a plural world. Finally, an article from Zuleyha Keskin offers some insights into how the teaching of metaphysical and spiritual concepts may be approached and discusses this in the context of teaching from the Qu’ran.

In all, the authors of these articles have provided a wide array of ideas and understandings to inform and enhance the study and practice of religious education today as well as highlight the contribution it might make to the wider education of primary and secondary students.

Marian de Souza
Editor
Bernadette Mercieca*

I listen, I listen again and I learn
The value of using iPods in Religious Education

Abstract
In March, 2010, 250 Year 9 students from Xavier College, Kew, participated in a newly designed learning experience that focussed on a Podcast tour of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, East Melbourne. The aim of this paper is to explore how students and teachers experienced this different type of tour, how this aligns with contemporary thinking about the use of mobile technology in education, and what the advantages of this type of tour were compared with more traditional tours, in terms of student learning.

Introduction
Today’s students – K through college – represent the first generations to grow up with (this) new technology. They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, video games, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age. Today’s average college grads have spent less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10,000 hours playing video games (not to mention 20,000 hours watching TV (Prensky, 2001, p.1).

Despite a chequered history of being banned in schools and associated with behaviour problems, the importance of integrating mobile technology in curriculum units has never been stronger. The 2010 Horizon Report, released earlier this year, draws on extensive research to identify and describe emerging technologies likely to have considerable impact on teaching and learning. Significantly, it nominates mobile technology as one of the top two key emerging technologies that should be implemented within the next twelve months in educational settings:

The portability of mobile devices and their ability to connect to the Internet almost anywhere makes them ideal as a store of reference materials and learning experiences, as well as general-use tools for fieldwork, where they can be used to record observations via voice, text, or multimedia, and access reference sources in real time. [para.6]

The research in US Colleges highlighted the flexibility and efficacy of mobile technology. Students who made use of mobile devices, as opposed to desktop computers, were found to spend more time working with their study notes in their free time, such as when waiting for an appointment or whilst using public transport. Examples quoted include the lead taken by Japan’s Fukuoka-based Cyber University where all courses are delivered in Softbank 3G smart phones. Young and old students alike seemed to enjoy the benefits of such technology:

Travelers packed on the Yamanote subway line can take a cellular course on their way home. [para.12]

Closer to home, innovative Victorian teacher, Andrew Douch (2006), highlights the benefits of Podcasting as being more versatile than notes, allowing students to listen to their Podcasts at different times of the day and in various circumstances. He believes that listening helps them absorb the material more so than just reading notes. This is supported by Sawle (2007):

The use of sound as a delivery mechanism for information is valued by many students and has the advantage that it accesses a student’s auditory memory and promotes learning in a more relaxed way (p.34)
David Wenzel (2010) in his article “Creative ways to use podcasts in the classroom” notes that the big advantage for teachers in using mobile technology is that it is student-centred, without involving great cost for equipment or software. He proposes the use of Podcasts for virtual as well as real field-trips. Students can engage with the wider community, a key aspect of Contemporary Learning, in recording various aspects of their field-trip, including interviewing staff, and then using this material to complete assignments or inform other classes by posting the Podcast on a website.

An important question for teachers is how to use this technology effectively. Sawle (2007) queries, “Is there any real educational benefit gained in simply replacing old technology, the cassette recorder and audio tape, with the new?” (p.2). Further, whilst there is value in experimenting with different forms of technology, it is essential that pedagogical discussions occur before emerging technologies are fully integrated into the curriculum (Murray & Sloan, 2008). The purpose of this paper is to generate such discussion, based on the experience of Year 9 Religious Education students and teachers at Xavier College, Kew on an excursion to St. Patrick’s Cathedral, East Melbourne. In previous visits, students had been lectured by Cathedral staff or their own teachers. This year it was decided to use Podcasting as an alternative way to convey information, paralleling the experience of tourists in the major cathedrals and galleries of Europe. The aim was to discover if students’ learning could be enhanced by using a Podcast tour in contrast to more traditional teacher-led or professionally guided tours, and if so, in what ways.

How mobile technologies could specifically enhance student learning has been the subject of a number of studies. Davis (1991) links the use of the iPod with Gardner’s Seven Multiple Intelligences (1983). He argues that whilst traditional education addresses only the first three intelligences—Linguistic, Logical-Mathematical, and Intrapersonal—many of today’s students are dominant in the other four—Spatial, Musical, Bodily-Kinaesthetic, and Interpersonal. The use of the iPod can support Intrapersonal learning in allowing for differences in learning styles. Students can work independently, at their own pace, and are able to receive additional instruction and reinforcement by repeating the sections they need to. The Bodily-Kinaesthetic dimension is developed in moving through a learning space, such as a cathedral, and through the eye-hand co-ordination of manipulating an iPod and listening through earphones.

Stansbury (2009) also highlights the value of iPods for differentiated learning. Working with a US student population where 90% do not speak English, she speaks of the iPod as a “global must-have.” She has seen how iPods have transformed classrooms, enhancing instruction by making it personal, increasing motivation and engagement and accommodating various learning styles. Further, students who were hospitalised or otherwise prevented from attending school, could listen to Podcasts created by their teacher or fellow students and downloaded onto a website to keep abreast of the curriculum.

Finally, it is important to note that the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) Information and Communication Technology’s learning focus for Level 6 (Years 9 and 10) expects students to use ICT in a variety of ways, including “for communicating” and “for visual thinking”. In both downloading and syncing the Podcasts required for this excursion, and making use of an iPod to access new information and understanding at the Cathedral, the students were working towards the achievement of these outcomes.

Method
2.1 Before the visit to the Cathedral
The Podcasts were developed several weeks before the excursion by a teacher visiting the Cathedral and preparing both background notes on 7 key indoor features and accompanying photos. A MP3 recorder was used to record 7 separate Podcasts that were saved and then downloaded onto a Gallery in Studywiz (a virtual learning environment that all students at Xavier College have access to). The photographs taken at the Cathedral were inserted into a worksheet for verification purposes.

2.2 The excursion to St. Patrick’s Cathedral
Class groups of 25-26 students visited St. Patrick’s Cathedral on different days. Whilst the majority of students had access to an iPod on the day, there were a number in each group who did not, for various
reasons. Whilst some shared earphones, on some excursions small groups of students without iPods were given a teacher-led tour.

The Survey
All Year 9 students (n=250) and accompanying RE teachers (n=7) were surveyed in the week following their excursion. Close to 90 percent of student surveys and just over 50 percent of teacher surveys were returned. Students and teachers were asked to use a simple Yes/No format for area (i) and a 5 point Likert scale for areas (ii) and (iii):

i. Technical considerations—success of downloading the Podcasts, whether this was done at school or home, whether the Podcasts were shared
ii. Evaluation of the Podcast experience compared with a range of alternative scenarios
iii. Evaluation of the interest level and relevance of the Podcasts

There was also space for participants to comment further. Approximately 45 per cent of students and 35 per cent of teachers chose to do so.

Data Analysis
The data was analysed with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel.

Results and discussion
The main finding was that the Podcast experience was preferred over each of the following scenarios:
1. Teacher-led tour
2. Reading printed material whilst walking around
3. Just wandering around

Although there were varying degrees of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in different classes about the whole experience, there was no class where the Podcast experience was not preferred over the other three scenarios. However, how the excursion was conducted and the level of success students had in downloading the Podcasts did influence the way various classes responded to the survey. This will be discussed further below.

Scenario 1: It was more helpful to my learning to have a Podcast tour instead of a teacher-led tour

The findings indicating a preference for a Podcast tour instead of a teacher-led tour are presented in Graph 1. It is apparent that just over 58% of students agreed (28.3% strongly agreed, 29.8% agreed) that the Podcast tour helped their learning more than a teacher-led tour:

Graph1: A Podcast tour helped my learning more than a teacher-led tour
Students commented:

Personally, I really enjoyed the Podcasts. They were not difficult to download.

The Podcasts really helped. It was a great learning experience.
It was a different way of learning and I enjoyed it.

The reasons why students preferred the Podcast are displayed in Graph 2.

**Graph 2: How Podcasts helped my learning**

The strongest response from students about how Podcasts enhanced learning was because it allowed the possibility of being able to “repeat material” (73.4%). This supports the findings of Andrew Douch (2006) that students benefit from being able to go back over material and pause the recording in their own time, “as many times as you need to understand it.” Students commented:

The Podcasts were easy to follow. If you didn't catch a part, you could always go back. There were no interferences in the tour. Overall, the Podcasts worked well.

It was (very) fun. It didn’t go too fast. The Podcasts were better because you were able to rewind, making points easier to find.

It allowed me to listen to information again so I did not miss anything which was good.

Students were required to complete a worksheet related to the Podcasts. In some cases, they may have needed to repeat individual Podcasts three or four times to get all the answers they required. This would have been considerably more difficult if a teacher was conveying the information. In a mixed ability class, and accounting for different learning styles, it is to be expected that some students would take longer than others in gleaning the information they needed for the worksheet. The Podcast allowed this in a way that a teacher-led tour might not have.

Closely following in percentage was the reason of being able to “move at own pace” (72.2%). This accords with Condie & Munro (2007)’s study on behalf of the UK Department for Education and Skills on the impact of ICT in schools. They found that “ICT can make the learning experience more personalized, more targeted at the needs of the individual learner” (p.6). They found that students experienced a greater degree of autonomy and independence in accessing information in this way. Xavier students made a similar discovery:

It was very enjoyable and I especially enjoyed the Podcasts as it made us think at our own pace.
(It was) a fun alternative to a speech about the Cathedral!
My own anecdotal observation of students on one of the excursions showed that students varied considerably in the time they spent at different sites. Some were particularly engrossed, for example, in the burial plaques of former archbishops, spending time trying to translate the Latin inscriptions on each Coat of Arms. Others spent more time viewing the seven chapels. The advantage of using iPods was that students could make choices about the time they spent at various sites, within the overall time-frame, and follow-up individual interests more freely. A teacher-led tour would have lacked this flexibility, all students needing to move onto the next site as a group. Further differentiation for more able students could be considered in the future to adding extra Podcasts with more detailed information on certain aspects of the Cathedral, such as giving hints about the translations of the Latin mottos on the bishops’ plaques or providing finer detail on the architecture or the seven chapels.

Other advantages that were recorded with over 50% of support in the survey were that you could “choose the order” of sites to visit and that you ended up with a “permanent record” of the excursion. Having students vary in their choice of the order of sites was an important organisational aspect of spreading the students out, so that there was never more than 25% of the class at a site at a particular time. From a student’s point of view, choice of order is another aspect of working independently and with the trust of their teacher.

It was a much greater experience and more trusting. This shows the teachers trust us.

In the case of this excursion where the details were not necessarily going to be tested at a later date, there may not be the same need to have a permanent record of them. However, in other situations where the Podcast material formed part of assessable work, then a permanent record of the site details would obviously be important. There were also several side benefits of permanency for teachers, in that students who may have missed the excursion through illness could listen to the Podcasts at home. The fact that the Podcast material was saved on Studywiz also means that teachers in coming years will not have to “start from scratch” in preparing the excursion, but simply add to or slightly modify what is already there in terms of commentary.

**Scenario 2. It was more helpful to my learning have a Podcast tour instead of reading printed notes.**

The findings that a Podcast tour enhanced learning more than using printed notes are presented in Graph 3.

**Graph 3 A Podcast tour helps my learning more than printed notes**

![Graph 3](image)

(n=204)

Over 68% of students agreed (45.6% strongly agreed, 23% agreed) that their learning was helped by having a Podcast tour rather than reading printed notes. One student felt that the Podcast tended to focus their attention more than reading notes might have done.

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I felt that the Podcasts enhanced my learning because I was able to pick up the facts that I otherwise would not have taken notice of.

Stansbury (2009)’s findings on differentiated learning are significant here. The fact that gaining information aurally is independent of reading ability would appear to be a distinct advantage for certain students. Students with a range of abilities appeared to enjoy using their iPods, commenting:

I think that it was good fun doing a school-based activity around the iPod.
I had fun!! Most enjoyable

I think that the Podcasts were very helpful to my learning as my body and eyes were relaxed
I enjoyed the excursion a lot more than I would have if I had to read printed notes

Because I learnt a lot more with visuals and experiencing it in real life

Evans (2007) also found that listening was important in his study of first year undergraduates: “Podcasts are more effective revision tools than their textbooks and they are more efficient than their own notes in helping them to learn.” His study further showed that students are “more receptive to the learning material in the form of a Podcast than a traditional lecture or textbook” (p.491). This would appear to be what many students found in the Cathedral tour.

Scenario 3. It was more helpful to my learning to have a Podcast tour instead of just wandering freely around the Cathedral.

The findings in relation to whether a Podcast tour enhanced learning more than just wandering freely in the Cathedral are presented in Graph 4

Graph 4: A Podcast tour helps my learning more than wandering freely

A slightly less relative percentage of 65% of students agreed (33% strongly agreed, 32% agreed) that the Podcast tour was better than just wandering around freely. It would appear that students genuinely value the opportunity to work independently in an environment like this, spending time with the sites that most interest them. The fact that 13.8% (6.9% disagree, 6.9% agree) of students would like to do this without any formal input could reflect either a desire to discover information in different ways, such as by looking at name plates or signs, or a certain resistance to having to do “work” on an excursion! The former sense of discovery approach is evident in the “extra” wandering this student did:

The wandering around the cathedral was good because we got to have a look around,

...more information that wasn’t on the Podcast
Implications and Recommendations

As mentioned earlier, not all students found the Podcast excursion to their satisfaction. The results for the teacher-led scenario, in particular, were not as conclusive as in the other two scenarios, with a significant group of students who were undecided (21.5%) and 20.5% who disagreed or strongly disagreed. I would suggest that the reason for this spread was due to two factors—ease in accessing the Podcasts and how individual teachers conducted the excursion.

a) Ease in accessing the Podcasts

The reasons why some students did not have access to an iPod at the Cathedral were as follows:

i. They didn’t possess an iPod
ii. They delayed downloading to the day before the excursion and found the server was down
iii. They had other problems downloading the Podcast
iv. They forgot to charge their iPod
v. They forgot to bring their iPod.

To confirm this hypothesis, the relationship between the factors of whether the Podcasts were successfully downloaded and of “Podcasts better than teacher-led” was investigated using Pearson’s product-moment correlation coefficient.

Table 1: Correlation between successfully downloading the Podcasts and preferring Podcast tour over teacher-led tour

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<th>Teacher-led</th>
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<td>download self</td>
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<td>Correlation</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
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**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results show a moderately strong positive correlation (0.309) between whether a student was able to successfully download the Podcasts and whether they thought that Podcast tours were better than teacher-led tours. A further analysis was conducted to achieve the variance of each of the correlation coefficients.

Table 2 Variance of downloading self with each of 3 scenarios

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<th>Variance of download self/teacher led</th>
<th>r1= .309</th>
<th>Variance = .309^2 x 100%=9.54%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variance of download self/Printed notes</td>
<td>r2= .168</td>
<td>Variance= .168^2 x 100% = 2.82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance of download self/Wander freely</td>
<td>r3=.165</td>
<td>Variance = .165^2x 100%= 2.72%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The significantly highest variance (9.54%) is for the first scenario, suggesting that success in downloading the Podcasts had more influence over the variation of scores in the “Podcast better than teacher-led” section (helping to explain over 9% of the variance of the scores) This is in contrast with only 2.82% and
2.72% influence in the “Podcast better than printed notes” and “Podcast better than wandering freely” scores respectively. The reason for this relates to how the excursion was conducted when a teacher was confronted with a number of students lacking iPods.

b) How the excursion was conducted
The students who couldn’t successfully download the Podcasts for various reasons had one of two alternatives: to share earphones with another student or to work with a teacher for the tour. Sharing earphones worked reasonably well, as one teacher commented:

Not all boys had the Podcasts so they had to work in pairs. It was good to see how well they worked in pairs.

Those who worked with a teacher appeared to enjoy the individual attention of being in a group of maybe 6-7 students.

I didn’t download the Podcasts due to internet problems, so instead I had Mr X which was very informative

They also appreciated the opportunity to ask questions:
Mr X was good to talk to ’cause we could ask questions.

However, the reality of taking a class on this excursion with 25-26 students is that the individual attention that students seem to value so much, is significantly reduced. What should ideally have happened in the Podcast tours is that the teacher was free to wander between different sites answering any questions students had. In reality, this did not happen in all groups because teachers felt compelled to work with the 6-8 students who did not have their iPods, consequently limiting their availability to the rest of the group.

The solution seems to be to find ways of ensuring close to 100% of student succeed in downloading the Podcasts. This could be achieved in a variety of ways:

(i) Professional Education for teachers:
It is clear that more professional development is needed to “promote widespread teacher ICT capacity and confidence” (Murray & Sloane, 2008, p.3). They also suggest that “teachers need to have a mindset that drives them to want to use the tool and see it as a positive addition to their tools” (p.23) Those classes where teachers were more comfortable with technology and enthusiastic about the use of iPods in the Cathedral excursion appeared to experience more positive engagement with downloading and using the Podcasts.

(ii) Provision of extra iPods
The fact that some students, even in a relatively affluent school, did not have access to an iPod, suggest that it would be wise for a school invests in a class set of around ten iPods. These could be loaded with the necessary Podcasts and taken on each excursion as a back-up for students lacking the Podcasts for the various reasons listed above. If a situation can be achieved where all students have access to the necessary Podcasts, then the teacher is free to deal with any problems that might arise, such as the negative reaction some students experienced from the general public:

On the downside, the people in the cathedral gave us boys looks of disgust as we walked around with our iPods.

The use of iPod technology is obviously not a problem in large churches in Europe with a steady tourist flow, but was something new for some Australian parishioners.

Some teachers felt that the Podcasts were limiting compared with a teacher-led tour:

The Podcasts are restricting in so far as they are minimal. They give the information and the boys write down the answers. On a personalised tour one can give a personal account or anecdotal stories to embellish a point. I believe this is a more comprehensive or more complete form of a tour.
Certainly, experienced teachers with a good knowledge of the Cathedral could give an engaging teacher-led tour. However, not all teachers are so informed. Further, with all students actively engaged in a Podcast tour, and with the added supervisory support role of a second teacher on the excursion, the RE teacher would be free to move amongst students at different sites to respond to questions and “embellish” points of interest to smaller groups of students. This happened on some excursions, but not on others, when the teacher was occupied in giving a personalized tour to a small group of students lacking Podcasts.

Overall, with this year’s experience behind us and further professional development for teachers planned, it would be hoped that next year’s Podcast tour of St. Patrick’s Cathedral would be even more appreciated by students and teachers alike. Further developments might include adding visual images to the Podcasts (vodcasts), improving the technical quality of the audio and ensuring all students have access to a Podcast through the supplementary class set. There is much potential in the use of this form of technology and as the literature suggests, teachers have no choice but to adapt their pedagogy to take into account the digital world their students come from. As one student summed it up:

It was a very good task and the audio certainly helped.

References

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AN EVALUATION OF THE RESOURCE

“PLANNING GUIDE FOR CELEBRATING LITURGY IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS”
(PRODUCED BY THE CATHOLIC EDUCATION COMMISSION OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA (CECWA))

Introduction

Those schools which have a close affiliation with a particular religious tradition will inevitably wish at some time or other to give some ritual expression to the faith life that many of the parents, staff and students profess. Those faith traditions that have a strong sacramental tradition will often celebrate the first communion and confirmation of their students as a school group, prepared by school staff, even though the actual liturgy might be held in the parish church, include other children not in a Catholic school, and be rightly seen as a parish event. Catholic schools have a stronger tradition than many of celebrating eucharist with the staff and children to commemorate patronal feasts, significant events in the liturgical calendar, or in the life of the school community. For all of these communities, no matter where they might find themselves on the scale of the frequency of these rituals, careful preparation is essential if the celebration is to have any efficacy at all.

Certainly in the Catholic school system, efforts are made to provide schools with some assistance in this preparation through some form of planning guide. There are no doubt sitting in bookshelves in staffrooms and Religious Education Co-ordinators’ Offices around the country copies of Liturgical planning guides produced at various times by a Catholic Education Commission, Catholic Education Office, or their equivalents. The intentions are always to review such documents and to bring them up to date in the light of new liturgical changes, Vatican documents, or new theological understandings. Due to pressure to work on other more urgent or more important areas, these Guides are sometimes left in their original state for some time and as a result fall into disuse, or worse still continue to be followed when the wider praying and worshipping community has moved on.

One such document is the Planning Guide for Celebrating Liturgy in Catholic Schools (Guide) published by the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia in 1998. One could safely say that is overdue for a revision. I dare say that it would not be alone.

This article will attempt to evaluate this resource against the principles for celebrations with children as set forth in the Directory for Masses with Children (DMC) (Congregation, 1982) and other sources of expert comment on liturgy, in the hope that this exercise might prompt a revision of similar ‘older’ documents in Dioceses around Australia. The same principles and suggestions applied to the West Australian document can be applied to any other similar document, hopefully with fruitful results. While this examination is focused on an, obviously, Catholic document, many of the principles and practical suggestions might find resonance in other faith traditions as well.

Principles

In general

The Guide is an attempt to localize the principles enunciated in the DMC, but fittingly goes further by recognizing that other celebrations are often more appropriate than Eucharist. This is not the same as encouraging other celebrations which include emphasis on the word of God and which assist children to “appreciate some liturgical elements, for example, greetings, silence, and common praise (especially when this is sung together)” (DMC #13) as an education towards future participation in Eucharist. It is saying that these celebrations have a worth of their own, especially as a means of including those in the community.
who are not Catholic. However, many of the same principles need to be applied to these other celebrations. One very important underlying principle is that children need to be led into an understanding of the liturgy so that they do not “repeatedly experience (in) the church things that are scarcely comprehensible to them” (DMC #2). So, liturgies for children are meant to be an opportunity for teaching and learning, not so much through the use of instruction, but through the experience of doing liturgy well. As the DMC says, “the liturgy itself always exerts its own inherent power to instruct” (DMC #12).

The fact that the Guide exists at all is a reflection of the modern view that the “Catholic sacraments … are liturgical rituals” rather than “metaphysical entities which are communicated … to a recipient from God through the instrumentality of a properly performed (or valid) liturgical ceremony” (Martos, 124). In other words, all of the elements involved in the celebration, and especially the human ones, have an impact on each participant’s experience of the celebration and hence upon its effectiveness. If a child’s appreciation of the human experiences of listening, gathering around the family table, and greeting others as friends (Simcoe, 6) is limited or non-existent, then the ability to appreciate liturgy is severely curtailed. This is mentioned specifically in the DMC when it lists “community activity, the exchange of greetings, a capacity to listen and to seek and grant pardon, the expression of gratitude, the experience of symbolic actions, a meal of friendship and festive celebrations” (DMC, 9) as important human elements of which the children require some prior experience to enable them to appreciate liturgy. This, of course, reinforces the importance of the role of parents as the first educators of their children in these matters as in so many others.

The other reality that the existence of the Guide reflects is that within our Catholic schools there are those staff members who do not have the required background or training in the area of liturgy preparation, but who may be required to undertake this task. This is acknowledged in the DMC in paragraph 1, but unfortunately not in the Guide. Some of the children referred to in the DMC who have not been given a good grounding in this area through family education in the faith may now be part of the staffs in our schools. The need for their training in the area of liturgy is a topic for another article. A further general criticism of the Guide is its lack of concern for inclusivity in liturgy, especially in Eucharist. There seems to be little concern given to the reality that there might be people (both adults and children) present at school liturgies who are not initiated Catholics. There could have been a place made in the Guide for addressing this issue. As it is, only the norms for reception of communion are mentioned (Guide, 10). A parallel publication from Brisbane, for example, includes the following advice in relation to the composition of the group celebrating Eucharist:

Sharing the eucharistic bread and cup is an expression of our unity in Christ, in the Catholic tradition, of unity already established; we do not use holy communion as a means of achieving or fostering unity where it does not exist. The celebration of the eucharist might for this reason be inappropriate for some groups...Quite apart from whether people are or are not receiving holy communion, it is important to respect people’s freedom and level of faith commitment (Brisbane,1992).

Something along these lines might have been appropriate in the Guide. In comparison with the Brisbane document, the Guide seems to lack what could be called a pastoral feel, and it seems more concerned with getting things right.

In particular
The introduction of the CECWA document sets out the principles that the Commission saw as underpinning the need for this publication. The first is the central part that liturgy holds in the Catholic school environment; parallel to the importance of the Sunday Eucharist to the local worshipping community. The second is the realization that celebrations other than Eucharist are “sometimes preferable” to use with children, employing other forms of liturgy. Thirdly, the Commission sees these other liturgical celebrations as opportunities to introduce the children over time to an appreciation of the Word of God and the other
elements of good liturgy by way of formation.¹ The fourth principle is the need for good planning of liturgies in schools, and therefore the planning guide is meant to be a resource document for them. Indeed, so important is the principle of planning, that this topic occupies the first section of the document.

**Section One**
The title of this section is ‘Advance Planning’, and the obvious redundancy should be attended to. This sets out to provide a checklist for those charged with the preparation of the liturgy to ensure that they have taken account of all the matters that require some consideration. Page five mentions those who need to be communicated with, and encourages early preparation and communication with all these people. The following two pages take people through a series of questions around the “what, why, when, how, who and where” of the celebration. These pages are very comprehensive and very detailed. The DMC devotes a specific one paragraph section (#29) to the matter of preparation, and makes it very clear that the children should be as much involved in the preparation as in the celebration itself. It is logical that the Guide places this matter first. If one is going to make adaptations to suit the people gathered for the celebration by way of “retaining, shortening or omitting some elements or of making a better selection of texts,” (DMC #3) then the preparation stage is vitally important, and needs to involve all the major players, including any celebrant and the children.

As Elizabeth McMahon Jeep summarizes the DMC’s intention, it is to describe “both the attitude the priests and the community should have toward child-believers, and the latitude within which suitable services can be developed for them” (Simcoe, 5). In order that appropriate and sufficient attention can be paid to both of these constituent elements of the liturgy, significant preparation time is required. The DMC encouragement to leaders that they “take great care that the children do not feel neglected” (DMC #17) needs to be employed right from the start in the preparation stage. This preparation allows for the assigning of roles to as many people, especially children, as possible. This is mentioned in #22 of the DMC and these options are taken up throughout the later section of the Guide in pages 13-16.

Not only is the initial section of the Guide given over to planning, ‘Preparation’ appears as a heading in Section 2 on page 9, Section 3 on page 11, twice on page 13 (once in reference to the Teacher’s role and once in reference to the environment) and finally in relation to preparing the altar for Eucharist on page 21. So the Guide seems to give due and adequate emphasis to this first step in celebrating good liturgy.

As Jeep points out, the two basic requirements for the liturgical renewal for children, as expressed in the DMC, are “the establishment of community and the return to simplicity” (Simcoe, 4). These are presumably applicable also for adults, and this point is taken up later in this article. The Guide is very good at encouraging the involvement of children in the preparation and celebration of liturgy (establishing community), but does not mention the second requirement of simplicity. This is achieved by avoiding an “excess of rites” (DMC #40) and allowing the actions to speak for themselves. Whilst DMC #40 is mentioned a couple of times in the Guide, the importance of simplicity is not.

**Section Two**
This section deals with Celebrating Penance and Reconciliation. The Guide mentions the two terms ‘penance’ and ‘reconciliation’ as part of the name given to the sacrament on page 8 in the section heading and on page 9, under the heading Priests and Time. The Rite of Penance (Rite)² (Congregation [b]) mentions ‘penance’ 51 times and ‘reconciliation’ 24 times, but never in this conjoined fashion. They are mentioned once together in #5 where the text reads, “Penance always therefore entails reconciliation with our brothers and sisters who remain harmed by our sins.” However, this is quite a different matter. This seems to be an inaccuracy. The document recognizes that the experience that the children have of these sacraments (Penance and Eucharist) at school might be the only experience they have of them, and therefore insists that the children be well prepared for them. The document recommends that consideration be given to the “age and size of the group” involved as this will influence things such as the number of priests who need to be involved for individual confession. The document then goes on to outline the two rites that are permissible in Australia – the First and Second Rites. The document encourages the
use of penitential services during religious education classes so that children are used to the elements of the liturgy incorporated into the celebration of the sacrament – reflection on God’s word, examination of conscience, and prayer of sorrow.

However, there is not the same detailed reflection upon the ways in which students (or adult members of the school community for that matter) might be involved in these celebrations or indeed in the Second Rite. The Second Rite provides places where students could be involved – Introduction, Readings from Scripture, and Examination of Conscience. Perhaps it is assumed that the encouragement given to preparation and involvement for Eucharist in Section 3 will be transposed into these celebrations as well. For this reason, it is a pity that this section is placed before the one dealing with Eucharist. Reference to the Rite is made only once at the very beginning of this section where communal celebrations are mentioned.

The only concession made to the human experience of the sacrament of Reconciliation is with reference to the place of the celebration and the need to have it prepared with “appropriate furnishing…quiet reflective atmosphere” and to allow for the “penitent to remain anonymous” (Guide, 9). The Rite (#11) places significant emphasis on the acts of the penitent, saying that “they are of the greatest importance…[sharing] by his (sic) actions in the sacrament itself.” The Rite also outlines the nature, structure, benefits and importance of what it calls penitential celebrations. One of the purposes for these celebrations expressed in the Rite (#37) is that they are “to help children gradually to form their conscience about sin in human life and about freedom from sin through Christ.” The Guide is faithful to this intention in its mention of the use of penitential services on page 9.

More helpful suggestions could have been provided to school communities in this section on the Celebration of Penance and Reconciliation by incorporating in particular the relevant parts of #40(a) of the Rite, which mentions the adaptations that are permitted to the minister of the sacrament “to adapt the rite to the concrete circumstances of the penitents”; this includes the ability to omit some parts for pastoral reasons or enlarge upon them… select the texts of readings or prayers… choose a place more suitable for the celebration according to the regulations of the episcopal conference, so that the entire celebration may be enriching and effective.

There is also in #40(b) encouragement for ministers to involve others (“including the laity”) in the preparation of the communal celebration of the sacrament so “that the texts chosen and the order of the celebration may be adapted to the conditions and circumstances of the community or group (for example, children, sick persons).” So, generally speaking, this section of the Guide seems to be rather sparse in its helpful suggestions in comparison with the section on Eucharist. It would have been helpful, for example, even to make reference to the Lectionary selections provided in the Rite for use in celebrations of Penance or Reconciliation.

Section Three
This section covers the celebration of the Eucharist, and quoting from the General Instruction on the Roman Missal (GIRM), it reminds readers of the fact that “all other liturgical rites and all the works of the Christian life” (Guide, 10) have their origin and end in this central liturgical act. The document (Guide, 10) is clear in its encouragement of a full education of children in schools about what they are proclaiming when they participate in Eucharist, especially in the reception of communion. In his book on the GIRM, Gerard Moore (2007, pg 2) details what he sees as the “five key principles for interpreting our celebration of the Mass.” These principles could legitimately be applicable to celebrations with children, whether they be celebrations of the Mass, other sacraments, or of other liturgies. The five principles are: that the celebration be “pastorally effective”; encourage full, active, and conscious participation; that we are attentive to the “genres and functions…of whatever we do or use”; the celebration ought visually “reflect appropriate standards of dignity, beauty, and solemnity”; celebrations should reflect the “very spirit of the Sacred Liturgy.”
This section of the Guide goes a long way towards incorporating most of these principles without making any overt reference to them. The constant theme is the encouragement towards the effectiveness of the celebration and the active involvement of as many of the children as possible in both the planning and the ritual itself. The Guide is of course aimed at the teachers, and the assumption is that teachers would work with the children and help them to understand what is required of them.

In her overview of the DMC, Catherine Dooley (1991, pgs 230-33) repeats the Directory’s insistence that the aim of liturgy for children is “never to create a sense of separateness but always a sense of belonging to the entire ecclesial community.” Mention is made in the Guide (pg 11) of the obligation to be part of the wider worshiping community by attending Mass on Sundays and the desirability of having adults take an active role in school celebrations as a witness to the children. Those using the Guide (pgs 11-16) are also referred to the most helpful church documents – the GIRM and the DMC.

Dooley also says (pg 230) that throughout the DMC the recurring themes are “adaptation, participation and liturgical formation.” The section on Group Preparation for Eucharistic Celebration takes up these themes in a practical way. The section occupies pages 13-19 and allows for the use of eight groups of students to be involved in various parts of the preparation. This section makes reference to #29 and #22 of the DMC, which lists the ‘Offices and Ministries’ that children can be involved in. This section does focus on the participation of the children which will hopefully lead towards their formation as well. As Cooke (1994, pg 11) says,

If Christian sacraments are to be transformative, that is, if Christians are to perform sacraments more effectively, they must become involved in these actions with a higher level of awareness.

Pages 17-19 allow for a neat summary of what is to happen in each section of the celebration, including a brief description of the options (adaptations) that are possible. This is followed by a one page overview that could be used to convey to the celebrant and the REC the basic information about the event. The final page of the section (21) is diagramatic, showing what the ‘things’ required for the Eucharist look like and where they are normally placed on or around the altar. This gives teachers the correct terminology to use with the students when educating them about what is used in the celebration of Eucharist; very helpful for those not familiar with these things. All of this forms part of the liturgical formation that is a desired product of these celebrations.

Section Four
The fourth section of the Guide looks at ‘Celebrating other Rituals’ and so picks up the ideas of sections #13 & #27 of the DMC which suggest ways by which liturgical formation can take place through celebrations of various kinds, specifically Blessing Ritual, Penitential Services and Prayer Services. All of these incorporate the use of Scripture. This section also makes mention of other elements that “need to be considered when compiling other rituals” such as sacred symbols, sacred space and art, participation (specifically through movement), music, and silence. The word ‘compiling’ seems inappropriate and ‘composing’ might have been a better choice.

As Martos notes, these other celebrations provide more opportunity for attention to be “given to the experience of the rituals in addition to the texts or rites” and as this experience is “influenced by culture, the arts of architecture and design, painting and sculpture, music and dance should be invited to enhance the felt dynamics of the rituals” (1991, pg 125). It is a pity that not much of this is connected to or mentioned in the sections on Eucharist or Reconciliation. These, the arts, are the places where culture is expressed; but culture in its broadest sense seems to be given scant recognition in the Guide and this is a pity because, as Pecklers says

it is precisely in culture that we locate the point of departure both for theology and worship...All worship must be contextualised and inculturated if it is to be a living reality (2003, pg 161).
In general, there is a lack of information for the teacher to be able to make requests of the celebrant in terms of how the Homily might be presented (through dialogue with the children or as a reflection offered by somebody other than the priest) or how he might speak with the children so that the celebration is more effective for them; or about drawing in to the celebration what might be relevant in local, national or world events. After all, as Cooke (1994, pg 14) reminds us, “Sacraments are moments of reflection, shared with one another in celebration, that bring together and deepen all our other reflections about life.” There is no encouragement to remind people that liturgy is meant to flow on to action “sending forth members of Christ’s body into the world as instruments of social change.” (Pecklers, pg 157).

Conclusion
At the beginning of this article mention was made of the need to ensure that what happens for the children in these celebrations, especially of Eucharist, ties them even more closely to their parish community. It is possible that a document such as this has the potential, especially in a parochial school, to influence what happens in the parish liturgy. Dooley (1991, pg 233) makes the very important point in concluding her remarks on the DMC that

the principles in the document are therefore a means of evaluation by which the local community can examine and improve its liturgical practices so that what children have experienced in liturgies apart from the adult community also may be a part of their experience with the adult assembly.

Sadly, there is no mention of the possibility of this sort of dialogue in the Guide. A document such as the Guide provides great potential for continuing the liturgical reform that was begun by Vatican II and was continued in the DMC and the Lectionary for Children. As Pecklers summarises them (pgs 211-16), there are things that “need further attention if we are to move forward”: times of common worship with other parts of the Christian Church; recovery of a “sense of awe and wonder” which requires silence and a recovery of our symbols unhampered by “endless commentaries”; liturgical formation in our parishes; and “liturgical inculturation.” iii Unfortunately the Guide does not take up this opportunity; it is a basic working document for teachers that could have been so much more, and hopefully with a revision and update, might yet be so.

Those who think, along with Martos (pg 125) that

liturgical theology does not assume that the present rites are definitive and final expressions of the church’s faith...the rites should continue to be adapted to the religious needs of the people for whom they are performed

will need to look for another document to provide the sort of education and encouragement that this continued adaptation will require.

References


**Notes**

1 Cf par 82 of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* on the purpose of celebrations of the word of God.

2 The word ‘compiling’ does not seem appropriate here; ‘composing’ might have been better.

3 The Guide does not address the role of the Liturgical Year, its pedagogical potential, and its importance as a means of linking what happens for the children with what is happening in the wider context of church celebrations.

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Elizabeth Dowling*

The Power of Parables for Religious Education

Abstract
In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus often uses parables to teach about the reign of God, to challenge his audience to think differently about God and themselves in relation to God. Today’s religious educators often draw on these parables in their own teaching. Understanding the power of the parable for its original first-century audience allows students to then make parallels within their own context. It is crucial for religious educators to be aware of the confronting nature of parables so that they might assist students to identify the subversive elements in these stories. This paper presupposes a basic knowledge of the parables and at the same time aims to assist educators with their understanding of the potential power of parables.

The Power of Parables for Religious Education
We all know that parables subvert our world view and invite us to look at ourselves and our world differently. Or do we? From my experience of working with secondary and tertiary students as well as with adults in schools and parishes, I have found that some of the gospel parables are well known and treasured. Many can tell the story of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son, for instance, and educators frequently draw on these parables in their teaching. Often, however, I find that there are elements of these and other parables that are not so well known and that the subversive character of parables is rarely appreciated. Drawing on contemporary parable scholarship, this article aims to give an overview of the nature of parables and to provide insights into lesser known aspects of the parables in order to recapture some of their power for religious educators.

Nature of a Parable
In 1961, C. H. Dodd offered a definition of parable that acquired classic status over the subsequent decades and that remains relevant in our times:

At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought (Dodd, 1961, p. 16).

Dodd’s description identifies several features of a parable. First, it may be as simple as a simile, such as comparing the reign of God with a mustard seed (Mark 4:30-31/pars.). Second, the parable will relate to a situation that is well known to its hearers (i.e. “drawn from nature or common life”). Third, the hearers will be struck by an unexpected aspect of the story. Finally, the parable leaves its hearers puzzled and having to tease out the implications of what they have heard.

In the Synoptic Gospels, the notion of God’s reign or realm or empire is at the heart of Jesus’ teaching. Jesus announces that the reign of God has come near (Mark 1:14-15/par.). God’s reign, in contrast to that of the Roman Empire and earlier ruling powers, is a reign of justice and graciousness. God’s power is directed towards fullness of life and liberation from burden. The reign of God is good news for those who suffer and yearn for justice and is confronting for those who benefit from the oppression of others. Jesus frequently uses parables as the medium for communicating the good news of God’s reign. The parables invite and challenge their hearers to expand their understanding of God and how God operates.

Like any good teacher, Jesus begins with the everyday experience of his audience. That some parables draw on themes from nature reflects the fact that a significant portion of his Galilean audience would have been engaged in agricultural and fishing occupations (Getty-Sullivan, 2007). In the example cited above (Mark 4:30-31/pars.), Jesus is trying to teach his audience about the reign of God by comparing it with something with which they are very familiar, a mustard seed. We are told that this small seed grows into a large shrub
that provides shade for birds (Mark 4:32-33).

There is, however, an unexpected element to this comparison. As Reid (2000) explains, mustard is a common weed. So, in effect, Jesus is saying that the reign of God is like a weed, something his hearers certainly know about but also something they might want to eradicate. At the very least, this statement would have been quite confronting and would surely have teased his hearers into trying to make sense of the comparison. It may have been alienating, even threatening. Reid makes this point when she notes the difficulty in removing wild mustard once it has taken hold and argues that the reign of God, similar to mustard, would be considered a threat by some:

The weed-like reign of God poses a challenge to the arrangements of civilization and those who benefit from them. This interpretation poses a disturbing challenge to the hearer: Where is God’s reign to be found? With what kind of power is it established? Who brings it? Who stands to gain by its coming? Whose power is threatened by it? (p. 297).

The potential for an informed engagement with this parable in a religious education context will depend largely upon the educator’s familiarity with the cultural context encoded in the parable. In other words, we need to know something about what the reference to a mustard seed would have sparked in the mind of a first-century Palestinian audience.

Jesus tells parables to challenge his hearers’ thinking about how God operates, to broaden their understanding of God’s reign so that they might begin to think in new ways. Sometimes the hearers are left puzzled, sometimes angry at being so challenged. The parables are designed to cause a reaction, to provoke questions in the audience. Parables are confronting rather than comforting stories. They are subversive of predominant worldviews (Crossan, 1975; Reid, 2000).

Another agricultural image forms the basis of Mark 4:1-9, often called the Parable of the Sower. It is the first of the parables in the Gospel of Mark and is followed in 4:13-20 by an allegorical interpretation. The allegory accounts for each element in the story and essentially provides a packaged explanation of the parable. Allegorical explanation tends to reduce the power of the parable and its capacity to tease the audience into active thought: “In some ways allegory operates against parable—closing off thought rather than opening it up, giving the answer rather than a question” (Malbon, 2002, p. 31). This is the only instance in the Markan Gospel where a parable is given such an explanation. Most scholars hold that this allegorical interpretation did not come from Jesus but was rather developed later by the early Church (Malbon 2002; Reid 1999) and retrojected into the teaching of Jesus.

Two of the surprising features of the Parable of the Sower are the manner of sowing and the size of the harvest. The sower allows the seed to fall on all sorts of ground – the path, rocky ground, among thorns and good soil. Given this seemingly random rather than focussed scattering of the seed, the hearers would naturally expect an indifferent harvest with limited growth. Since an average harvest was about eight-fold, the resultant harvest of thirty, sixty and a hundredfold (4:8) is utterly beyond comprehension (Malbon, 2002). These surprising features, the manner of sowing and the dimensions of the harvest, would provoke the hearers to reconsider their understanding of how God operates: God invites all and not just a few into relationship, and there are no limits to the overwhelming nature of God’s abundance (Reid, 1999). The parable leaves its hearers thinking. It does not attempt to answer all their questions. Having briefly addressed the nature of parables, we now turn to ways of reading the parables that speak to contemporary sensibilities and are, at the same time, congruent with the originating contexts.

Reading Parables
In order to understand the dynamic of any particular parable, it is imperative to identify Jesus’ target audience in telling the parable. Sometimes the targeted group is a particular section of a bigger audience. In the Parables of the Lost (Luke 15:1-32), for instance, we learn that tax collectors and sinners come to listen to Jesus (15:1). We also learn that the ensuing grumbling by the Pharisees and scribes is the catalyst for the telling of these parables (15:2-3). So while the audience is wider than the Pharisees and scribes, it is
principally these groups who are being targeted by the Lukan Jesus. The reader who identifies with the targeted audience is, I suggest, the one who experiences most deeply the power of the parable. There is a little bit of the Pharisees and the scribes of the gospels in every one of us.

A word of caution is necessary, however, concerning the gospel presentations of the Pharisees. Usually the Pharisees are portrayed in the gospels as opponents of Jesus but this stereotyped characterisation does not accurately reflect the historical situation of Jesus’ time or the diversity within Judaism. The gospel presentation of tension between Jesus and the Pharisees may be influenced by the late first-century tension which developed between the nascent Church and Judaism. Thus, religious educators need to deal sensitively and in an informed manner with the gospel presentations of Pharisees and, indeed, Jews in general (Council of Christians and Jews [Victoria], 2007).

Once the target audience of a parable has been identified, the next aspect that might be explored is the nature of the confrontation. What elements of the parable would be confronting for Jesus’ audience? What is Jesus trying to get them to see differently? Because we read these parables in very different contexts from Jesus’ original audience we may miss some of the challenges within the parable.

Reference to contemporary biblical scholarship is indispensable for educators seeking to understand the nuances that inform this mode of communication. To my mind, one of the most accessible recent contributions to parable scholarship is the three volume work of Barbara Reid OP (1999, 2000, 2001). While this fine scholarship is addressed to preachers, it is equally applicable to religious educators across all levels. It takes account of a wide range of scholarly views and includes Reid’s own insights into each of the synoptic gospel parables. Of particular assistance to teachers is Reid’s focus on aspects of contemporary experience that might resonate with or find echoes in Jesus’ parabolic teaching.

The limits of this article preclude any attempt to provide a detailed exploration of any one parable or to consider in detail the questions that parables raise for contemporary readers. Rather, my aim is simply to alert educators to some of the surprising and confronting aspects of selected Synoptic parables, mostly from Luke, and thus to open a space for reading them through different lenses, expanding our understanding of God and ourselves in relation to God.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

Since, as noted above, this is one of the best known parables and is widely used in the classroom, it will be helpful to look again at the dynamic of the parable. Byrne (2000) comments that the modern reader may lose some of the impact of which Jesus’ audience could not fail to be aware:

Centuries of holding together the adjective “good” and the noun “Samaritan” have dulled us to the explosive tension of the phrase in the world of Jesus. The hostility between Jews and Samaritans at the time makes the phrase an oxymoron—as phrases like “good terrorist” or “good drug dealer” would be for us (p. 100).

Jesus tells the parable in response to a lawyer’s questioning. The lawyer sets out to test Jesus (10:25) and justify himself (10:29), so that his questions lack authenticity. From the perspective of the narrator, he has an ulterior motive.

Much of the parable would cause little surprise to Jesus’ audience. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous (Bailey, 1983), so it would not be unexpected for a traveller to be attacked, robbed and left half dead (10:30). The audience would perhaps excuse the priest and the Levite for not helping the wounded man as they would contract ritual impurity if the man happened to be dead or to die while they were giving assistance. For the priest, this would interfere with the performance of his religious duties and would necessitate a time-consuming and costly process to become ritually clean again. While ritual impurity would not have as significant a consequence for the Levite, he could be excused for following the example of the priest in passing by. Since the offering of sacrifice in the Temple was restricted to priests,
Levites and Jewish laymen, the audience would be expecting a Jewish layman, someone just like themselves, to be the third character to arrive on the scene and to act differently (Bailey, 1983). It is therefore the next part of the parable that would cause shock for Jesus’ hearers and challenge their established worldview. The third person who comes along and helps the man is not a Jewish layman but a Samaritan. The very word ‘Samaritan’ was enough to repel a Jewish audience, given the centuries-old enmity between Jews and their Samaritan neighbours to the north. When the Samaritan sees the stricken man, he is described as being moved with compassion (10:33). The Greek word used here (splanchnizomai) is a cognate of the word splanchnon which refers to ‘inner parts of the body’. The use of splanchnizomai here informs us that the Samaritan is moved to the very depths of his being. The same word is used elsewhere in Luke’s Gospel to describe the response of Jesus to the plight of the widow of Nain (7:13) and that of the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son when the younger son returns (15:20).

Many educators are aware of the relationship between Samaritans and Jews in Jesus’ time and may consider that the main point of this parable is the need to show compassion to all, even to your enemies. Jesus broadens the understanding of “neighbour” from fellow Jew to all. This is certainly one aspect of the parable. There is more, however, to this subversive story. If Jesus were only trying to get his audience to see this one dimension, he could have reversed the roles in the story and had a Jew helping a Samaritan who was in need. This would still have been surprising for a Jewish audience but they would be affirmed by the generosity of the Jew.

Instead, Jesus turns the dynamic on its head. An enemy of his specifically Jewish audience models God’s compassion and Jesus invites them to follow the example of this man (10:37). This would be nothing less than shocking for Jesus’ audience. They are being challenged to change their whole way of thinking about Samaritans. They were convinced that Samaritans were detestable and worthless, but the one they label as despicable is the one that models God’s action. Jesus tells them to be like the Samaritan. This change of mindset would be far harder to take than doing an act of kindness to an enemy. Jesus challenges the stereotypes that are held by his audience and asks them to see the other differently. This is an important element of the parable to be opened up and discussed with students who might, in their turn, suggest some contemporary parallels.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son /Parable of the Lost Sons (Luke 15:11-32)
The parable traditionally titled the Prodigal Son is perhaps more appropriately titled the Parable of the Lost Sons because it is the third of a series of parables in Luke 15 that deal with finding the lost. The first two of these are the Parable of the Lost Sheep (15:3-7) and the Parable of the Lost Coin (15:8-10). In the Lukan context, as noted earlier, Jesus is targeting the Pharisees and scribes who are complaining that he welcomes sinners (15:1-2).

The first two parables are an example of a gendered pair of stories often found in the Gospel of Luke. Parallel stories feature a man and a woman in matching situations. Here a man celebrates after searching for and finding a lost sheep and a woman celebrates after searching for and finding a lost coin. Both the man and woman are images of God who seeks out the lost and welcomes the sinner. In the third of the parables, the father images God. By using a range of images for God with their classes, religious educators can reflect the wide range of biblical images for God.

According to Deuteronomy 21:17, the firstborn son receives twice the share of the father’s possessions than that of each of the other sons. It was usual, however, for the sons to receive their share upon the death of their father. The younger son’s request is therefore an offence to the father, yet the older son does not protest about the plan (Reid, 2000). That the father agrees to this scenario (15:12) is one of the surprising elements of the parable because to divide up his property would be tantamount to losing honour. Hence, the father’s gracious response comes at a cost to himself, causing him to be shamed in the eyes of others.
Most teachers know well the dynamic in this parable which highlights the father’s love and compassion (splanchnizomai) for his younger son. My comments here, therefore, will focus on the older son who is sometimes not given as much attention. The older son’s resentment of the father’s embrace of the returned younger son (15:25-28) is a key element of the parable. He considers himself a model son and is angered that the wasteful other son is reunited with the family. Yet a closer look at the parable indicates that the older son’s perceptions of his own behaviour and relationships may not reflect reality.

Far from being the model son, the older son’s relationship with his family leaves much to be desired. He describes himself as working like a slave for his father (15:29) rather than like a son. He refers to his brother as “this son of yours” (15:30). Thus, he alienates himself from both his father and brother. He, too, is a lost son. The father’s love for the older son is evident in his words: “My son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” (15:31). Yet there is no indication as to whether this son will respond to the father’s invitation to join the celebration. The parable is left open-ended.

Remember that this parable is really being addressed to the Pharisees and scribes, the “older sons”, who are grumbling because Jesus is welcoming sinners, the “younger sons.” While the Pharisees and scribes might consider themselves as God’s faithful ones, the dynamic of the parable invites them to reconsider their relationship with God and to perceive their need to be reconciled with God. Once again, we see that a parable confronts its hearers to think differently and such a message would not be easily received.

It is important that religious educators highlight both the depth of God’s compassion portrayed in the parable as well as this challenge that the parable levels at its hearers. God’s mercy and graciousness are offered to all, including those considered outsiders. The challenge is to recognise one’s own need for God’s gracious love. That there is no mention of the mother or any daughters in the parable reflects the patriarchal context within which the story is set.

The Parable of the Widow and the Judge (18:1-8)
Another uniquely Lukan parable is that of the Widow and the Judge (18:1-8) in which we are introduced to two characters: a judge who has no concern for God or people (18:2), and a widow who continually comes to the judge seeking justice (18:3). The portrayal of the judge presents a contrast with the description of God as judge in Sirach 35:14-22 where we are told that God executes justice and will not ignore the widow and orphan (Schottroff, 2006; Reid, 2000). While the narrator’s comment in 18:1 links the parable with persistence in prayer, there is more in the parable than this focus.

Deuteronomy 16:20 instructs the faithful to pursue only justice. We see that it is the widow rather than the judge who pursues justice and thus is the model to be emulated, a key element of the parable that is frequently overlooked. We also see that it is the widow and not the powerful judge who images the God of justice. This is a surprising dynamic for Jesus’ audience: “It asks one to leave behind stereotypes and wrestle with unfamiliar notions about what God is like and what justice in the realm of God looks like and how it is achieved” (Reid, 2000, p. 233).

Parables of Reversal
Immediately following the Parable of the Widow and the Judge, Luke presents the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (18:9-14), one of the so-called parables of reversal. Reversal is a prominent theme in the Gospel of Luke. It forms a key element of the passage we generally refer to as the Magnificat (1:46-55) where we hear that God raises the lowly and brings down the powerful, fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty (1:52-53). The theme is continued in the woes that follow the Lukan beatitudes (6:20-26) and also features in a number of Lukan parables.

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is addressed to those who regard themselves highly and treat others with contempt (18:9). The parable describes both a Pharisee and a tax collector going to the temple to pray. The Pharisee is self-satisfied, placing himself above others and thinking himself righteous while the tax collector simply acknowledges his need for God’s mercy (18:11-13). We are told that it is the
tax collector, one from a despised occupation and labelled a sinner, rather than the religious leader who goes home in right relationship with God (18:14). The parable highlights that God’s embrace of the outsider is characteristic of the reign of God. Once again, Jesus’ target audience, who would align themselves with the Pharisee in the parable, would be challenged to reconsider their own relationship with God.

A similar dynamic is evident in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31). This parable is addressed to Pharisees who are described here as lovers of money (16:14). Usually, riches were considered a sign of God’s blessing (Reid, 2000), so the descriptions of the two main characters would lead the audience to consider that God’s favour lay with the rich man rather than the beggar, Lazarus. The outcome of the parable, however, reverses this understanding. The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus confronts its hearers to reassess their understanding of how God operates and challenges those with wealth to see the needs of others and ensure that all have enough. God’s reign is confronting for the comfortable.

The topic of wealth and riches is treated more comprehensively in the Gospel of Luke than in the other Gospels. This may be because the Lukan community is thought to comprise people from a range of social locations, from the wealthy to the poor, even destitute (Esler, 1987). It is no surprise then that some of the Lukan parables draw on the theme of riches.

The Parable of the Rich Fool (12:13-21) also takes up this topic. In response to a request from someone in the crowd to settle an inheritance dispute (12:13-14), Jesus tells the Parable of the Rich Fool on the dangers that an excess of possessions can pose. When his land produces abundantly, a man decides to build larger storage barns so that he can stockpile all his goods, enough for several years. It is pertinent to note that the man engages in a soliloquy (12:17-19). He does not thank God nor celebrate and share the abundance with family and friends. He is totally self-focussed. The first person singular pronoun “I’ predominates in his self-talk. His obsession with possessions has isolated him and he dies alone (Donahue, 1988). In the Rich Man and Lazarus, the rich man is unaware of the beggar at his gate. Here, the Rich Fool is unaware of God’s presence: “God has to interrupt his material musings” (Donahue, 1988, p. 179). God’s words, “You fool…” (12:20) provide an ironic twist as the parable comes to a close. We see the dangers that riches can trigger and to which this man, like his counterpart in the Lazarus story, has succumbed.

Elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus affirms another rich man, Zacchaeus, for sharing his wealth with those in need (19:1-10). The problem is not having riches but what you decide to do or not to do with your wealth. In 8:1-3, several women who travel with Jesus and the twelve support the group out of their own resources. The women are portrayed as having independent means and as sharing these for the benefit of others. While Zacchaeus and these Lukan women followers of Jesus are characters in the gospel story as a whole rather than in the parables, they provide the model for the appropriate use of possessions. They thus help readers of the gospel to comprehend more fully the teaching of the parables on riches. God’s reign is concerned with fullness of life for all. Hence, riches are to be shared so that all may flourish.

Slaves and Day Labourers
Several parables involve slaves or day labourers. It is important for educators to have an insight into the social world of the first century in order to understand the context for these parables. Within the economic climate of the Roman Empire, many peasants operated in desperate situations:
Famine, lack of rain, over-population, and heavy taxes could put a struggling farmer over the brink. In Palestine of Jesus’ day it is estimated that somewhere between one-half and two-thirds of a farmer’s income went to taxes that included Roman tribute, payment to Herod and the procurators, and land rent to the large landowners (Reid, 1999, 114).

Those who lost their land had to rely on finding employment as day labourers. Theirs was a precarious existence. The usual daily wage for a male labourer, the equivalent of a Roman denarius, was insufficient to feed a family and had to be supplemented by the labour of women and children who received significantly less than the male wage (Schottroff, 2006).
Hence, the day labourers formed an extremely vulnerable group. There is evidence that landowners tended to be more concerned about the health of their slaves than of these labourers (Schottroff, 2006), and there was no certainty that a day labourer would be given employment on any particular day. The landowners were in the positions of power. This is the context for the Parable of the Labourers (Matt 20:1-16) where a landowner gives the same wage to those who worked for a full day and to those who worked only part of the day. Since the fittest labourers would be likely to be selected first by the landowners, those who had not been employed by late in the day (20:6-7) are probably the frailest. Their situation would be the most desperate of all the labourers. The parable highlights yet again that God’s ways are not the conventional ways of the Roman world. God’s graciousness is particularly concerned for the most vulnerable.

The plight of slaves in the Greco-Roman world varied, depending on the status and temperaments of their masters. While some slaves held important roles in their master’s business dealings, others were engaged in physical labour. Either way, the slave’s work was used for their owner’s benefit. Slaves were considered as property, non-persons, and were commonly subjected to physical and sexual abuse (Dowling, 2007).

Several of the Gospel parables presume a master-slave dynamic and the violence and exploitation of slaves is also evident in some of these stories. Luke 12:41-48 (parallel Matt 24:45-51), for instance, shows that male and female slaves are subject to abuse by anyone in a position of power over them, even another slave (12:45). The master punishes the slave who does not follow the master’s instructions by dismembering him (12:46). Even the slave who does not know his master’s wishes and displeases the master will receive a light beating (12:48). Physical violence is an expected part of the world of slaves (Dowling, 2008). The exploitation of a slave’s work is evident in Luke 17:7-9 where a slave who has been labouring in the field is then expected to prepare and serve the meal for the master. The slave is not thanked for doing what is commanded.

The slave’s status as nonperson is relevant to a reading of The Parable of the Great Dinner (Luke 14:15-24). In this story we find the host of a great dinner sending out his slave to tell the invited guests that the dinner is ready. When they find excuses not to come, the master sends the slave out again to invite the poor, crippled, blind and lame (14:21). When there is still more room, the slave is sent out yet again to the roads and lanes to compel others to come (14:23). While the main foci of the parable are the abundant hospitality of the host and the poor and the outsiders coming to the dinner rather than those originally invited, Glancy (2006) makes an observation that many readers of this parable overlook. The slave is not invited. The poorest and most vulnerable of free persons are invited but the slave is not considered as a guest. The slave is a nonperson.

We have seen that some aspects of the slave parables reflect the offensive social structure which allows slaves to be owned by masters. Within this structure, violence and abuse inflicted on slaves is thought to be acceptable because slaves are considered nonpersons. Though the slave parables are aiming to challenge their hearers in their own way, they presume a context of slavery that needs to be critiqued.

Educators also need to be aware that slavery is not just an issue of the past. While it was common practice in biblical times, slavery remains one of the most urgent human rights issues which our world faces today. Human trafficking, for the purposes of sexual exploitation and forced labour, is one of the forms of slavery in our present world, including Australia. When using slave parables in teaching, it is well to be informed about the biblical and modern slave context so that the violence inflicted on slaves in ancient times and today is critiqued and not glossed over or unconsciously reinforced (Dowling 2008).

While some aspects of the gospel parables reinforce slaves’ vulnerability and status as nonpersons, there are other aspects which subvert this to a certain extent. The story of the master who sits his slaves down and serves them (Luke 12:37) counters the usual dynamic of master-slave relationships, disrupting the hierarchical structure. In a previous work, I have argued that some unexpected aspects also occur in the Parable of the Pounds (Luke 19:11-27). Here, the master is depicted as extortionate and the third slave exposes his master’s practices and refuses to continue the oppression. That the third slave is portrayed as
the hero of the parable and the master as the villain counters general expectation (Dowling 2007). The third slave acts as the Lukan Jesus acts to relieve the burdens of the oppressed, modelling the characteristic values of God’s reign.

**Conclusion**

Jesus taught in parables. He used parables to teach about the reign of God and to challenge people to think about God and themselves in new ways. Understanding parables is therefore an ongoing responsibility for teachers of Religious Education in schools and adult education contexts. It is vital that teachers are aware of the confronting and challenging nature of parables, so that students might come to appreciate the power of the parables. Parables should not leave hearers thinking that they are lovely stories. Rather, hearers should be puzzled and having to think further about the meanings. Hearers are challenged to expand their understanding of God’s reign and how God promotes fullness of life for all.

Knowledge of the social and cultural contexts encoded in a particular parable is an essential element in understanding the dynamic of that parable. Contemporary biblical scholarship provides insights into these contexts. Identifying the audience whom Jesus targets by telling the parable is also a key aspect. With this knowledge, educators can assist students to understand how the parable would have been confronting or even shocking for Jesus’ original audience. Only then is it possible for students to recognise parallel situations within their own contexts to which the parable might speak. When a parable presumes the context of slavery and reinforces the abuse and exploitation of slaves, however, that context must be critiqued so that it is not unwittingly reinforced. This is particularly relevant given the ongoing existence of slavery in our present world.

**References**


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Peer Review and its contribution to the Professional Growth and Learning of Pre-service Teachers of Religious Education

Abstract
In recent times peer review strategies have been incorporated into the learning and teaching plans of many tertiary education courses across a variety of disciplines. Recent studies have found that the inclusion of peer review strategies has increased student motivation (Topping, 1998), promoted collaborative learning and improved academic skills (Malone & Riggsbee, 2007), fostered constructive feedback from peers (Bernstein, 2008) and improved learning outcomes for students (Van Weert & Pilot, 2003). This paper reports on some of the key findings about the inclusion of peer review strategies in a religious education subject undertaken by pre-service teachers enrolled in a postgraduate diploma in secondary education at Australian Catholic University (Melbourne campus), Australia. The study involved sixty pre-service teacher participants who were undertaking a curriculum and teaching religious education class. Each participant was involved in the peer review process and then invited to share their perceptions by participating in a focus group as well as completing a questionnaire. This study was located within a constructivist paradigm and drew upon Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) original principles of grounded theory to identify the key findings. The study found that there was a significant alignment between the benefits of peer review strategies in other discipline areas, and religious education. Furthermore, the study found that the peer review process contributed to the pre-service teachers’ ability to critically self-reflect on their learning and their professional growth as religious educators.

Introduction
Peer review or feedback can take many forms but generally speaking it involves “a process whereby students evaluate, or are evaluated by their peers” (van Zundert, Sluijsmans, van Merrienboer, 2010, p. 270). As is suggested by such a broad definition, peer review processes can take many different forms – where each form is defined by its various characteristics. Although the benefits of peer review may well differ depending on these characteristics, the literature on peer review has devoted little attention to the assessment of the ways in which the benefits of peer review may change as the form of the peer review changes (Topping, 2010).

This paper reports on a study of a particular form of peer review. It reports on a study of a small group of pre-service religious education teachers which aimed to gain some insights into the significance of a peer review from their perspective. The details about the participants and the actual study are outlined later in the research design section of this paper. The peer review literature informing this study explored peer review processes in other disciplines areas in tertiary education (Bindley & Scoffield, 1998; Smith, Cooper & Lancaster, 2002; Wen, Tsai, Chang, 2006). The approaches adopted in other discipline areas tended to highlight several benefits for students. These benefits, arising from the studies conducted by Bindley and Scoffield (1998), Smith et al (2002), Wen et al (2006), aligned with the perceptions of the pre-service religious education teachers who participated in this study.

The inclusion of peer review strategies in higher education courses have contributed to increased levels of student motivation. These increased levels of student motivation were largely due to increases in student satisfaction arising from the process of being reviewed by one’s peers (Topping, 1998).

Peer review is not perceived as having the same imbalance of power commonly associated with teacher /
student and/or tutor / student feedback. Those being reviewed and those providing the review (or peer feedback) are more likely to be perceived as being on an equal playing field. A recent study found that participation in peer review generally resulted in improved learning outcomes for students (van den Berg, Admiraal and Pilot, 2006a). The level of improvement is generally attributed to the type of feedback associated with peer review. In general peer feedback is likely to be based upon the students’ experience of dealing with the same (or similar) learning problem and also their own reflection upon that experience. The student receiving the feedback knows that the student offering the feedback has dealt with the same (or similar) issue(s) and therefore she / he is more likely to be open to receiving feedback from a like-minded peer or peers.

The higher levels of student satisfaction have been attributed to the peer review processes that promote collaborative learning (Malone & Riggsbee, 2007); they provide feedback that resembles professional practice; they involve real-life task performances; and they contribute to improving academic skills (Van Weert & Pilot, 2003).

The benefits reported from the adoption of peer review suggest lessons as to how peer review processes should be designed. In particular, they should be designed to foster constructive feedback from peers (Bernstein, 2008) in order to maximise chances for attaining improved learning outcomes for students (Van Weert, & Pilot, 2003). From a study based on students enrolled in a fourth year History program at Utrecht University in The Netherlands by van den Berg, Admiraal and Pilot (2006b), it was found that most students gained significant insights from peer feedback which led to an improvement in their academic growth. Their study also revealed that there were significant differences in the grades from groups of students involved in peer review to those who were not. For example, better structured writing was found from the groups who were involved in peer preview.

A study of pre-service teachers and in-service teachers participating in tertiary programs across various universities and colleges in Northern Taiwan revealed that there was a slight difference in attitudes toward peer review between pre-service and in-service teachers. Both groups did in fact regard peer review in a favourable light. However the pre-service teachers perceived peer review mainly as an assessment tool while in-service teachers viewed peer review as a learning aid rather than exclusively as an assessment tool (Wen, Tsai, & Chang, 2006). For in-service teachers, peer review was also perceived as a way of enhancing a sense of class participation and increased classroom interaction (Wen et al, 2006). This difference in attitude towards peer review was likely to have resulted from a sense of pressure upon Taiwanese pre-service teachers to actually pass their initial teacher training course with high ranking academic results. Where as, the Taiwanese in-service teachers involved in peer reviews were not bound by the same degree of pressure to achieve a qualification. Against this background of literature regarding peer review in higher education in general, this study aimed to explore whether a peer review process might enhance the academic and professional learning of pre-service teachers of religious education. The following research question underpinned the investigation:

**What are the perceived benefits of a peer review process for pre-service teachers of religious education?**

**Research Design**

**Participants**

The participants were pre-service teachers from the Postgraduate Graduate Diploma in Education (Secondary) / Graduate Certificate in Religious Education course and they were enrolled in the second semester religious education curriculum and teaching unit at the Melbourne Campus of the Australian Catholic University. The total number of students was sixty and they were divided amongst three tutorial groups. The unit took place over a twelve week semester. During each week of the semester, each student attended a one hour lecture and a two hour tutorial.
Setting
The Melbourne campus of the Australian Catholic University offers a one year combined Postgraduate Graduate Diploma in Education (Secondary) / Graduate Certificate in Religious Education course. Upon successful completion of this course pre-service teachers can apply for registration as a secondary teacher in schools in Australia; as well they can apply for accreditation to teach religious education in Catholic schools. The minimum prerequisite for enrolling in this combined teacher education course is a three year Bachelor’s degree (or equivalent) from a recognised tertiary institution.

Students enrolled in the unit were divided into three tutorial groups. Each group consisted of twenty pre-service teachers. The unit involved an assessment task which incorporated a peer review component. The assessment task required pre-service teachers to conduct a professional learning seminar for their peers in their tutorial. The pre-service teachers were divided into groups of five. Each group was required to present an overview of a teaching and learning model and demonstrate its application to a religious education curriculum area for a specific year level. In particular, each group was required to demonstrate a teaching and learning approach to a religious education lesson. Each group presented one of the following approaches: De Bono’s Thinking Hats (De Bono, 2006); Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences (McGrath & Noble, 2005); the Composite Model for Teaching Scripture (Caswell, 2001) or; an Inquiry Learning Model (Wilson, 2006). The time assigned to the seminar was thirty minutes from introduction to conclusion.

At the conclusion of the seminar each presenting group was given an opportunity to conduct a peer review in order to seek feedback from all members of the tutorial who had participated in the seminar. The peer review instruments incorporated both written and oral feedback. Each group prepared a questionnaire generally consisting of closed-ended questions including Likert scaled questions. Figure 1 provides an example of the types of questions asked.

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Was the overview of the teaching and learning approach comprehensive?
1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

The application of the teaching and learning approach to the curriculum area at a given year level was relevant.
1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

Figure 1. An example of the types of questions incorporated into the written peer review instruments developed by the pre-service teachers.

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The actual benefits and use of Likert scale type questions as a peer review instrument for this study were difficult to determine. Furthermore, even though the pre-service teachers researched and decided upon the peer review instruments they would develop or adapt for the purposes of receiving feedback, they were unable to justify their choice in adopting and developing an instrument based on Likert scale type questions. They in fact had trouble explaining any benefits arising from their choice and use of Likert scale type questions as a peer review instrument for the purpose of gaining critical insights into how their professional learning workshop was perceived. Indeed, the focus group discussions (which formed part of the investigation) revealed that the pre-service teachers who used Likert scale type questions did not
perceive that they gained any significant insights from the use of this type of feedback instrument. Given that the pre-service teachers were responsible for designing and developing their own peer review instruments, their reflection and critique on the worthiness of the peer review instruments they had used suggests that their research and preparation for the professional learning workshop was not confined to the content knowledge and processes necessary to facilitate the workshop. Their research skills were also used to decide upon which peer review instruments to adopt and develop, and later to develop the worthiness of these instruments. This suggests that a culture of pre-service teachers of religious education being researchers of their own learning and reflection on that learning should be fostered because many contemporary learning communities in recent times have tried to promote cultures where teachers see themselves as researchers of their own practice (Stern, 2010).

While the pre-service teachers of religious education lamented the adoption of a Likert scale approach to develop a peer review instrument they were also glad that they had adopted another strategy for receiving peer feedback. The use of an oral feedback session as part of the peer review process was perceived as beneficial. They found that the oral feedback from peers provided them with in depth insights into how their ability to deliver a professional learning workshop was perceived by their peers. They were able to use the oral feedback to reflect upon and make judgements about their own learning and professional growth needs.

Once the presenters had collected the written peer review questionnaires they were given an opportunity to seek oral feedback from their peers. Some groups prepared questions and others asked for general feedback. It was an expectation that the feedback from peers be relevant to the assessment task criteria. Figure 2 provides examples of some of the peer review questions asked as part of the oral feedback phase.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To what extent were the strategies used appropriate to the target age group?</td>
<td>To what extent were the strategies used appropriate to the target age group?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In what ways has the professional learning seminar added to your own confidence and ability to teach this topic?</td>
<td>In what ways has the professional learning seminar added to your own confidence and ability to teach this topic?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What have you gained from this professional learning seminar that might inform your own classroom teaching?</td>
<td>What have you gained from this professional learning seminar that might inform your own classroom teaching?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. An example of the types of questions asked during the oral feedback aspect of the peer review process.

The time allocated for the peer review feedback session was approximately fifteen to twenty minutes and each group determined how much time they would allocate to the written or oral peer review instruments. One week after presenting the professional learning seminar and receiving the (written and oral) feedback from peers the pre-service teachers were invited to meet with the tutor and discuss their reflections on the whole experience as well as clarify any issues or concerns.

Method
Towards the end of the semester all of the pre-service teachers were invited to participate in the study by completing a short survey questionnaire and a focus group discussion relating to their experience of undergoing a process of peer review. All pre-service teachers completed the survey questionnaire and fifty-five of the sixty pre-service teachers participated in a focus group discussion. Their participation helped to validate and clarify the categories of findings emanating from the responses to the questionnaire. The focus groups were held outside of timetabled tutorial time to ensure that students did not feel under any undue pressure to participate. Figure 3 provides an overview of the key questions in the survey questionnaire. These questions were also used to guide the focus group discussions.
1) What contributions, if any, did peer review feedback make to your own understanding of the work you presented?

2) What insights, if any, did you gain from the peer review process that will impact on your development?

3) In what ways, if any, did the peer review process contribute to your own professional growth and as an educator?

4) In what ways, if any, has the peer review process contributed to your ability to critically self reflect on your work as an educator?

Figure 3. An overview of the key open-ended survey questions

Data analysis
The study was situated within a constructivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998) and drew upon Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) original principles of grounded theory to identify the emergent categories of findings. Since there is very little documentation about the impact of peer review upon pre-service religious education teachers, the principles of grounded theory were adopted in order to gain insights into this relatively unknown area. This methodology and adaptations of it are commonly used where little is known about the phenomenon under investigation (Goulding, 2002). Four categories of findings emerged from the data arising from the survey instrument and the focus groups. The categories of findings which are the focal point of this study are explored in the following section of this paper.

Results and Discussion
The study found that this particular experience of peer review amongst pre-service religious education teachers impacted upon pre-service teachers in the following ways:

- It helped them to identify the strengths and limitations of their work;
- It was a positive experience with the potential to contribute to one’s own development;
- It contributed to one’s professional growth and understanding of the professional role of a teacher;
- It contributed to a pre-service teacher’s ability to critically reflect upon the role of a religious education teacher.

Identify the strengths and limitations of their work

It has been argued that peer review processes can be effective in identifying the strengths and limitations of a student’s work in situations where tutors take control of the peer review process by developing peer review instruments such as questionnaires (Wilson, 2006). This study showed that the ability to identify strengths and limitations is not limited to tutor directed peer review instruments, that is, instruments designed and developed by the tutor or lecturer. A unique feature of this study was that participants were responsible for designing and developing their own peer review instruments.

The following comments from pre-service teachers are indicative of their ability to identify some strengths and limitations of their own work. It is common for pre-service teachers (and students in general) to become very focussed on mastering the knowledge content associated with new learning. During a presentation exercise (or in this case leading a professional learning workshop) the focus on content has the potential to cause some students (or in this case pre-service teachers of religious education) to lose sight of the significance of a coherent presentation process. The following comments from Respondents 27 and 9 are indicative of this: “The peer review feedback helped me to figure out the aspects of my presentation that were not clear. If I were to do it again I now know which parts to leave out and which parts to elaborate on” (Respondent 27). “The peer review was very good in helping me to recognise oversights in the presentation. It is hard to see things myself and the feedback helped me to see things from another angle” (Respondent 9).
Positive experience contributing to one’s development
It is very common for those receiving feedback from a peer review to hear only the negative aspects even when the positives may well outweigh them (Wager, Godlee, Jefferson 2002). The pre-service teachers involved in this study tended to view feedback from the peer review in a positive light even in situations where they found the feedback to be strongly critical of their work. “One profound insight I have gained from peer review is that I should always be open to constructive feedback because taking on board some of the feedback can really challenge or help me to grow as an educator” (Respondent 36). Receiving feedback from peers can be really challenging for the receiver; however having an opportunity to experience a peer review can also help individuals to be open to the likely potentials for one’s own development. For some pre-service teachers the experience of being peer reviewed helped them to improve their work. “Since being involved in the peer review experience I am able to take constructive criticism on board and use it to empower myself and make my work better” (Respondent 15). The opportunity to receive feedback can be perceived as a very positive experience leading to growth and development (Malone & Riggsbee, 2007).

In this study, structures were put in place to help ensure that the feedback could be received mainly in a positive light. A key structure (or process) incorporated into this study required that oral feedback from peers was not to be challenged or discussed between the reviewer(s) and those being reviewed during the feedback session. To debate the feedback at this point in time has the potential to reduce the opportunity to receive a broader range of feedback. This was due to the fact that there was limited time in which to hear the range of feedback from peers. Another structure incorporated into the peer review process was to provide pre-service teachers with the opportunity to respond to the feedback in a written evaluation of their experience of the whole process. Against the backdrop of these structures (or processes) being set in place this study supports the view that to be able to receive feedback from a peer review can contribute to a pre-service teacher’s own improvement. “The feedback from peers can really assist in my development” (Respondent 4).

Professional growth
Participation in peer review has the potential to change one’s educational outlook (Bell, 2005). A recent study based on a group of pre-service teachers in Taiwan revealed that peer review was perceived as an assessment tool rather than a learning aid and this perception generated an unfavourable outlook toward peer review (Wen, Tsai & Chang, 2006). However, this peer review experience amongst pre-service teachers in an Australian tertiary setting enabled many to further consider what it means to be part of the teaching profession. Because it was not viewed primarily as an assessment tool, the participants predominantly perceived the experience as contributing to their professional growth. The following insight reflects the general view of the pre-service teachers involved in this study. “It has convinced me that teaching is a highly skilled profession and anyone who thinks that all it takes to be a good teacher is to have a bright personality and like children is seriously mistaken. There is so much more to this profession!” (Respondent 3).

During the early stages of the course (and up until participating in the professional learning workshop) Respondent 3 perceived that having a likeable personality was the main requirement needed to be a successful teacher of religious education. The peer review experience transformed the perception held by Respondent 3. In a professional learning workshop segment facilitated by Respondent 3 the ‘likeable personality theory’ was put to the test. The peer feedback was enlightening for Respondent 3. The feedback from peers challenged Respondent 3 claiming that a lack of preparation was evident and that the professional learning workshop segment facilitated by Respondent 3 did not clearly demonstrate the relevance for adolescent development in relation to the learning and teaching approach being demonstrated. This was a turning point for Respondent 3 which help the respondent to reflect on his/her own professional growth as indicated by the comment made earlier by the Respondent.
Critically reflect upon the role of a religious education teacher

Tertiary students, including pre-service teachers (and pre-service teachers of religious education), can be encouraged to develop their thinking skills in ways that enable them to think critically and independently (Savoy, Burnett and Goodburn, 2007). The potential for these skills to be developed through peer review were evident in this study not only in terms of understanding the knowledge and skill content but also in terms of what it means to be a religious education teacher. “Peer review provided me with a solid set of data to refer back to and it helped to ensure that my own reflections are more critical and hence productive because I gained insights into possible improvements that can be made not only to my classroom teaching but also to what it means for me to be a religious education teacher” (Respondent 7).

Another benefit of the peer feedback process in this study was that it advanced the pre-service teachers’ ability and willingness to critique their own work and profession. “It gave me more insights by which to critique my own teaching from different but equally relevant perspectives” (Respondent 29). Or, as one other participant stated; “My own critical self-reflection about what it means to be an effective religious education teacher can be assisted by seeking and considering feedback from peers” (Respondent 40).

For many pre-service teachers the key learning related to the importance of knowing the content knowledge associated with a range of affective teaching and learning strategies designed to enable students to gain access to and to critically reflect on the content knowledge associated with the discipline. In addition another key learning was to be familiar with the developmental stages of an adolescent (including the faith and spiritual developmental stages).

Conclusion

This paper has reported on the preliminary findings of a small study into the perceptions of pre-service religious education teachers about their participation in a peer review process. The insights gained should not necessarily be generalised beyond the scope of this study. While it is likely that increased student motivation may arise from student involvement in peer review (Topping, 1998), this study has shown that an increased level of motivation amongst pre-service teacher of religious education in both their academic and vocational / professional learning. The participants’ involvement in the peer review process perceived it as a favourable experience because it helped them to identify some of the strengths and limitations of their own learning (including collaborative learning) and professional practice. These insights were used to motivate them to take responsibility for their own improvement. The experience of collaborative learning contributed to improved academic skills (Malone & Riggsbee, 2007). The participants in this study perceived that the feedback from the peer review process gave insights into how to improve their work. It was as a positive experience in that they perceived it as having the potential to contribute to their own academic and professional development. The pre-service teachers in this study, unlike their North Taiwanese counterparts (Wen et al, 2006), perceived peer review as a learning aid rather than an assessment task. As such this non threatening approach to peer review enabled them to consider the skills involved in being a teacher of religious education as well as orient themselves towards taking responsibility for their own professional growth. It is possible to achieve improved learning outcomes (Van Weert, & Pilot, 2003) and the participants also perceived that the peer review experience enabled them to critically reflect upon the role of a religious education teacher and focus their learning towards achieving the skills required to be an effective teacher of religious education.

References


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Gerard Stoyles, Peter Caputi, Geoffrey Lyons and Nigel Mackay

New wine, new wine-skins: Revisiting Catholic Sacramentality through the Eyes of a Child’s Spiritual Being

Abstract
This theoretical paper discusses the spirituality of childhood within the context of Catholic sacramentality, specifically the child’s experience of the Sacrament of Eucharist. The authors argue that readiness for a child’s reception of the Eucharist needs to take into account the spiritual being of the child, as well as the child’s cognitive capacity to grasp the meaning of the Eucharist. Future research directions arising from this theoretical paper are discussed in the conclusion.

A sobering experience
As first author of this paper, I was recently the celebrant for nine year-old children’s First Communion Mass. I devised what I thought was a novel approach to an understanding of Eucharist for children of this age. I asked some volunteer children to smell a cake of soap and a piece of chocolate. My question of “how do the soap and chocolate smell like soap and chocolate?” attracted a variety of creative solutions. To my way of thinking, the process of understanding was simple. If we can still enjoy the smell of soap and chocolate without knowing how soap and chocolate smell like soap and chocolate, then we can enjoy Jesus as Eucharist without knowing how the bread and wine becomes Jesus. However, when I asked the children if they understood what I was talking about, one small child looked at me quizzically and said, “sort of”. The highlight for the children was not the awakening of some olfactory theology of Eucharist, but rather who was going to get the chocolate. Incidentally, no one was interested in who was going to get the soap.

Later in the day, I reflected on this experience. A nine year-old child is conceptually concrete – “what you see is what you get” – yet the notion of Eucharistic presence is essentially abstract. Empirical models of spiritual development indicate that children lack the cognitive ability to think in the abstract manner required by many theological principles. While an in-depth discussion of the psychological research surrounding child development is beyond the scope of this paper, this area deserves exploration and discussion in another forum (see Oser & Reich, 1996). Though the activity might have been novel for child and adult alike, it contained problems and posed some challenging questions. First, I was telling the children about the meaning of Eucharist, instead of listening to their sense of what Eucharist meant to them as nine year-old children. I was taking what was already a complex, abstract concept and confusing it with everyday concrete experiences of chocolate and soap, presuming that children would jump easily from one stepping-stone of understanding to the next. I was attempting to teach children what they should know, and how they should know. Second, I presumed that the children needed some wise person to clarify the meaning of Eucharist for them. Overall, a misalignment of communication existed between the children and me, and this misalignment was summed up in the young girl’s reply of “sort of”. It occurred to me later that the fog of non-understanding started to descend when I attempted to generalise from the smell of the chocolate and soap to interpreting and applying this activity to an understanding of Eucharistic meaning. I mused that if had I stopped before this point and listened rather than teach, then I might have progressed a lot further than “sort of”.

“Presumption” – the pitfall of the unwary
It was clear that I was attempting the pedagogically impossible. A nine year-old child is very much a concrete thinker, and there is little likelihood that a child of this age will understand the abstract concept of “Eucharist”. However, my experience with the children challenged me to consider how much I had been imbued with the expectation that readiness for this Sacrament was defined by the child’s ability to describe the theology of transubstantiation, in the hope that one day the lines of teaching and knowledge would
intersect at the “ah-ha!” point of complete understanding. Did my starting point consist of the tenet that knowledge was a synonym for spiritual awareness and feeling? Does theoretical knowledge alone allow children to grasp and savour the “theologically indescribable” in their own way, and in their own time? Children are similar to the woman in the Gospel story who suffered from a haemorrhage (Mark 5: 27-29). She sought the experience of Jesus without knowing his teachings. These aforementioned challenges cannot be generalised to everyone who undertakes the sacramental and spiritual formation of children. However, they prompted my colleagues and me to think about the “spiritual child”, and the degree to which a child is encouraged and allowed to simply wonder about the “theologically indescribable”, even in the absence of what an adult would consider to be acceptable levels of knowledge and understanding.

The Relationship between Religion and Spirituality

Our being has the power to enlighten our minds at times of crisis, draw us from despair to hope, and nourish our spiritual yearnings, and this experience need not necessarily occur within the parameters of traditional religious values and rituals (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008; de Souza, 2009; Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger & Gorusch, 1996; Zinnbauer, Pargament & Scott, 1999). Religion and spirituality are not equal referents. Rather, the traditions and rituals of religion provide the focus for expressing one’s spirituality (Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCullough, Swyers, Larsen & Zinnbauer, 2000), as indicated by the following authors. When Hay enquired from his students about their understandings of religion and spirituality, he noted a tendency to define religion in terms of place, ritual, negative perception and emotional response. On the other hand, his students readily defined spirituality as warmth, depth, mystery and personal devotion (Hay & Nye, 2006). Benson, Roehlkepartain, and Rude (2003) view spirituality as a person’s “intrinsic human capacity” to seek “something greater” than that which is presently contained within one’s noetic grasp (Benson et al., 2003, p. 208). Hyde (2008) extends the notion of spirituality and intrinsic human capacity further into the realm of a universal human experience that cannot be contained by any one particular religious tradition. For O Murchu (2000), spirituality offers a sense of inclusivity that extends beyond the bounds of religious traditions and beliefs into the lives of those who have never been formally religious.

Religion and religious ritual is therefore a human construct (O Murchu, 2000). Its traditions and rituals allow one to symbolically express the struggles and discoveries of life, yet religion does not define the limits of spirituality. One can simply be present, alone or with others, in the midst of religious symbolic action without having to justify or explain that presence (Hood, Hill & Spilka, 2009; Tacey, 2003). The action of Eucharist demonstrates this relationship between religious ritual and spirituality. Eucharist is physically expressed in the fundamental action of communal eating and drinking – an action that is basic for human survival. In the expression of this action, a person brings meaning to the Eucharist, and takes meaning away from it, and at this point religion and spirituality meet. Spirituality is not subservient to religion. Rather, religious symbol and action has the potential to take people across the threshold of daily life, and for a while enable them to leave their struggles behind so that they might return to them afresh. Meaning is therefore brought to religious tradition and ritual through its communication with the person’s spiritual being, so that ritual might touch what is spiritual within the person. This is something that is felt rather than taught (as with the woman suffering from the haemorrhage). It cannot be confirmed via the mere recitation of learned facts.

Whether inside or outside the confines of religious tradition, it is that spiritual part of our being-in-the-world – that innate reality in every person, religious or not – that prompts us to question, to doubt, to explore, to discern (O Murchu, 2000). At the same time, religiosity is not the antithesis of spirituality. The gathering of like-minded people has the potential to provide a framework around one’s personal search for the meaning, identification, articulation and transformation of what is sacred. As O Murchu points out (2000), the struggle is not about religion itself, but about the person who brings the search for meaning into the arena of religious tradition, ritualistic practice, and belief. From the perspective of childhood experience, children may not “know” the theological principles that define Eucharist (as with the author’s experience), but in their innate capacity for spiritual experience they are able to “be” engaged in the Eucharist as they share with others what the action of Eucharist denotes. Little more in the way of understanding may be expected from them (Boyatzis, 2005).
Traditional religion and spirituality: the spiritual being of a child

The foundations upon which the spirituality of children is engendered must be constantly scrutinised and challenged (Coles, 1990). Hart (2003) speaks of children as having a natural capacity to “listen with their hearts” (p. 86), and those who teach and practice religious beliefs must listen to what these hearts have to say. Hence, what are the pedagogical perspectives of those who seek to create a context for children to find their spiritual selves in the midst of a religious community? What do children bring to this experience from their own spiritual discoveries, and to what extent are they allowed to make this contribution? The author’s experience presuming that there was a “right way” of understanding Eucharist, and somehow the children who listened to him were expected to follow this “right way” to the point of full understanding (as he saw it). The girl who responded with “sort of” was struggling between giving assent to the author’s stance and offering her own reflection. How much, therefore, does the adult’s foundation of influence respect the environment of the child’s life – its people, places and history? Champagne (2003) sheds light on this question.

Traditional religion and spirituality: the influence of children on adults

Champagne (2003) describes three modes of a child’s spiritual being, namely, the Sensitive, the Relational, and the Existential. These modes of spiritual being describe the spiritual interactions between a child and his or her environment, as well as the manner and quality of the child’s human relationships as these might be experienced in space and time. The three modes of being have the capacity to enrich and broaden the spiritual awareness of adults who care for the child when they notice the child’s own spiritual awareness, and then proceed to engage with the child in that awareness. The author might have been attempting to actively engage the children in seeking an understanding of the Eucharist. However, the author’s intention was driven by a domain that reflected his own understanding and knowledge, both of which did not acknowledge the children’s breadth of interaction with the people and events of their environment. Thus the author achieved little more than relate to the children as passive observers who received the “good things” he offered to them. He did not allow himself to become immersed with the children in seeking a new and richer understanding of Eucharist than the one he ascribed to. There was wisdom in the young girl’s response that sought to open the author’s mind towards a new direction of thought and meaning through her experience of life as she saw it.

Children, as well as adults, ponder life

Children are able to positively influence the spiritual beings of adults in their questioning of the world around them. They have the capacity to be comfortable within their world and its surroundings, and possess the ability to actively communicate with it (Eaude, 2005). Hart (2003) writes that it is within the child’s heart that one finds the capacity to simply ride the backs of life’s questions without necessarily knowing where the answers might lie. Whereas adults will seek to pull an experience apart, and examine the parts of its whole in order to arrive at a defensible solution, children are able to sit comfortably with the unsolvable mysteries of life. The questions of children do not rely on answers for their validation, and adults can learn from children’s readiness to ask questions without necessarily finding the answers. In the clinical experience of the first author, children who have experienced parental abuse in their early years possess the capacity to recall these experiences, to feel the hurt aroused by these experiences, and question the justice and hurt that these experiences have brought about. They may not fully understand the reasons behind the actions of those who have hurt them, but they know the experience of this hurt, both for themselves and for others. Children’s questions, even those questions about the complexities of life such as the aforementioned example, are found at the heart of daily interactions with people and the world (Coles, 1990; Hart, 2003). The motivation to wonder about life without necessarily working out its intricate meaning has the power to prompt their urgings towards thanksgiving, forgiveness, delight, tenderness and simplicity (Coles, 1990; Hart, 2003). A child has the ability to deeply ponder the mysteries of life, and children will often arrive at answers that might seem quaint to the adult mind but are full of serious meaning for the child. A child can therefore bring depth and direction to theological concepts that are often, in themselves, unable to provide resolution to the questions they pose.
Adults hold an important place of trust within children’s questions about the meaning of birth and death (Adams et al., 2008; Coles, 1990); about the meaning of attachment and rejection (Granqvist, 2006; Siegal & Hartzell, 2004); and about the depths of love (Hart, 2003). At times of distress, children look to adults to hold them emotionally. They look to adults for approval, and they seek the company of adults when happiness inspires them (Granqvist & Dickie, 2006; Siegal & Hartzell, 2004). Furthermore, Champagne’s (2003) three modes of a child’s spiritual being speak of the value of trusted adults in a child’s life – adults who share the child’s environment. Adults need to be aware that at times children will show their trust in an adult by accepting without question what he or she says or does. Adults who accept a role of influence over the spirituality of a child need to view their influence through the spiritual eyes of the child before them. Where this does not occur, children are likely to accept the adult’s words on face value alone, even though they lack meaning for the child. This is not a commendable outcome. The gap between what the adult imparts and what the child comprehends will likely lead to confusion. The child will quarantine this information, will not own the information as a personal value, and will probably reject the information as his or her cognitive flexibility increases. While discussion about the psychological underpinnings of this outcome is not possible here, such discussion in a separate forum would contribute to understanding why this will be the case.

Two issues arise from the above comments. The first issue demonstrates the importance of identifying the adult’s own basis of learning from which this knowledge is imparted, as well as the adult’s subsequent expectations of the child’s ability to both understand and consolidate the knowledge that is taught. The second issue is a question of concern and has already been highlighted. How much does difficult-to-understand knowledge about traditional beliefs such as the Eucharist block the child’s ability to make sense of the teaching focus in his or her own way, and within the context of his or her personal history, thus impeding the child from choosing to enter more deeply into the spiritual, unspoken reality that underpins traditional beliefs? If this is so, then perhaps it is better that the child does not learn the facts of a difficult religious concept such as Eucharist until the child is able to consolidate them into his or her spiritual being. As an example of this approach, a child’s readiness for Eucharistic participation would be ascertained by the child’s expressed desire to do what the community does at the Eucharistic assembly, rather than knowing why the community does what it does. Over time, the child would then grow into a deeper understanding of the Eucharist through the community’s presence and support. In the primitive Church, it was only after baptism and anointing that the newly initiated were instructed in the sacramental life of the Church. It was as if the newly initiated needed time for the meaning of what they had experienced through sacramental encounter to seep into their being (McCallion & Maines, 2002; Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, 1986/2003; Upton, 1990). This period was referred to as the “mystagogia”, and it demonstrated that knowledge was not a pre-requisite for baptism. As a final comment for this section, it helps to note that a child’s spiritual awareness makes sense of confusion, rather than create it. It can be difficult for adults to allow children to sit with a level of meaning that does not reflect expected factual knowledge. Mystagogia makes a lot of sense within a child’s deepening spirituality.

The place and role of intelligence in spirituality

In spiritual research literature, the place and role of intelligence in spirituality has been discussed to greater length. Zohar and Marshall (2000) argue that the notion of “spiritual intelligence” is located within the physical structure and functioning of the brain, specifically the temporal lobe (the seat of memory) and the limbic region (the seat of emotional expression). These authors also refer to the notion of the “God spot” located within the temporal lobe, noting that this part of the brain plays a crucial biological role in spiritual experience. Zohar and Marshall further hold that spiritual intelligence is an “internal, innate ability of the human brain and psyche, drawing its deepest resources from the heart of the universe itself” (2000, p. 9). As such, spiritual intelligence has no necessary connection to traditional religion or to any one culture, but rather is a guiding force from within the soul of a person, providing one with meaning, healing, and wholesomeness. Mayer (2000) would view spiritual intelligence as being less defined by “heightened intelligence” and more defined by a sense of “heightened consciousness” (p. 47), as an entity that is formed over time through activities such as contemplation, and as a state of consciousness that is directed beyond the concerns of the present. Emmons (2000) defines spirituality as a type of intelligence, but does not describe spiritual intelligence as merely a problem solving function for daily living. For Emmons (2000),

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spiritual intelligence is something unique to each person, and can be defined according to five core abilities. These core abilities include the ability to transcend the physical and material, to experience heightened states of consciousness, to make sacred ordinary everyday experiences, to apply spiritual resources to problems that seek solutions, and finally, the capacity to be virtuous (Emmons, 2000, p. 10).

The scope of this paper precludes an in-depth exploration of spiritual intelligence. However, from the aforementioned research, it would appear that spiritual intelligence involves more than the mere capacity to cognitively grasp and manage what is happening around a person. That is, a consideration of spiritual intelligence reflects the sense that knowledge does not necessarily equate with intelligence. A person can know a lot of facts about the world, and still miss the meaning of those facts. Conversely, a person can be considered to know very little in the way of worldly facts, and still possess deep wisdom and insight about the world. For a child, wonder and awe about the world that does not need to be proven predisposes the growth of sophistication that arises from expanding cognitive knowledge and flexibility (Boyatzis, 2005; Oser & Reich, 1996). A child who is allowed to understand the meaning of some reality through the lens of wonder and awe is more likely to hold that meaning as a value even as he or she becomes more intellectually sophisticated. In this case, wonder and awe are not abandoned, but rather stand comfortably alongside the increased cognitive capacity to understand factual knowledge. Adults would be likely to say that they do not believe that Santa Clause spins around the world in one sleigh bringing gifts to millions of people in one night. And yet, in spite of this factual knowledge, on Christmas Eve fathers and mothers still help their children put out carrots for Santa’s reindeer, plus drink and cake for Santa. They bring presents out of hiding places when their children go to sleep as evidence that Santa did indeed visit them during the night. They pretend to hear reindeers’ hooves clattering around the roof, and creep to the window with their children to get a glimpse of Santa’s sleigh – and even see it! Parents unashamedly find great joy in their children’s excitement about Santa’s arrival, and in joining the excitement and wonder of their children, they recall and once more enjoy the wonder and excitement they felt about Santa and Christmas Eve when they were children. Factual knowledge does not need to destroy the meanings derived from spiritual awe and wonder. Rather, spiritual awe and wonder gives life and joy to the sterility of factual knowledge (De Roos, 2006; D’Onofrio, Eaves, Murrelle, Maes, & Soilka, 1999). On the one hand, parents see nothing wrong in rediscovering their childhood by believing in Santa Claus, and on the other they have no problem in being the “adult” who denies his existence. The joy of childhood wonder can sit comfortably with the sophistication of adult knowledge.

As children develop across the lifespan, they learn to deal more effectively with the evolving complexity of social and worldly events, and their ability to grasp the meaning of these events as they exist rather than as they appear-to-be becomes more refined with increasing cognitive maturity (Boyatzis, 2005; Oser & Reich, 1996; Priestley, 2000). Yet understanding the meaning of worldly events with simplicity does not mean that one must cast this simplicity aside just because there appears on the developmental horizon a more complicated and “adult” way of understanding the world. The enjoyment of Santa Claus can still stand alongside the knowledge that Santa Claus, his reindeer, and his sleigh cannot exist in reality. It is possible to savour a child’s interpretation of life, even as an adult, while at the same time struggle with complex realities that demand an analytical approach. It can be a relief to sink back into the simple understandings of childhood when continually confronted with the demands of intellectual interpretation. Why then is it so important for children to understand theological principles that so evidently lie outside their cognitive grasp?

As people grow older, they tend to lose contact with their spiritual being, so that what children experience in the spiritual realm is often invisible to adults (Adams et al., 2008; Pearce & Thornton, 2007). Perhaps adults lose this contact through their need to evaluate the world, seeing themselves as acting upon, rather than participating within the world. Perhaps adults interpret the potential for spiritual awareness out of their lives, so that their greater capacity for sophisticated thought and meaning surpasses the openness to occasionally accepting unquestionably what is in the world around them. Hart (2003) states that the greatest gift a child can offer an adult is the memory of what it is like to be mindful of the present moment; to hold simple yet indefinable moments of life in awe; to behold with unquestioning open-mindedness that which cannot be proven. Perhaps the notion of “use it or lose it”, indicative of expanding cerebral capacity,
is applicable to the adult’s loss of contact with his or her spirit, and the blindness towards the spirit that ensues from this loss (Hart, 2003; Siegal, 1999). Imagination is one area of a child’s life that takes a person directly into the child’s world, and that opportunity challenges the notion of “use it or lose it” in an adult’s world of meaning.

**Imagination and spiritual awareness**

The readiness to enter the world of imagination and impose fantasy upon reality is the mark of early child development, and is evident even in older childhood and adolescence. Children touch their spiritual being through imagination, and through play and story leave the material world and enter another realm of reality. Adults often perceive a child’s imaginative play as being charming. Yet imaginative play can be serious business for children. Imaginative play can bring inanimate objects to life, or take a child to the furthest ends of the universe. Imagination can also protect a child from the abuse and tragedy of the adult world. In the movie, *Radio Flyer* (Columbia Pictures, 1992), two brothers, Mikey and Bobby, transform their red wagon (referred to as a Radio Flyer) into a flying machine, and with it embark on an extraordinary adventure. The dark side to this deeply spiritual experience for Bobby (the younger one) is that he is continually the victim of his stepfather’s physical brutality, which he survives through the symbol of this unwieldy, un-flyable machine. Adult reckoning would declare any notion that this machine might fly as being bizarre, and in fact it takes his life at the end of the movie. Yet through it Bobby enters the womb of a mystical experience, and through this experience Bobby does fly. There is a scene where he is standing on the edge of a cliff, eyes closed, arms out, twirling slowly before the face of the breeze, clearly immersed in its midst as if enfolded within a womb. At no time in the story does Bobby give any indication of suicidal hopelessness. Rather, it is the opposite. For Bobby, his dream of flying away is complete with hope and freedom – and, in a child’s world, reality.

**Imagination and symbol**

*Radio Flyer* reflects the view posited by Hay and Nye (2006), that imagination is part of spirituality, and that adults who are drawn into a child’s world of imagination are offered the gift of peeping through the symbolic window of the spirit of a child. Bobby does not literally escape his stepfather’s abuse through his flying machine. Rather, Bobby’s flying machine allows him to imagine possibilities that cannot be taken away or diminished by his stepfather. Through his flying machine, Bobby touches the “unseen forces that rest at the heart of creation” (Tracey, 2003, p. 211). In a sense, spiritual and religious symbol is akin to Bobby and Mikey’s flying machine. Symbol demonstrates unspoken power through image and action, and in a similar fashion enables a person to step across the threshold of daily life into a world of sensory reality, beyond the breadth of space and time. That is, symbol allows a person to imagine what might not be sensible in reality. When the symbolic is perceived by the sensual, the domain of empirical interpretation becomes unnecessary and even meaningless. In effect, symbol is disempowered by the need to explain and rationalise, and can be rendered mute by analytical scrutiny (Hood et al., 2009). Yet symbol is brought to life by the power to imagine. It is therefore curious that adults become concerned that children need to have factual knowledge about the theology of religious ritual, such as Eucharistic ritual, before they can participate fully in it. The girl who responded with the comment “sort of” felt she had to find the response that aligned with the right answer rather than simply express her sense of joy in being part of a special day and a special moment. Like Bobby, who twirled in the midst of a breeze, and was caught up in its hypnotic swaying, she could have simply been caught up in the moment without having to explain how or why. Here the salient caveat resides in the rather sad belief that the ability of children to communicate freely with the spiritual world appears to diminish and even be lost as adolescence merges into adulthood. Even inadvertently, adults can risk shutting down the two-way communication between a child and the imaginal by responding in ways that invalidate what the child believes to be real, but what is also hidden from the sensory vision of the adult (see especially Hart, 2003, pp. 105-106 for an example). In relation to the specific focus of this paper, children can take the complexity of something like the Eucharist and redefine it through imagination and even fantasy. There is nothing sacrilegious about doing this. Rather this capacity is the acknowledgment that the Eucharist has the power to symbolically communicate with the child in a spiritually imaginative way, and help the child grasp a level of meaning that sits comfortably with his or her stage of cognitive development.
We risk seeing children as little theologians
The context of Catholic sacramentality is embedded within the broader view of children’s spirituality, particularly in relation to how children’s knowledge and spiritual awareness are formed within this context. The Catholic understanding of Eucharist provides a poignant example of the sacramental formation of children, since Eucharist entails both concrete and theological/abstract notions. A Eucharistic focus also highlights the difference between the approach that imposes knowledge and awareness onto another person, and the approach that allows a person to make knowledge and awareness one’s own possession. Cognitive and emotional growth is a reality of child development, and where a concept is imposed upon a child who lacks sufficient cognitive flexibility to grasp its meaning with reasonable clarity, then the child will be likely to shelve the concept without argument or question, and without understanding or clear meaning. This response contains a dormant problem. When a child reaches the stage of abstract/hypothetical reasoning, earlier abstract concepts (such as the Eucharist) that have been imposed on the child, and that have been accepted by the child without question and understanding, might be rejected by the developing abstract mind as being absurd. Where abstract knowledge is imposed without understanding upon a concrete mind, the concrete-thinking child is likely to respond with “I don’t understand what you want me to understand, but I will agree to understand anyway, even though I want you to hear what I think I understand”.

Concluding comments and future directions
When adults undertake working with children in a spiritual sense, it is essential that they develop the openness to understand a child’s spiritual world by striving to see that world through the eyes of the child before them. Hence, rather than seeking to impose knowledge and meaning on children, these adults need to guide children towards a level of meaning that sits well with their spiritual being and their cognitive capacity. This openness might be essential, but to what extent are adults capable of exercising this openness if indeed it is true that as we grow older, we lose the capacity to wonder? What do adults who are responsible for the spiritual formation of children expect of them in relation to their spirituality, especially in relation to the applied focus of this paper, Catholic sacramental readiness?

Two terms are relevant here, namely, fixated expectation and flexible expectation. If the adult’s expectation is fixated, so that a child’s spiritual response must be in accord with the adult’s evaluation of “right” spirituality or “correct” sacramental readiness, then the child will need to adapt to the adult’s level of knowledge and understanding. That is, the child’s own breadth of wonder will be truncated to fit the adult’s expectation. However, if the adult’s expectation is flexible, then there is the likelihood that adult and child will be able to communicate spiritually with each other, and grow spiritually within the ebb and flow of each other’s understanding and openness to what might be new and different. That is, the child’s breadth of wonder will be given licence and space to spread its wings, rather than become stifled. There is also the likelihood that the adult will be challenged to consider meanings within the world from a child’s perspective once more.

Adults’ expectations of children’s spiritual expression do not occur within a vacuum, but rather in various contexts of daily personal interaction. Hence the first step of further enquiry would be to identify what those contexts – or domains – might be. The authors of this paper have therefore commenced two stages of research. The first stage seeks to identify the foundational domains through which adults carry out the responsibility of forming the spiritual and sacramental lives of children. The second stage will investigate the extent to which children and their parents agree that these domains are reliable starting points to evoke the spiritual response and wonder of children. The aim of this further research is twofold. First, the researchers seek to inform the content and structure of Catholic programmes of childhood sacramental formation. Second, the researchers hope to evoke informed discussion about those arenas of traditional religious formation that implicate the spiritual worlds of children. It might become evident that programmes of spiritual and sacramental preparation are fixated in their expectations of knowledge, understanding, and subsequent evidence of readiness. In this case, the challenge will be found in the willingness to accept the expertise of a child’s store of knowledge, understanding, and meaning that emerges from spiritual expressions of wonder and curiosity.
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**Advance Notice**

**Seventh National Symposium on Religious Education**

**Wednesday 6 July 2011 – Friday 8 July 2011**
Australian Catholic University, North Sydney Campus, 40 Edward Street, North Sydney NSW 2060

The Symposium, hosted by the School of Religious Education, has been held biennially for the past 12 years and is a gathering of scholars, curriculum advisors and practitioners in religious education from Australia and overseas.

A call for abstracts for the Seventh National Symposium on Religious Education will be made early in 2011. Abstracts should be of two hundred words for either a 30 minute paper or 60 minute workshop relating to the theme of the symposium.
Many religious communities rely heavily on the work of parish based catechists in assisting the intergenerational transfer of religious beliefs and practices. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) in Alberta, Canada is no exception. In this study, based on questionnaire responses and interviews, UGCC catechists were found to be experienced, well qualified and motivated. They, nonetheless, face a number of challenges in their role such as working in a culture that no longer supports and privileges religious commitment and the need to develop a cogent and distinctive educational program for children and youth who enroll in parish based programs. A number of recommendations such as the need for greater networking and provision of more focused Eastern Catholic educational are made. A key conclusion is that the role of the catechist needs to seem as augmenting and not replacing that of parents as agents of catechesis.

Introduction
The persistence of religion largely depends on how successfully one generation is in passing on its belief and practices to its offspring (Meyer 1996; Kay and Francis, 1996). The importance of inter-generational transfer of religious beliefs and practices has been commented on in a variety of studies spanning numerous faith traditions (Bendroth, 2002; Keysar et al., 2000). Contemporary Western societies, however, present challenges to the transfer of beliefs and values for many so-called mainline religious groups, but also for religious communities that are not strongly associated historically with Western culture. (Davie, 1994; Finke and Stark, 1992; Kelley and de Graaf, 1997). Christians who follow a Byzantine Rite whilst relative newcomers to countries such as Canada experience at least three challenges in passing on religious beliefs and practices to their children (Rymarz, 2006). Before discussing these challenges a brief explanation of Eastern Catholic Churches will be presented.

Who are Ukrainian Greek Catholics?
Eastern Catholic Churches are in full communion with Rome but do not follow the liturgical and disciplinary norms of the Latin Church (Rymarz, 2003). They share a common theology and history and are sometimes referred to as Eastern Rite Churches. This term does not, however, do justice to the autonomy of these groups as it implies that what distinguishes them from the Latin, or the more commonly used descriptor Roman, Catholic Church are merely liturgical practices. Eastern Catholics, amongst other things, also have quite different histories, spiritualities and are governed by a separate code of canon law. Thus many who work in this area prefer the designation Eastern Churches rather than Eastern Rites to distinguish them from the numerical dominant Roman Catholic Church. Four significant Eastern Catholic Churches are the Maronites, Melkites, Chaldeans and Ukrainian Greek Catholic. Within Eastern Catholic Churches there is considerable diversity. Maronites and Chaldeans both follow different Syriac Rites and are historically associated with the Antiochian Tradition. Both the Melkites and Ukrainians follow a Byzantine Rite and are part of the Tradition derived from Constantinople.

The key distinction that needs to be made is that Eastern Catholicism is not an ethnic expression of Roman Catholicism. If only differences of worship and culture are mentioned many are confused about what is the difference between, say, Melkite Catholics from Syria and Catholics from Chile. The latter group has a range of cultural practices and celebrates the liturgy in Spanish. They are, nonetheless, Roman Catholics. Melkites share many similarities with other Byzantine Rite Catholic Churches such as the Ukrainians but are quite distinct from Roman Catholics.

With the exception of Maronites, all Eastern Catholic groups share much in common with larger Orthodox groups from the same national and ecclesial family. The Ukrainian Catholic Church, for instance, shares a common history with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Starting at the Reformation there were consistent
efforts made by Catholic missionaries to reconcile Orthodox groups. This largely involved one the one hand, acceptance by the Orthodox of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome and, on the other, full recognition of existing liturgical and canonical norms.

**Challenges facing Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church**

*A new cultural context*

Three challenges will be discussed here as they are especially relative to the work of catechists. Firstly, for many groups relatively recent changes in cultural attitudes makes the intergenerational transfer of religious beliefs and practises increasingly problematic. Many teenagers today express a form of religious affiliation that makes their beliefs and behaviours hard to distinguish from general cultural norms (Cornwall, 1997). Smith and Denton (2005) argued that many religious communities are failing rather badly in religiously engaging and educating their youth. Where engagement and education of youth by their religious communities is weak, the faith of teenagers tends to degenerate into “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (MTD) (Smith and Denton, 2005, 162). This belief, in essence, sees religion as a moral system which, at best, generates behaviours that benefit the individual. It is highly personal and positivistic and the notion of God is relegated, not unlike in the thought of some eighteenth-century philosophers, to a kind of impersonal, distant force that is part of the universe but not in an involved or decisive way. This type of belief is a not unique to Christians, but forms the background of much current discussion of the cultural forces that shape society in a range of countries (Bouma, 2007). In many ways, MTD is a type of default position to which most, without strong counter views, can easily subscribe.

MTD can also be seen as an expression of a contemporary understanding of spirituality. This is not characterized by “a conscious way of life based on a transcendent referent,” but a far more elusive sense that lacks discriminatory power (Mason et al., 2007, 13). Many younger people today do not eschew an abstract belief in God, and in some sense, are trying to live a moral life. Spirituality here is not something that is transformative and influences in a profound way how the person thinks or behaves (Smith and Denton, 2007, 182-185). A private, personal, and diffuse spirituality is often evident (Smith and Denton, 2007, 201-214). This makes few demands of the individual and can be incorporated into a variety of worldviews, Christian or otherwise. It does not privilege any particular denominational position and, as such, makes it difficult for any religious community to stress the uniqueness of their particular message.

The religious trajectory of many younger people, furthermore, seems to moving further away from strong religious commitment and association with one particular worldview. In a five-year follow up study, participants in the original Smith and Denton investigation were re-interviewed (Smith and Snell, 2009). Here, emerging adults were the least religious group in the United States and the most likely to explicitly move away from religious origins. In the ensuing five years, for example, the proportion of the sample group identifying as Catholic had declined from 24% to 18%. By way of comparison, the not-religious group had risen from 14% to 27% (Smith and Snell, 2009, 114). Most emerging adults see religion as having a positive effect, as a place where basic moral principles are acquired, but beyond this religion has an increasingly minor role to play. Smith and Snell describe this as a view among many emerging adults that they have “graduated” from religion in the sense that they have gained from it all that they need and have now moved on (Smith and Snell, 2009, 286).

Contemporary adolescents tend to keep their options open and are unlikely to commit to something if they cannot see a tangible benefit arising (Tuohy and Cairns, 2000). They are aware of the range of choices that are available to them, including the option of having a low level of allegiance to a number of positions. Some have suggested that a way of understanding the emerging worldviews of youth and young adults today is to see these in terms of consumption. (D’Antonio et al 2001; Slater, 1997). This consumer analogy has been widely used to describe the relationship between young people and religion. (Bauman, 1991; Crawford and Rossiter, 2006; Metzger, 2007).

The idea of the contemporary young person as a consumer rather than a seeker has implications for the work of UGCC catechists who are working in parish settings. The catechist is, in a sense, competing with a
variety of other interests that make a claim on the time and energy of both Ukrainian Catholic children and their parents. To be sure the parents are making a choice to send their children to parish based religious programs but this choice is expressed within the context of a variety of competing interests. The catechist, therefore, is under some obligation to provide an experience that meets the demands of religious consumers who could exercise their option not to attend. In a sense the child and the parent are asking, “What does the UGCC have to offer?”

An immigrant Church no more
Secondly, the work of catechists in the UGCC in Canada takes places within a context of numerical decline. Anderson (2010) quoting figures from the 2001 Annuario Pontifico noted that the membership of the UGCC in Canada in a seventeen year period from 1990 to 2007 had declined 58% from a figure of 201, 957 to 85, 608. By way of comparison the decline for the Edmonton Eparchy was 30% from 49,907 to 28,750.² Bearing these figures in mind, the words of Motiuk (2005, 1) the current Eparch of Edmonton are apposite:

It is with trepidation that I contemplate the future of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Canada – a Church with a drastic decline in membership, few native vocations to replace aging clergy, whose raison d’être since the 1940’s has been closely linked with the persecuted Church in the Ukraine.

The reasons for the sharp decline in UGCC membership is a topic that can only be addressed briefly in this paper and in relation to the work of catechists. Three factors seen especially relevant. Firstly, in terms of numbers, profile and institutional structures the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) is the dominant Catholic Church in Alberta. As such, for those Ukrainian Catholics who express a religious interest, it may be easier to become active in the RCC rather than in the UGCC. There is no systematic collected data which shows the number of those with Ukrainian Catholic heritage who now identify as Roman Catholic but the number could be quite significant. In terms of religious identity, therefore, it is critical that the UGCC be able to establish itself as an entity that is distinct from the RCC. In terms of the work of catechists in UGCC parishes they must be able to provide a cogent rationale for their beliefs and practises that at once distinguishes between the wider, increasingly secular culture and from the RCC.

Secondly UGCC appears to moving away from a cultural model of intergenerational transfer of religious beliefs and practises to one that is predicated on the personal choice on individuals to retain more than nominal religious affiliation. A similar trend was noted by Rahner (1974) in relation to the RCC. He commented that RCC was in transition from a national Church where membership was automatic, if unreflective, to one where individuals make a personal decision to be associated. The decline of Ukrainian language and increased intermarriage are two factors that clearly signal an ethnic community that is losing the rich culture and high boundaries that gave its members a collective sense of identity (Goa 1989). The loss of a supportive and cohesive religious culture has a clear ramification for the work of UGCC catechists. The parish now becomes a critical marker of religious identity and the work of catechists may be the most significant religious education experience that many Ukrainian Catholics have.

Finally, the UGGC in Canada is now well over one hundred years old and this brings with it issues around the transition of the Church from one based on the immigrant experience to what that is generational rooted in Canada. The salience of religion in the lives of immigrants is a well-established phenomenon (Ebaugh, and Chalets, 2003). With the gradual integration of Ukrainian Catholics into Canadian culture the need for religion as a decisive factor in defining identity is far less acute. Rymarz (2005) has commented that the religious socialization of Orthodox youth is dependent on an intact family culture which helps integrate religion into the everyday life of children. The centrality of family as the chief agent of catechesis is well supported in a variety of Church documents such as Familiars Consortia (John Paul II, 1984). In Eastern Christian families, socialization is accomplished in part by a series of rituals and cultural practices that remind family members of the link between their own lives and the Divine (Boojamra, 1989). To take one example Ukrainian Greek Catholics have a rich culture surrounding ritual fasting and celebration (Cross, 1988). The Great Fast before Easter, for example, prepares family members to celebrate the resurrection of Christ. It is one mechanism of reminding the Ukrainian Greek Catholics of key events in their faith
Contemporary culture, however, places considerable strain on this complex web of religious ritual practice. This is at both a practical level – “when can we find time to do this?” – and also at a more conceptual level – “why do we do this?” Taken in isolation the diminished importance of rituals such as fasting does not have serious consequences for religious socialization. When, however, they are taken as one part of an intricate social system of metaphor and symbol that shapes the religious imagination then the collective demise of these practices runs the risk of disconnecting the believer from their religious roots (Greeley, 2004).

*Lack of institutional structures such as specialized schools*

Thirdly, in comparison with both Catholic and Protestant traditions, Orthodox communities lack educational support. Orthodox youth are often without the benefit of specific educational initiatives, such as schools and universities that cater for their needs. In Canada, for example, many Ukrainian Catholic youth attend Roman Catholic or public schools in the absence of ones for their particular community (Dwyer, 1986). Many Ukrainian Catholic youth, are therefore, not exposed to curricula that have been developed from their particular perspective (Nicozisin, 1977). To compensate for the relative lack of schools and colleges, parishes and the programs they offer take on additional significance. The lynchpin in the delivery of these programs to youth and children are catechists. Without proper planning and support, however, parishes and catechists can struggle to develop these services, leaving younger people feeling that they have been neglected or excluded.

Apart from the family and an integrated faith community how do Ukrainian Catholic children and youth gain an understanding of the religious beliefs and practices of their faith community? This question has two aspects. The first is relatively straightforward and is the focus of this paper. It relates to the work of catechists within UGCC parishes. Specifically what are some of the demographic characteristics of UGCC catechists, what are some of the challenges they face and what role do they play in the intergenerational transfer of religious beliefs and practices? The second is more challenging and will not be addressed here. It concerns how Orthodox communities are enculturated in contemporary Western secular culture.

*This Study*

Two research methodologies were used in this study. The first utilised a quantitative approach and incorporated the use of a questionnaire aimed at gaining an insight into the work of catechists. To support the analysis, six catechists were also interviewed. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies is a well-attested research approach as each gives a different perspective on the research question. (Bryman, 1992; Hunter and Brewer, 1989). Although springing from different bases the use of hybrid methodologies allows the researcher to approach the research from different perspectives (Gorard, 2004).

All questionnaires were distributed during a province wide meeting of catechists and those who wished to participate were given thirty minutes to complete the questionnaire. 37 responses were collected; 31 females and 6 males. This represented 89% of those attending the conference. Respondents identified themselves only if they agreed to be contacted for a follow up interview. The questionnaire was made up of twenty-six questions comprising Likert responses and short answer open-ended questions, focusing on the work and experience of being a catechist.

Six participants were selected for follow up interviews. These were selected on the basis of age, experience as a catechist and current involvement in parish based programs. These interviews were conducted over the phone. The interviews followed a semi-structured pattern (Minichiello et al., 1995). After each interview participant responses were analyzed, using contemporaneous notes and dominant response categories identified (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984).

**Discussion and Results**

*The catechists*

The age distribution of respondents was: below 30 years of age, 7; between 30 and 40, 8; between 40 and
50, 9; between 50 and 60, 5 and over 60 years of age, 8. Experience as a catechists ranged from less than 1 year to 55 years, with a mean of 11 years and a median of 6 years. The catechists in this study seemed committed to their work. Twenty eight respondents indicated that they would like to still be parish based catechists in 5 years and only two ruled out any long-term commitment and this was because of advancing age. Thirty five participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement – “I enjoy being a catechist”. When asked about what their primary motivation was most responded in terms that emphasized the transcendent. A common response was that we “are doing God’s work”. Another frequent response was along the lines of, “I am trying to give something back”. All of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I believe in the importance of catechetical ministry”. Most of the catechists felt well supported in their own parishes but were not well networked with other catechists working in different parishes. As one participant put it, “I would really like to know what they do at St Basil’s!”

The work of catechists

Three strong response themes emerged from the analysis of both the surveys and interviews. Firstly, twenty four of the participants had a qualification in education and as such seemed to be well qualified to take on catechetical work with children and youth. Many of the respondents volunteered that they worked, or had worked, as teachers. Most of the participants reported that they were confident in their ability to relate to students and meet the educational demands of working in parish based programs.

The two most common programs that catechists were engaged in were teaching Sunday school and in preparing children for first or solemn communion. Most of the catechist used materials that had been prepared by a variety of UGCC Eparchies. There was also use of material developed by Orthodox Churches. In general, catechists reported that they could make use of additional resources, especially those that reflected the current world of the children they dealt with. This idea was summarized by one interviewee who commented that “I would like to use books and videos that reflected what it is like to be a Ukrainian Catholic in Edmonton today”.

Challenges for catechist

Two issues emerged as major challenges for UGCC catechists. Firstly many of the catechists reported that although participation in the various programs offered was voluntary, many of the students involved lacked strong motivation. This is consistent with a religious consumer mentality. In this case parents are choosing to send their children to parish based programs. This action already distinguishes many parents from others in contemporary culture where attitudes to religion are more passive. The catechists, nonetheless, acknowledged that parents were, in many instances, not following up on what was initiated in the parish based programs. A comment that was frequently made was that too many parents placed too much of the responsibility on the catechists for the religious formation of their children. As one respondent commented, “With some parents I know that religious instruction starts and ends with me.”

Secondly, although the parish is a critical part of the religious nurturing of the child it cannot substitute for the family as the key agent of catechesis. No matter what aspect of prayer, for example, the catechists emphasize, prayer will not become a part of the life of Ukrainian Catholic children and youth unless it is practised both individually and in the home. The diminished role of family as the critical agent of catechesis would also explain that presence of mainly younger children in the parish based programs reported in this study. At a younger age the child may be more willing to be involved in parish based religious programs on their parents initiative. With time, however, the range of choices available to both children and parents increases and the parish is competing with other agents who have a claim on the time of Ukrainian Greek Catholics. One catechist put this view succinctly when she commented, “As the kids get older we have to compete with hockey and in that race you know who is going to win!”

Struggling to find good educational resources

Another significant challenge facing Ukrainian Greek Catholic catechists is being able to provide an educational experience to children which reflects a characteristically Eastern Catholic perspective. Many
of the catechists in this study were aware of the need to deliver a distinctive Ukrainian Catholic dimension to their work – “we need to show children that we are not Roman Catholics.”

Some of the participants reported that it was difficult to find educational sources that reflected the UGCC theological emphasis. As participants commented “we are always looking out for good Uke [Ukrainian] stuff”. While there was a large range of RCC material available there was not the same abundance of suitable Eastern Catholic material. To take one area that was commented on, many noted the lack of catechetical material available that presented the UGCC perspective on liturgy and Eucharist. A development of this was the reported difficulty in trying to imbue students with Eastern Catholic spirituality, especially as it relates to prayer both personal and communal. Prayers that invoke the Trinity are an important part of the spiritual life of Eastern Christians. The departure point for these devotions is that the Christian is already redeemed in Christ. Many of the available Roman Catholic resources on prayer, however, are based on a more supplicatory sense of prayer.

Conclusion
The participants in this study, on the whole, were a motivated, well trained and dedicated group of catechists. They represent a very important human resource for the UGCC. One very practical question is how best to utilize this group. In the first instance, a greater emphasis on networking amongst catechists working in parishes would provide mutual support and sharing of educational ideas and resources. A key issue is the further development of educational material that addresses unique and characteristic features of the UGCC.

The role of the family as the prime place for catechesis needs also to be emphasized. The notion that the catechist can take the role of the parents in catechesis is misplaced and places too much pressure on parish based catechists. The role of the catechist needs to be envisioned within a wider educational context. Those parents who enrol their children in parish based programs should be encouraged to see this as a complementary activity that supports what they do in the home. To be sure, for some parents taking on the role of the religious formators of their children will be something that they are disinclined to take on but for other parents this may be an awakening of their religious sensibilities. In either case the days of a strongly mediated cultural reinforcement of religious ties are long gone and the UGCC, like many other Churches, needs to respond to a culture where choice has replaced obligation as a fundamental orientating principle.

The movement of the UGCC from one that is dependent on religious and cultural norms for intergenerational transfer of beliefs to one based on personal choice and conviction appears to be a process that is now well in train. It seems that a consequence of this movement is a substantial diminishment, over time, of those who strongly identify themselves as Ukrainian Catholics. One consequence of this could be a smaller, more resilient Church, where the work of catechists is one dimension of the religious community providing religious nurturing to its members.

The role of the catechist may be a harbinger for a new cultural accommodation of the UGCC in Canada. In the past the UGCC in Canada has benefited from being an immigrant church with strong ethnic and linguistic ties amongst Ukrainians. This type of cultural religious association as a defining principle of what it means to be a Ukrainian Catholic is now in sharp decline. For those who wish to explore and retain their religious heritage this decision will be a much more conscious one and as such needs to be fortified by strong educational experiences that give cogency to religious beliefs and practises. The participants in this study offer some hope of a skilled and talented body that should be able to assist the Church to greater outreach and consolidation of its members.

References


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1 Ukrainian Greek Catholic and Ukrainian Catholic are used interchange in this paper. The former is the more correct term as it designates both the origin of the Church and its classification as Byzantine (or Greek) Rite.

2 It is worth noting the astonishing decline quoted by Anderson in membership figures of the Eparchy of Toronto, from 80,00 to 10,888 a fall of 86%

3 The practice of First Communion is very much a Roman Catholic one. In Eastern Churches generally the three sacraments of initiation; baptism, confirmation (chrismation) and communion are received together. In the UGCC in Canada a practise has developed where infants receive communion at baptism in accord with Byzantine norms and at around age seven or eight receive what is called solemn communion. This is a good illustration of the influence of Roman Catholic thinking on UGCC in Canada.

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“I speak textbook Jewish”: Confessions of an outsider

Abstract

Two religious education modes have co-existed in public education for some time. In NSW, these are known as General Religious Education (GRE) and Religious Instruction (RI). GRE is seen as non-sectarian in nature. Teaching of GRE is typically conducted by the classroom teacher, perhaps supported by visiting experts. Its aim is primarily to inform about the faith and its adherents; education by outsiders, catering for outsiders. RI, by contrast, is usually conducted by a visiting faith adherent, and is persuasive in purpose.

This paper compares each approach, and asks who is best positioned to instruct on religion/s, in terms of the subject’s audience and purposes. It investigates what faith ‘insiders’, or outsiders bring and fail to bring to GRE pedagogy. Can outsiders transcend ‘textbook knowledge’? This dichotomy is illustrated by encounters between the (outsider) author and an insider-colleague. Three strands intertwine in this paper: my discussions with a colleague; my understanding of my teaching; the implications for related curriculum.

Introduction (In the beginning…)

“But let a man [sic] examine himself…”

1 Corinthians 11:28

It would seem that study of religion is as good a place as any for examination of one’s practice. Like all confessions, this one has personal origins. My teacher education colleagues and I often take opportunities to observe and then discuss one another’s teaching sessions. On this occasion, the topic was teaching religions in the primary/elementary school, specifically Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Ruth (a pseudonym) is Jewish. Apart from our sharing a close professional relationship that permits frank and honest communication, I was aware that Ruth was in a position to provide me with ‘insider feedback’ on Judaism that no other staff member (to my knowledge) could. Perhaps understandably, I approached and conducted the lesson with some trepidation, but confident that I had made a decision that would add value to my teaching of the subject, or at the very least build character.

Ruth was highly positive in her comments on all aspects of the session – all except one, that is, on which she offered quite forthright criticism. More of that later.

My Confession of Doubt

My doubts were the only thing of which I was certain. Now I’m not so sure.

Personal musing

There is a broader issue here, with regard to the teaching of religions. I consider myself to be a practising non-believer. I have an existential fear of becoming a parrot, a mouthpiece for someone else’s truths. I accept that this, virtually by definition, excludes me from religious faith. I trust that my mind is not closed to the matter, though. I am reminded of a scene from the movie “A Beautiful Mind” (Grazer & Howard, 2001), in which mathematician John Nash is advised that he cannot use his mind to escape his problems, because his mind is the problem. I am prepared to accept that there may be things that I cannot grasp.
intellectually, not just because of my limited intellect, but because these matters are of a different nature, and that intellect alone admits no pathway to their discovery.

Neither is it as simple as the above suggests. I am at times a lapsed, if not an infidel agnostic. Perhaps I believe more than I confess. As a secular example, I don’t believe in astrology, but I occasionally read the section in the paper or a magazine. This appears benign, but why do I read Gemini, rather than another random sign? Why do I appear to believe that Gemini might be slightly less inaccurate and irrelevant a blueprint of my life’s pathway than the any of the other 11 signs? Similarly, I claim not to believe in weather forecasts, but do washing on days when it is forecast to be sunny. Then, when it rains, I curse the Weather Bureau, claiming “I knew it would rain”. My infidelity and my works are inconsistent. I’m left wondering if my natural inclination is to have faith; nurturing and maintaining my faithlessness in an effort to avoid backsliding seems to require constant vigilance, effort and energy.

I think there is something in us, or (I have to concede the possibility) beyond us, that predisposes us to having faith. Taking this a step further, I believe it’s a simple step to elevate one’s doubts to the level of the sacrosanct. Perhaps the only redeeming thing I can say here is that I (um) trust I can maintain my ability to doubt my doubts.

Returning to my classroom observation, Ruth’s criticism came from a table that was distributed to the students, outlining some of the annual holy days of Judaism (see Appendix). Ruth had two objections to this approach: she felt that this was very reductionist, denuding Judaism of so much of its cultural, historic and interpersonal richness; she also felt that the content of the table was very Christian-centric. She was right on both counts. The trouble was, I wasn’t sure what to do with this. Initially, I wasn’t even aware of what was Christian-centric about my approach. This standpoint is so well camouflaged from my Anglo-Australian stance, so comfortably inhabiting what I refer to as my ‘sphere of normal’, that it did not occur to me to approach the topic otherwise, let alone how I might do this. A subsequent discussion with Ruth revealed that my description of Pesach/Passover dwelt too much on the sacrifice of the firstborn. For Jews, Pesach is a celebration of freedom from oppression.

On the second point – reductionism, I agree, but am left with a problem of depth versus breadth – and even this dichotomy may itself be reductionist. More time could be devoted to one or two celebrations, but at the expense of a broader overview of the festivals. More to the point, at best I can only ever provide information on what I can read in a text book, just as any of my (non-Jewish) students can do. I am not really in a position to put the flesh of personal experience on these dry bones – with apologies to Ezekiel.

The incident made me realise that I speak ‘textbook Jewish’. To explain the analogy, ‘textbook French’, for example, may appear adequate in the classroom, only to be left sadly wanting when faced with native speakers, who speak with such ease and alacrity. Similarly, my outsider, Jewish-as-a-second-religion status will always be obvious – at least to a ‘native speaker’ such as Ruth. My metaphorical non-native accent will betray me, as will any number of shibboleths. My starting point for Judaism is preordained to be that of an outsider. More dangerously, however, my outsider and arguably fraudulent status will be much less immediately recognisable to other outsiders, such as any of my students who aren’t Jewish, and who may be lulled into placing too much faith in me, considering me an authority on the subject.

Creation: in whose image?

Some broader curricular discussion is of worth here. Until relatively recently in Australia, the term non-sectarian was probably assumed to mean the non-privileging of any particular Christian denomination, but to the exclusion in practice of other faiths. More recently, it refers to an inclusion of what the NSW HSIE (Human Society and Its Environment) Syllabus (Board of Studies NSW, 1998, p. 57) refers to the five world religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. This, too, is arbitrarily sectarian, but in defence of the Syllabus document, also included is Aboriginal spirituality, as is the choice of other faiths if
desired, on the basis of factors such as local communities of adherents. The choice of these five ‘world religions’ is not without contention; it is generally considered there are more Sikhs than Jews worldwide. It seems to be more difficult to ascertain reliable numbers of Sikhs in Australia. The inclusion of Judaism is probably justified on the basis of its antecedent links with Christianity and Islam.

Audience: *If any man [sic] hear my voice*

Revelation 3:20

Religious Instruction (RI) is typically offered to adherents of a faith, or to children whose parents are willing to have their children instructed in a particular faith. Its purpose is to convince and convict the children of the faith’s merits and credibility, as well as simply to inform. In a number of educational jurisdictions, GRE, on the other hand, sets out to inform students as to some of the tenets of a number of faiths. It has no ostensible goal to convince or convert learners into a particular spiritual tradition. In some jurisdictions, GRE is offered to, indeed imposed on, all students, regardless of their own faith traditions. In NSW, this component of the syllabus is typically delivered in the middle years of primary school, years 3 or 4, that is, to children of about 8 or 9 years old. This, too, has implications for depth of study.

Purpose: to what ends?

If the purpose of GRE is not to proselytise, then its aims need to be interrogated. The NSW K-6 Human Society and its Environment Syllabus document (NSW BOS, 1998) does not make comment on the matter. In its secondary school Studies of Religion Syllabus document the NSW Board of Studies (2004, p. 6) offers the following: “Religion is an integral part of human experience and a component of every culture. An appreciation of society is limited without an adequate understanding of religion, its influence on human behaviour and its significance within culture”. In this sense, then, the study of religion is a search for meaning, even though it is secular/non-sectarian in its approach. It seeks to find meaning in human expression and behaviour, as well as people’s understandings of life-and-death issues, of the supernatural, the symbolic expressions of this and its moral and ethical implications. It is contended here that these moral and ethical implications extend to the learner, and don’t merely constitute a ‘spectator sport’ as learners observe the behaviour of other humans. Another purpose, distinct from but similar to this, is the fostering of tolerance and understanding of difference. All the while, students acquire content knowledge about the religions concerned.

If there is no intention for study of religion/s (or of any subject worthy of study, for that matter) to challenge the learner to be a ‘better person’, the worth of that topic would seem dubious. The expression ‘better person’ should not be left unmolested here. Better in whose eyes and by which standards? Each of us would have a list of attributes that make a good person. Our various lists might be categorised more by contention than by consensus.

The aim of avoiding proselytisation raises another issue in the conduct of GRE. A comparison with environmental education may be helpful here. Environmental education is intended to be pro-environmental, that is, to engender a respect for the environment and a willingness to nurture it. The line between providing a positive expression of ‘another’ faith and proselytisation appears thin and blurred. Intercultural education may provide a more helpful comparison. Intercultural education does well to provide a positive expression of the culture being studied, but this does not exclude scope for questioning aspects of a culture, including one’s own.

Peace is commonly cited as an outcome for inter-religious studies. King (2007, p. 115) observes that, “it is important to bear in mind the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of both peace and education”. It would seem reasonable to add religion to the list, to generate a trinity of complexity and multidimensionality. And yet, to study the contributions of religions to peace seems fraught. Arguably,
religions have been more of a catalyst for conflict than for harmony. Admittedly, religion is at times a ‘badging issue’ with regard to conflicts over scarce resources such as land or political power. Nevertheless, a religious overlay is likely to add fuel to an already volatile situation, and exacerbate, rather than mitigate, conflict. This, though, may simply strengthen the imperative for peace and religion to be yoked.

Some parallels could also be drawn between the GRE/RI dichotomy and Civics and Citizenship education. Civics is at times referred to as an understanding of political systems and structures (akin to GRE), whereas citizenship is the critical and active response to and initiation of social change (similar to RI). But this model arguably oversimplifies the difference between GRE and RI.

Other aims of studies of religion may include an instilling of:

- Environmental care or stewardship. Yet, while the philosophical notion of the earth as God’s garden is compelling, adherents of the various traditions have not necessarily been among the forerunners of environmental care.
- Values and morality, human rights and inclusivity. Again, the pilgrims’ progress is patchy here. Faith has moved some to extend human rights to others, but it could be argued that believers have not always been at the forefront of defending women’s, children’s or gay rights.
- Tolerance. Believers and their institutions have not always fared well here.
- Critical literacy. Jackson and Fujiwara (2007, p. 2) comment that, “knowing other cases always helps in being critical of one’s own presumptions about religious education”. Whether or not this is true in the case of religious education, it arguably does not appear to extend to a questioning of one’s religion.

The above criticisms all reveal, I concede, my biased perspective. I am left wondering if some of these criticisms might be more palatable if made by a believer. I do not propose them as a criticism of religion per se, but I believe that the conceptual links between religion and the environment, human rights etc should be open to question. In fairness, the uninterested and the disinterested, such as atheists and agnostics, are not consistent champions of the above issues either (Hayward, Buchanan, Gerner & Cheek, 2007).

What then, of developing authenticity in studies of religion? Cush (2007) warns of the risk of religious education being “oversimplified, stereotyped and misleading, especially if taught from secondary materials by non-specialist teachers” (p. 223). Her concern is with non-specialist teachers, rather than with non-adherents, but a non-adherent is arguably a ‘secondary source’.

Suitable teachers and leadership: whither thou goest I will go

Ruth 1: 16

The above discussion raises the question as to whether the teaching about a particular religion should be restricted to an adherent thereof. An outsider presumably fails (or refuses) to accept the innermost tenets of the faith concerned - otherwise why do they not embrace the faith? Such a person’s fitness and suitability to teach about the faith concerned is open to question. By contrast, an adherent of a faith may also bring limitations to the pedagogy thereof.

What skills and personal attributes are the most valuable for the teaching of religions? The analogy of second language learning may be of further help here. Debate has persisted for some time as to the merits of a native speaker of the target language as opposed to a native speaker of the students’ first language, when it comes to choosing a teacher of a second language. A teacher is a bridge to link the learner and the material to be learnt, and potentially a barrier between the two. What bridges and barriers do teachers with different expertise and experiences bring to their teaching and their children? Similarly, what bridges and barriers might an adherent of the faith under study bring to the teaching and the learners? For the purposes of this discussion, we might presume that most or all of the children are not adherents of the religious tradition being studied. If the students are relatively homogenous in terms of their own spiritual
heritage – which can by no means be assumed – is it preferable for the teacher to be of a similar background to that of the students?

There are arguably advantages and disadvantages for a non-believer teaching about a faith. Purists (fundamentalists?) might cringe at the notion of the faith in the hands of a non-believer, but for pragmatic reasons such a situation is virtually unavoidable within a system-wide treatment of several faiths. Even if this were not so, we might still not choose adherents to teach the material. In teaching and learning, we make sense of the unknown or soon-to-be-known by reference to and comparison with the known. Simile and metaphor are tools commonly used to assist a learner in understanding the new in terms of the already known. It is unrealistic to expect a neophyte to grasp profound concepts of theology and ethics. Purism may need to be willing to accept compromises. As an aside, one aspect that religion and teaching have in common is their reliance on simile, symbol and metaphor to convey their message.

Leading astray?

There is yet one more matter that I need to confess. I concede that my teaching of religions is at times consciously inauthentic. This can be illustrated with an outline of my treatment of the Hindu celebration of Raksha Bandan.

In Hindu traditions, to celebrate Raksha Bandan, a girl or woman will make a rakhi, or wristband for her brother. In return, the brother commits himself to take care of his sister. This is discussed with the children in class. Then, as an adaptation of this festival, each child in the class makes a rakhi, and places it into a box. The rakhis are more or less identical, with no distinguishing features. The rakhis are then taken from the box by the children. Nobody knows who has made their rakhi. The children are therefore asked to commit themselves to being kind to everyone in the class for the rest of the day. There is also a ‘nice note of mystery’ in terms of not knowing who one’s rakhi benefactor or beneficiary might be. The children are also advised that they should also commit to being kind to their siblings. Parents are advised of this and few have objections. This is genuinely inauthentic, and wilfully so, even though its inauthenticity is pointed out to the students. It is to be hoped, though, that some of the moral significance of the observation is captured in this approach.

I once was blind, but now I see.

Amazing Grace (Newton, 1779)

As I think back to my conversations with Ruth, it strikes me as passing strange that her comments about Pesach and freedom appeared new, and as a revelation. I find it irritating when people claim, “I knew that” when patently they didn’t. Nevertheless, I knew that. I was aware of the ‘let my people go’ aspect. And yet, other ‘knowledge’ pushed this to the side of the plate on this occasion. As with sight of things physical, something bigger and closer masked this aspect of Judaism for me.

I confessed earlier to being a practising non-believer. I feel that this provides me with a certain even-handedness and freedom from a desire to proselytise when it comes to matters of religion. Let the believer who has no sense of belief-related privilege cast the first stone at me for believing this. A sense of privilege appears to be something that believers and non-believers have in common.

Moreover, during the writing of this paper and discussions with Ruth, I came to realise that if my freedom to practise my non-belief were compromised, I suspect that I could become highly devout and zealous in response. ‘Devout’ and ‘zealous’ are not adjectives that I apply to myself with ease or comfort. This is another aspect that I share with other non-believers and believers alike. An adherent of any particular faith is likely at best to tolerate, in the most grudging sense of the word, any other faith under study. Most non-believers are similarly likely to be grudgingly tolerant of any and every faith. This would suggest at first blush, that most people will accept either one or no faiths. It is more complex than this, however. Many
believers may find themselves being less tolerant of other denominations or divisions in their own faith, as in the case of Sunni and Shia Muslims, Catholic and Protestant Christians etc. For most people, when it comes to the number of faiths one is comfortable with, it will be a case of $n < 1$.

The issue of credibility

The above does present a problem for the one teacher delivering instruction on ‘all’ five world religions. No one person is likely to have equal amount of faith in each of them. Arguably, a person who has rejected all of the faiths equally may consider themselves to be even-handed. But it may just be a case of what I’ll call ‘Gemini syndrome’ – my belief that I wasn’t privileging one sign above the others was delusional. Just as I was unaware of my Christian-centric bias, many of us will find ourselves similarly unaware of how our biases make themselves heard. What, then of the justification of employing an adherent of each faith to teach it, presuming each is a competent teacher? One justification for this is the rather underwhelming one that it spreads the biases evenly.

Tolerance was cited earlier as a reason for teaching religion. Perhaps a better term is acceptance. Acceptance that there exist other people, many of them, with beliefs that are different to mine. Whatever my beliefs, on a global scale I belong to a minority. If religion teaches me nothing about itself, it does teach me about myself, and about people.

My knowledge, understandings, experiences and perspectives are so vastly partial (neither complete nor impartial). But this does not necessarily preclude me from teaching those whose knowledge is even more incomplete than my own. I almost certainly risk leading my students into ‘misunderstanding’ on a daily basis, in this as in any field of knowledge/ignorance. The aim of the teacher is to build bridges. A possible analogy here is that of building a bridge from the same side as the students are on, rather than from ‘the other side’. Building from the same side may help learners to advance. To extend the analogy, the students are limited in their capacity to examine and make sense of, let alone use, the bridge as it approaches from the other side.

Speaking in the context of mathematical understanding, Gough (2007) asserts that, “at successive stages through the curriculum, we need to keep the curriculum as rich and honest as our students can stand” (p. 15). The terms ‘rich’ and ‘honest’ are open to interpretation. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to adopt a similar stance in studies of religion, perhaps particularly with younger children. The content hopefully piques students’ interest to the point of enquiring further.

My encounters with my colleague Ruth provide an interesting parallel for the learning of my students. According to King (2007, p. 116), “the insider and outsider perspective on religion are not considered as mutually opposed to each other but as interrelated and mutually helpful”. While this is reassuring, it does demand interface on the part of the teacher. In the topic of religion, this is bound to be confronting at times for teachers, just as it will be for students. King goes on to say that, “believers can often seem blind as to the evil arising from their own practices” (p. 123). In fairness, I should include non-believers in this risk- or fault-zone. What all believers and non-believers appear to have in common is their belief that they have found something others haven’t. They have reasoned for themselves – or had revealed to them – that God is like this or like that, or that there is no God. It would seem reasonable to assert that study of religions only ‘works’ when one is willing to suspend belief – or in my case suspend disbelief - to accept that my version of reality may not be correct. I cannot be certain that in my agnosticism I am not simply parroting other people’s Truths or Relativities.

This brings me to my own aims in teaching studies of religion. A compelling reason for me is that as a lodger in the global boarding house, I accept that I and my fellow tenants need to get along. This is especially the case now that, to extend the analogy, we have the technology to destroy the boarding house, ourselves and all the tenants in it.
These things are hot to handle. As stated above, I will bring a certain knowledge as well as knowledge deficit to every topic I teach and/or learn. I will bring a certain insight and a certain blindness. But for my encounters with Ruth I would have even more limited knowledge and insight. When Ruths (and Ahmeds etc, if you’ll permit the shorthand stereotype) are available to inform us and our classes, this is charged with wondrous potential. At the risk of sounding arrogant, though, if I am having trouble digesting what Ruth has to share with me, my students might find this more difficult still. It feels at times as though Ruth has only helped me to understand how incomplete my understanding of Judaism is. But this, too, is progress – becoming consciously unskilled is better than remaining unconsciously unskilled. Insider information such as can be gained by conversing with adherents is a vital component in gaining a better understanding of the faith. Who knows, it might even serve as a model for promoting some of the other good things like peace, harmony and deliverance from fear and prejudice.

In defence of my table, there has to be a beginning point. To the expert writer, mathematician or musician, learning or teaching ABC, 123 or do re mi no doubt looks terribly (if you’ll permit me) fundamental. Yet, one has to start somewhere with the person who has never heard of Hanukkah, Christmas or whatever.

A confession of a different type

My tentative response to the above circumstance is that I do have something to offer as an outsider. As primary/elementary school educators, we teach all sorts of topics, from astronomy to dinosaurs, that we can only ever understand vicariously, as outsiders.

“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation” (Isaiah 52:7).

Even though I’m an outsider, I believe I have some understanding as to why Jews get excited about this, in reference to a Messiah who is to come. And I think I can understand how Christians get excited about it with regard to Jesus.

Similarly, I believe I can understand some of the spiritual and historical moment for Jews in celebrating, for instance, Hanukkah. I believe I can understand the significance of the symbols and what they stand for. I believe I can understand the excitement emanating from the story that the oil, sufficient only for one day, lasted a week. I have sufficient faith and understanding to accept that children in particular might get excited as each subsequent night, a little more light fills the room, as one extra candle is lit, and the sense of hope and anticipation that this evokes, even for adults. I also believe I can understand the disappointment on the ninth day, as the chanukia is packed away.

A smile comes to my face now as I look again at my table in the Appendix, and notice that I, the ever-faithful academic, referenced its main reference source, a website known as “Judaism 101”.

Acknowledgments: I am indebted to Ruth, for her time in visiting my class, in discussing it with me, and in reading and commenting on various drafts of this paper. This article derives from a paper I delivered at the Social Educators’ Association of Australia Conference in Newcastle, 20-22 January 2008.

References


## Appendix A

### Some Jewish Celebrations and Commemorations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Approximate time of year (Jewish and western)</th>
<th>What does it commemorate?</th>
<th>Information in the Hebrew Scriptures</th>
<th>How is it commemorated or celebrated?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pesach/Passover</td>
<td>15 Nisan (1st month). Full moon in April, for 7 or 8 days (near Easter). The first month of the Jewish calendar. Autumn in Australia.</td>
<td>When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, God sent plagues in order to force the Egyptians to set them free. In the final plague, the first born in each family. The Israelites put the blood of a lamb around the front door, and God ‘passed over’ that house, not killing the first-born.</td>
<td>Exodus 11, 12 (and previous chapters of Exodus) Numbers 28: 16-25</td>
<td>Families have a <em>seder</em> meal. Unleavened bread is eaten in memory of the fact that the Israelites had to leave Egypt in a hurry, without enough time for their bread to rise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosh Hashanah/New Year</td>
<td>1 and 2 Tishrei (7th month) September Spring in Australia 1-10 Tishrei are known as the High Holy Days</td>
<td>Worship at the synagogue. New Year’s resolutions. Throwing bread or stones into water, as a sign of casting away sins. It is also a lead-up to Yom Kippur.</td>
<td>Leviticus 23: 26-32 Numbers 29: 7-11</td>
<td>Worship at the synagogue. People repent of (apologise for) things they’ve done to offend god. Fasting. Begins with the evening meal the previous day (before sunset).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yom Kippur/Day of Atonement</td>
<td>10 Tishrei (7th month) September/October. Tenth day of the first month. Spring in Australia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hanukkah or Chanukkah/Festival of Lights</td>
<td>25 Kislev November/December. Often near Christmas. Summer in Australia.</td>
<td>Rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem. One day’s supply of lamp oil lasted 8 days.</td>
<td>1 and 2 Maccabees (part of the apocryphal Jewish Scriptures)</td>
<td>Lighting a hanukkiah (or Hanukkah menorah, a ‘ninefold candlestick’). One more candle is lit each night.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purim/‘Lots’</td>
<td>14 Adar March</td>
<td>Book of Esther, especially 9:18 ff.</td>
<td>A palace official of King Xerxes, called Haman, wanted to kill all the Jews. One of the Jews, Mordechai, saved the king from possible assassination. Queen Esther (a Jew) interceded for the other Jews. Eventually, the King had Haman hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordechai.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sukkot/Tabernacles/Booths</td>
<td>15-21 Tishrei September/October. Starts 5 days after Yom Kippur.</td>
<td>Numbers 29:12ff</td>
<td>Building a shelter in the back yard (a sukkah), eating and perhaps sleeping in it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shavu’ot</td>
<td>6 Sivan</td>
<td>Handing down of the 10 Commandments (by tradition)</td>
<td>Exodus 20: 1-17</td>
<td>Reading the 10 Commandments in the Synagogue.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Jewish calendar is both solar and lunar, so dates of Jewish holidays ‘oscillate’ between certain dates in the Gregorian (Western) Calendar. The ‘Jewish day’ stretches from sunset one day to sunset the next day. Genesis 1:5 “and there was evening and there was morning – the first day”. Different traditions have different forms of commemoration.

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Overcoming Challenges in Understanding Metaphysical and Spiritual Concepts

One of the challenges for followers of any religion is to understand and internalise metaphysical and spiritual concepts that are often abstract or hard to conceptualise for an ordinary believer. Islamic spiritual and metaphysical concepts are no exception to this challenge. Understanding certain concepts which appear in the Qur’an, the holy book for Muslims, such as “God is everywhere” and “God sees all”, can be difficult for Muslims to grasp, because of their intangible and ‘unseen’ nature. But at the same time, understanding such concepts is a critical part of one’s spiritual development. Understanding is the first step in spiritual development, followed by internalising and experiencing.

Even if one is able to understand, internalise or experience such concepts oneself, explaining or teaching such metaphysical realities to people who have different levels of education, spirituality and life experiences, is not an easy matter. Without diagrams, experiments or demonstrations to support ones statements, explanations of such concepts may seem superficial or even delusional. This is an extremely important point needing consideration when teaching religion. As youth become more dependent on visual stimuli and as material existence is the only type of existence accepted by some, belief in the existence of a metaphysical and spiritual world becomes almost impossible for many. However, arguably, a mission impossible is made possible through clever use of analogies which compels one to consider concepts which would otherwise be disregarded.

In this paper, the topic at hand will be addressed by firstly explaining three challenges that exist in our contemporary world which make it difficult for individuals to grasp metaphysical and spiritual concepts; separation of religion and science, the abstract nature of metaphysical and spiritual concepts and the materialistic nature of societies.

Secondly, the approach taken by the Qur’an and the Risale-i Nur, a contemporary commentary of the Qur’an, will be explored to better understand how they overcome the above mentioned challenges by the use of analogies and allegorical comparisons.

Three challenges that impact on understanding metaphysical and spiritual concepts

There are many factors which make it difficult to understand metaphysical and spiritual concepts.

Separation of religion and science

In today’s time, science and religion, or more specifically reason and faith, appear to be strangers to one another. “The modern conceptualisation of the sciences is subservient to the idea that reality can only be examined by its highly specific and restricted experimental method. Thus, the modern conceptualisation implies, due to this method, that theories, doctrines, and principles concerning non-observable realities cannot be scientific. A natural consequence of this way of thinking is to be sceptical about metaphysical realities in the belief that the absolute reality is the physical one.” (Sebetic, 2009)

Due to science’s focus on physical existence, it has understood the human body to be made up of only matter and certain emotions that are driven by impulses. Spirituality is viewed to be outside science and, therefore, it is not considered to be real but purely a concept created by human beings.

The separation of religion and science has resulted in contradictory explanations of how life began and what sustains that life. While science argues that life began through chance, religion attributes existence
and life to God. As Unal explains:

"...science regards religion as a set of dogmas requiring blind belief and therefore as scientific and irreconcilable with itself. This unforgivable attitude and denial of creation's supra-natural dimension or its agnosticism are the result of separating science and religion" (Unal, 2006, p. 83).

This approach of contemporary science has, at the minimum, caused great confusion for followers of all religions about the existence of God, creation of the universe and purpose of life.

The abstract nature of spiritual concepts

Metaphysical and spiritual concepts are usually abstract and philosophical in nature. The concepts may require a good level of background knowledge or a particular approach to the information which facilitates the grasping of the concepts. For example, the Qur'an contains verses that indicate God is near but yet distant. How does one understand this statement which may appear contradictory at first glance?

Also, spiritual concepts cannot be demonstrated in front of a classroom like a chemistry concept. How does one demonstrate to a student or to anyone else that "God can see everything and everyone at the same time"?

Also, human spirituality is not a measurable notion. It is qualitative which can make it difficult for an individual to identify it or to identify with it. It is easy to say "Strive to be God conscious all the time" but the intuitive response can be "How can I be conscious of something that I cannot see?" or "How do I measure my God consciousness?"

A materialistic world

Teaching metaphysical and spiritual concepts can be like describing the ocean to someone who lives in the desert. Or it could be like explaining how to drive a car to someone who has never seen one. These may appear to be extreme examples, but very often, creating awareness of such concepts is extremely challenging when living in a world where individuals are bombarded with materialism and consumerism. It almost feels like one needs to be pulled out of a whirlpool, to be able to stop and comprehend what is being said.

Understanding spiritual concepts necessitates the ability to see beyond the physical, to reflect and see the deeper meaning in things which is very difficult when we are being bombarded with information, stimuli and messages that others want us to notice.

When the above three obstacles to understanding metaphysical and spiritual concepts are taken into consideration, the challenge at hand is quite large. Even if one is not affected by one obstacle, he certainly will be affected by another, making it difficult to experience the immanent and transcendent world.

The method of the Qur’an and Risale-i Nur in addressing the challenges

Seeking to understand the Qur’an, the holy book for Muslims

Due to the difficulties mentioned, teaching of spiritual concepts has become a real challenge in present time. As Muslims become more educated in the physical sciences, their belief in the unseen world can be shaken, their beliefs challenged and their perception of their religion changed.

Explaining that there is a metaphysical component to creation is the first hurdle, understanding its nature is the second, and knowing how to develop one's spirituality in this material world is the third.

Based on these hurdles, how does the Qur’an, which Muslims believe to be the word of God, facilitate the comprehension of such beliefs? How do Muslims relate to the Author of this Holy Book Whom they cannot ‘see’? Are they able to comprehend the words of the Qur’an which talk about God’s Power and Knowledge which we can only try and imagine? An affirmative response to these questions is critical for any Muslim to
have sound belief. It is due to the importance of understanding the Qur'an that Muslim ulema (scholars) have attempted to unlock the secrets contained within the 604 pages of this Divine Revelation for centuries. As a result, hundreds of voluminous commentaries have been written throughout history.

The Risale-i Nur is one such contemporary commentary (tafseer) of the Qur'an which is quite different to most tafseers; most start by explaining the first verse of the Qur'an and continue in an orderly fashion through the whole Qur'an, verse by verse.

On the other hand, the six thousand pages of the Risale-i Nur consist of extensive exegesis of verses with theological which are important to understand in current times. Said Nursi, the author of the Risale-i Nur, was born in eastern Turkey in 1877 and died in 1960 at the age of eighty-three. Nursi was a respected scholar during his time, having studied not only all the traditional religious sciences but also modern science. Nursi witnessed the weakening of the faith of the Muslim. He saw materialistic philosophy and reason to be responsible for this weakening. Consequently, he concentrated on proving the truths of faith in conformity with modern science through rational proofs and evidence.

The methodology of the Risale-i Nur in expounding upon theological concepts

The methodology that Nursi uses in his commentary is reflective of the methodology of the Qur'an which helps the reader grasp important concepts relating to theology, spirituality and practice. The use of analogies and allegorical comparisons to explain Islamic spiritual concepts is an important part of this methodology. As Smith explains, "Nursi draws extensively on the use of allegorical comparisons, employed for the express purpose of helping the reader understand more directly and personally the truths of the Qur'an." (Smith, 2008, p. 70).

The use of analogies and allegorical comparisons address the three challenges of teaching metaphysical and spiritual concepts mentioned above as follows:

Overcoming the scepticism generated by the separation of religion and science

To overcome the scepticism generated by the separation of religion and science, Nursi not only approaches metaphysical and spiritual concepts by addressing the heart, but he also approaches them from a logical and philosophical perspective. Through this approach, he seeks to engage the heart and ensure the mind is content. Nursi explains:

"Even if the intuitive knowledge of those with knowledge of God lacked proof, their expositions were acceptable and sufficient. But at this time, since the misguidance of science has stretched out its hand to the fundamentals and pillars [of belief]...the most distant truths were brought close through the telescope of the mystery of comparisons." (Nursi, 2001, p. 243)

Overcoming the challenge of understanding spiritual concepts due to their abstract nature

Understanding spiritual concepts is not easy due to the abstract nature of the concepts. As mentioned above, it is not easy to explain how God is near but yet distant. However, through an analogy, the individual is able to use reason to compare a known experience or image to understand the spiritual concepts. It is "purely to enable people in general to understand what is properly communicated without words, by putting into words, and immaterial and abstract matters are represented in material form." (Nursi, 1993, p. 644).

Nursi is not addressing philosophers, scientists or scholars through his writings; he is actually addressing the lay person. By using analogies, he is able to break down and simplify spiritual concepts to a level where any individual can understand them without losing the essence of the concepts.
Nu
rsi explains this in the following way:

For in all these treatises, the most profound truths are taught to the most ordinary and uneducated people by means of analogical comparisons. Whereas leading scholars have said of most of those truths that "they cannot be made comprehensible," and have not taught them to the elite, let alone to the common people. (Nursi, 2001, p. 439).

**A materialistic world**

Understanding spiritual concepts and staying conscious of them, can seem to be very difficult in a materialistic world. In one of his writings, Nursi mentions how a group of high school students came to him, asking him to speak about God, because their teachers would not speak about God. Nursi responds saying, "Do not listen to your teachers, listen to the sciences for they speak about God in a tongue of their own." (Nursi, 2002, p. 226)

Nursi gives examples of familiar sciences and how they should remind us of our Creator. One example he gives is the millions of electric lights that can be found in a city, explaining how the electrician who designed it had great skills. He then explains how the lamps of the stars must have an even better Electrician due to the sheer size of the 'lamps', the fact that they do not collide or become extinguished. Thus, the electrical system of a city testifies to and makes known the Monarch, Illuminator, Director and Maker of the mighty exhibition of the universe;

"Thus, hundreds of other sciences like these make known the Glorious Creator of the universe together with His Names, each through its broad measure or scale, its particular mirror, its far-seeing eyes, and searching gaze; they make known His attributes and perfections." (Nursi, 2002, p. 228)

Nursi teaches us that one can constantly relate to God and 'witness God', even in this materialistic world.

Thus, Nursi addresses the challenges of today's science oriented and materialistic world by the use of analogies and allegorical comparisons, a methodology which is in line with that of the Qur'an.

**The use of analogies and allegorical comparisons in the Qur'an**

The use of analogies and allegories are an important part of the Qur'an's methodology, containing over one thousand such comparisons. Nursi explains how great things are achieved through their use; "imagination is compelled to submit to thought, the hidden is made present, the abstract made tangible, and the meaning made palpable." (Nursi, 2007, p. 123)

Some examples of where analogies, parables and similitudes are mentioned in the Qur'an are:

...Thus doth Allah set forth **parables**. (Qur'an 13:17)
Seest thou not how Allah sets forth a **parable**?... (Qur'an 14:24)
...So Allah sets forth **parables** for men, in order that they may receive admonition. (Qur'an 14:25)
...We put forth (many) **parables** in your behoof! (Qur'an 14:45)
O men! Here is a **parable** set forth! listen to it!...(Qur'an 22:73)
And We have explained to man, in this Qur'an, every kind of **similitude**. (Qur'an 17:89)
He does propound to you a **similitude** from your own (experience). (Qur'an 30:28)

The analogies used by Nursi in the Risale'i Nur, are very often the same as those used in the Qur'an. Just as the Qur'an often mentions the same analogy in different places, Nursi also mentions the same analogy in various places, occasionally modifying it to fit the topic of discussion.

The analogies are written in a way that readers of all ages, intellectual levels and cultures can understand because they are objects or events that are common in the lives of all people or would not be foreign to the
reader. Below are some examples of analogies used in the Qur’an and the Risale-i Nur to explain spiritual and metaphysical concepts.

The Palace

Nursi explains the purpose of life through an allegory. The verses from the Qur’an which he uses as a source of reference are the following:

By the sun and its glorious splendour; * By the moon as it follows it; * By the day as it shows [the sun’s] glory; * By the night as it conceals it; * By the firmament and its wonderful structure;* By the earth and its wide expanse; * By the soul and the order and proportion given it. (Qur’an 91:1-7)

The allegory is about a King who had various treasuries, great skills and encompassing knowledge. Like every possessor of beauty and perfection, he wants to see his own beauty and perfection but he also wants to display it. Nursi goes on to explain that beauty and perfection could be appreciated in two ways. The first way of beholding such beauty and perfection is by the witnessing of it with his own discerning eye and the other way is through the view of others. (Nursi, 1992, p. 133) It is like an artist who paints. Not only does the artist want to see his painting with his own eyes, but he also wants others to observe his painting and witness their reflection on the painting.

The analogy continues with the development of a vast beautiful palace where people were invited to come and experience the jewels and ornaments of the palace, providing them with a teacher to make known the wisdom of the palace and the contents within it. Some of the people reflected with amazement at what they saw and sought to find out more about the King who designed and built it. While the second group indulged in the food, not caring where everything came from and why it was created.

In the allegory, the King is God, the palace is the universe, the teacher is Prophet Muhammad, and the people invited to enter the palace are the people who have been put on this earth. Through this brilliant story, Nursi is able to address many questions that arise about the purpose of life. Why did God create the universe? Why did He send down Prophets? What does God expect from us? How do we get to know God? What is the difference between a believer and a non-believer? Importantly, the part in the analogy that explains how beauty and perfection want to be witnessed by the Creator of that beauty and perfection addresses questions such as; Why did God create such a vast universe? If humans cannot witness all of God’s creation, why does it exist?

The light analogy

The light analogy often appears in the Qur’an to highlight the difference between a believer and a non-believer. Belief and guidance are likened to light while non-belief and misguidance are likened to darkness.

The Qur’an states:

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth...Light upon Light! Allah doth guide whom He will to His Light: Allah doth set forth Parables for men: and Allah doth know all things. (Qur’an 24:35)

Allah is the Protector of those who have faith: from the depths of darkness He will lead them forth into light... (Qur’an 2:257)

A Book which We have revealed unto thee, in order that thou mightest lead mankind out of the depths of darkness into light... (Qur’an 14:1)

But to those who receive Guidance, He increases the (light of) Guidance... (Qur’an 47:17)
Nursi follows through with the light analogy in many parts of his writing. Some of his major works are named after light terms; "The Flashes", "The Rays" and "The Epitomes of Light" demonstrating the importance of this analogy on the contemporary world in understanding faith matters.

Knowing God, the omnipresent God

A question that is commonly asked when trying to understand God is: “How can a single individual be in innumerable places and do innumerable things at the same time with no difficulty?” (Nursi, 1993, p. 637)

Nursi starts to answer this question by first explaining the method he will use to answer it:

“Man’s mind can only look at this mystery through the telescope of and observatory of comparison and allegory. While there is nothing similar or analogous to God Almighty’s Essence and attributes, the functions of His attributes may be looked at to a degree by means of comparison and allegory.” (Nursi, 1993, p. 637)

Nursi then continues to explain that reflections of the sun are not identical to the sun. Although the sun is a particular and single individual, it can be seen somewhat in everything by reflecting off shiny objects. Its reflection can be seen, like a mini-sun, in all shining objects, drops of water, and fragments of glass on the face of the earth, according to their capacity. The sun’s heat, light, and the seven colours in its light, a sort of likeness of the essential sun, are found in all shining physical objects.(Nursi, 1993, p. 637)

Through our personal experiences, we see how the tiniest things cannot avoid the luminosity of the sun. Even if one is under a shade or in the house the sun cannot be avoided. It is because of the greatness of the sun’s luminosity that the tiniest things cannot hide or escape from it.

Nursi then goes further to explain that if were to suppose the sun had knowledge and consciousness, then every mirror would be like a dwelling-place or seat for the sun, it would be in contact with everything in person. Communicating with one thing would not be a barrier to communicating with another. It would make its presence felt everywhere. Similarly, God can perform innumerable actions at the same time, and communicating with one being would not be a barrier to communicating with another. It helps one to grasp God’s omnipresence.

Knowing God, the personal but transcendent God

In the Qur’an, there are two verses which may appear to contradict each other which Nursi explains. "And We are closer to him than his jugular vein” (Qur’an 50:16) suggests that God is extremely close to us while the verse "The angels ascend to Him in a day the measure of which is fifty thousand years” (Qur’an 70:4) suggests that God is very distant from us.

Nursi starts to address this query by stating that “the Divine Name of Light has solved many of my difficulties. God willing, it will solve this one too. Choosing the way of comparison, which brings clarity to the mind and luminosity to the heart...” (Nursi, 1993, p. 209).

From here, Nursi uses the sun analogy to explain the two verses mentioned above; even though the sun is very far from earth and everything on it, it is still very close to every object, especially those objects that are transparent. On the window of a house, for example, the sun’s light, heat and its complete image appears, making one feel the sun’s closeness. In a similar way, the sun simultaneously appears on every transparent object on earth because it radiates those attributes (heat, light etc) in all directions. We can say that the sun is closer to a piece of glass with its attributes but the glass is very far from the sun at the same time.

Similarly, God Almighty is very close to everything and everyone with His attributes but we are physically far from God. The direction from God to creation is infinitely close like the image on the window, but the
direction from creation to God is infinitely far.

And so, we surely believe with complete certainty as though witnessing it that the All-Glorious One, Who is the Light of Light, the Illuminator of Light, the Determiner of Light, and in comparison to Whose knowledge and power the sun’s light and heat is like earth, is all-present and all-seeing and infinitely close to all things with His knowledge and power, and that things are utterly distant from Him... (Nursi, 1993, p. 221)

The sun analogy and the mirror analogy - relating to God

Nursi uses the sun and the mirror analogy to explain how we can relate to God; just as we can only make contact with the sun through some of its reflections and shadows and meet with it through its minor and particular manifestations, we can make contact with God through the reflection of God’s names and attributes on His creation. Thus, everything is like a mirror which manifests the qualities of God for us to witness. The colours of the light are like the attributes of God and its rays are like His names. (Nursi, 1993, p. 221) Therefore, we can understand the names and attributes of God by pondering on what we see and experience.

Nursi points out that understanding ourselves is extremely important in knowing God since “man is the place of manifestation of all the Names, but the Names being various, which has resulted in the universe’s variety and the differences in the angels' worship, has also caused variety to a degree among men.” (Nursi, 1993, p. 343) If man is the most comprehensive mirror, then he must know himself to be able to know God. In the Qur’an, it states “And be not like those who forgot God, so He made them forget their own souls...” (Qur’an, 39:19).

- relating to others

Nursi talks of love in many sections of his work, emphasising that we very often misuse the love that we have been given the ability to experience. “All your loves dispersed through the universe are a love given for His Names and attributes. You have used it wrongly and you are suffering the penalty.” (Nursi, 1993, p. 369)

Nursi argues that we should love the One who is truly deserving of that love and that is God. Based on the light analogy, we are giving all our love to the reflection in the mirror, forgetting that the reflection has a source. Nursi expresses his frustration at the misdirected love; “O my heart! The most stupid person is he who does not recognise the sun while he sees its image in a mirror, and loves only the mirror and tries to preserve it passionately with the aim of holding on to the sun permanently.” (Nursi, 1999, p. 249)

The key to loving in the correct manner is to realise that the mirror’s shining brilliance is dependent on the sun’s manifestation. When the mirror dies, the sun within it will not be lost. Nursi tells man that the intense love should not be for the mirror which is simply the reflection of God’s manifestation (the human being) but it should be for God. (Nursi, 1995, p. 185)

- purpose of a human being

Nursi (1995) emphasises that the real purpose of a human being is acting as a mirror to the manifestation of Divine Oneness. If God’s light is likened to the sun, it shines upon us and we reflect that light, breaking it down into rays. Each ray is considered to be a different name of God; The Patient, The All-Wise, the All-Knowing etc. Nursi explains that it is our responsibility that all the names of God shine through us.

According to Nursi, not only do we try and reflect the names of God but we also try to read them through our experiences. “Now, as for the perfection of your life, it is to perceive the lights of the Pre-Eternal Sun which are depicted in the mirror of your life, and to love them.” (Nursi, 1993, p. 141) When we see the
compassion an animal shows towards its newborn, we know the animal is being a mirror to God’s name ‘The Compassionate’. The numerous functions of a liver are a mirror to God’s name ‘The Wise’. The growth of fruit and vegetables are a mirror to God’s name ‘The Sustainer’.

Turner and Horkuc explains what meaning such witnessing should have, "Man’s quest should be to see all things as 'Other-indicative', the result is a vision in which all things in the created realm are invested with sacrality, pointing as they do to the transcendent Sacred, or God." (Turner and Horkuc, 2009, p. 69)

The ship analogy

Nursi likens the journey of life to a journey on a ship and explains how one who puts their trust in God is like one who “travels through the mountainous waves of events in the ship of life in complete safety”. (Nursi, 1993, p. 322) Nursi provides a story to help us understand this point; two men with heavy loads board a large ship. While one man leaves his load on the deck, the other man does not, preferring to carry his load on his head and back because he is worried that his load would get lost if he puts it down. Based on this analogy, just as the man on the ship does not trust that the ship can carry his burdens, the man who carries all his burdens of life, does not entrust his burdens to the hand of power of the Absolutely Powerful One, God.

Nursi tries to highlight how exhausting and inappropriate such behaviour can be. He does point out that we need to do the best we can to achieve good outcomes, fulfilling the causes that need to be undertaken for a particular result. But after that, we should leave the results to God. Nursi explains that such an approach provides light and strength for the believer.

The spring analogy

Nursi dedicates a significant part of his work to proving the existence of Resurrection and the hereafter. Belief in the resurrection is an imperative part of Islamic belief. Life in this world is seen as a temporary stopping place before moving on in one's journey.

In the Tenth Word, which is the longest chapter in "The Words", Nursi starts the chapter by explaining the reason for using metaphors, comparisons and stories:

"The reasons for my writing these treatises in the form of metaphors, comparisons and stories are to facilitate comprehension and to show how rational, appropriate, well-founded and coherent are the truths of Islam. The meaning of the stories is contained in the truths that conclude them; each story is like an allusion pointing to its concluding truth. Therefore, they are not mere fictitious tales, but veritable truths." (Nursi, 1993, p. 59)

Amongst the many analogies he uses, he uses the spring analogy quite regularly to prove that resurrection will take place. Nursi ties the spring analogy to the verse in the Qur'an which explains how God gives life to the dead earth:

Then contemplate (O man!) the memorials of Allah's Mercy!- how He gives life to the earth after its death: verily the same will give life to the men who are dead: for He has power over all things. (Qur'an 30:50)

Nursi explains how three hundred thousand different kinds of animal and plant are brought back to life over a period of five or six days during spring and then asks, "Is it at all possible that for the One Who does all of this anything should be difficult; that He should be unable to create the heavens and the earth in six days; that He should be unable to resurrect men with a single blast?" (Nursi, 1993, p. 92) Thus, Nursi's compelling argument is, if God can resurrect dead earth during springtime, and we know he can because we witness it every year, then it would not be too difficult for God to resurrect everybody.
Conclusion
The Risale-i Nur are comprised of many analogies and allegories which help one to comprehend the spiritual concepts which would otherwise be very difficult to understand. When we look at the Qur’an, we notice that Nursi has followed the method of the Qur’an. The use of analogies is particularly important in today’s time where science has separated from religion making it difficult for people to accept the existence of anything metaphysical. This is a very important point that needs to be addressed in religious education. In a time where spiritual and metaphysical concepts can be viewed as fairytale like, analogies and allegories can help create certainty by enabling minds to grasp concepts which would, otherwise, be dismissed. Although this paper has addressed the topic from an Islamic perspective, the issues discussed are just as important and relevant to other religions.

Another important concluding note is that the materialistic world that we live in distracts us from the metaphysical world. For anyone seeking to be God conscious, being able to relate to the metaphysical through the material is very important. Nursi helps the reader to do this by using analogies that contain objects which are familiar to people from all walks of life such as the sun, the mirror and spring. When the Qur’an is studied, it can be seen that the analogies of the Qur’an have been used in the Risale-i Nur.

As a result of this approach, belief in matters, such as the existence of God, one's closeness to God and the omnipresence of God, become easier to comprehend. This enables one to practise and experience their faith at a deeper level, by properly relating to material existence.

References

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Psychometric properties of the Francis Scale of Attitude to Christianity among Australian Christians

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Abstract
This paper describes and discusses the psychometric properties of the 24-item Likert-type Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity among a sample of Australian Christians. A total of 104 Christian undergraduate students attending Sydney University completed the scale together with indicators of religious behaviour and experiences. Findings confirm the reliability and construct validity of the scale and commend it for further use.

Introduction
Self-report measures of religiosity are a vital part of ongoing research in the psychology of religion. In the early 1970s, Francis set out to promote the study of the attitudinal dimension of religion and to enhance its contribution to the integration and testing of coherent psychological theories by proposing a new measure of attitude toward Christianity (Francis, 1978a) and by arguing for a programme of interrelated studies employing that instrument (Francis, 1978b). Kay and Francis (1996) drew together the fruits of 26 years’ work and over 100 independent studies using the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (FSAC). Since Kay and Francis’ review in the mid-1990s, more than 100 further studies have been added to this corpus.

The psychometric properties of the 24-item adult English language edition of the FSAC (Francis & Stubbs, 1987) have been supported in a variety of countries including a general sample of Australian undergraduates (Francis, Lewis, Philipchalk, Lester, & Brown, 1995). In the latter study, the construct validity of the FSAC as a measure of religious attitude in Australia, the UK, USA and Canada was supported by its prediction of religious behaviours, as indicated by self-reported frequency of prayer and worship attendance.

The development of a cross-cultural body of research has been further facilitated by FSAC translations available in a variety of languages (see Francis & Katz, 2007 for review), and adaptations of the FSAC measuring attitudes towards Judaism (Francis & Katz, 2007), Islam (Sahin & Francis, 2002), and Hinduism (Francis, Santosh, Robbins, & Vij, 2008).

Building upon this work, emerging evidence suggests that some psychological and other correlates of attitude toward religion vary across religions and cultures (Lesmana & Tiliopoulos, 2009; Francis, Lewis,
Philipchalk, Brown, & Lester, D., 1995; Johnstone & Tiliopoulos, 2008). For example, female gender is associated with increased religiosity in British Christians but decreased religiosity in British Jewish and Israeli populations (O’Connor, Cobb, & O’Connor, 2003; Francis & Wilcox, 1998; Loewenthal, MacLeod, & Cinnirella, 2001), and predicts attitude to Hinduism in Balinese Hindus (Lesmana & Tiliopoulos, 2009) but not attitude to Islam in international Muslims (Johnstone & Tiliopoulos, 2009). The demographic, behavioural, personality and social correlates of religious attitude in specific cultures and religious populations are evidently an important and intriguing field of enquiry. However, the psychometric properties of the FSAC remain to be established in many such populations.

The aim of the present study, therefore, was to examine the reliability and construct validity of the FSAC in a sample of Australian Christian undergraduates.

Method

Materials

The Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (adult) (FSAC; Francis & Stubbs, 1987). A 24-item questionnaire assessing attitude toward key aspects of the Christian faith, such as Jesus, the bible, church and prayer, on a single dimension. Each item is measured on a five-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating a more positive attitude.

Religious indicators. Frequency of prayer, church attendance, religious experience, and feelings of being guided by God were measured on a five-point scale, from 1 = Never or almost never, to 5 = Twice daily.

Demographics. Information regarding gender, age, and religion of parents was also collected.

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 104 first year psychology students at the University of Sydney, Australia, who identified themselves as Christian. Mean age was 19.04 years ($SD = 2.65$, range 17 to 37). Of 102 who indicated gender, 78 (76.5%) were female. Four-fifths (81.3%) reported that both parents were Christian.

Questionnaires were completed online for course credit. Two students who did not specify frequency of prayer or worship were excluded.

Data were analysed through SPSS 16; other than two cases for gender, no missing values were present in the final dataset.

Results

Prayer at least weekly was reported by 48.1% of participants, while 52.9% attended church at least monthly; 44.2% reported having a religious experience at least monthly, and 53.4% experienced feeling guided by God at least twice a week. Mean FSAC total ($84.6; SD 23.0$) was consistent with scale norms.

As shown in Table 1 (see p. 86), the scale is characterised by homogeneity, unidimensionality and internal consistency reliability in the present sample.

The FSAC showed the expected positive correlations with frequency of religious behaviours and experiences (see Table 2 p. 86).

A one-way ANOVA found no sizeable influence of gender on attitude to Christianity ($F_{1,102} = 3.21$, n.s., partial $\eta^2 = .031$).
Table 1
**FSAC internal consistency reliability statistics and Principal Components Analysis (unrotated).**

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<td>I find it boring to listen to the bible*</td>
<td>.578</td>
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<td>I know that Jesus helps me</td>
<td>.892</td>
<td>.906</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saying my prayers helps me a lot</td>
<td>.797</td>
<td>.814</td>
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<td>The church is very important to me</td>
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<td>I think going to church is a waste of my time*</td>
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<td>I want to love Jesus</td>
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<td>I think people who pray are stupid*</td>
<td>.698</td>
<td>.724</td>
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<td>God helps me to lead a better life</td>
<td>.847</td>
<td>.866</td>
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<td>I like to learn about God very much</td>
<td>.824</td>
<td>.840</td>
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<td>God means a lot to me</td>
<td>.931</td>
<td>.942</td>
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<td>I believe that God helps people</td>
<td>.836</td>
<td>.855</td>
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<td>Prayer helps me a lot</td>
<td>.758</td>
<td>.778</td>
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<td>I know that Jesus is very close to me</td>
<td>.892</td>
<td>.905</td>
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<tr>
<td>I think praying is a good thing</td>
<td>.778</td>
<td>.800</td>
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<tr>
<td>I think the bible is out of date*</td>
<td>.617</td>
<td>.633</td>
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<td>I believe that God listens to prayers</td>
<td>.898</td>
<td>.912</td>
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<td>Jesus doesn’t mean anything to me*</td>
<td>.832</td>
<td>.852</td>
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<td>God is very real to me</td>
<td>.861</td>
<td>.880</td>
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<td>I think saying prayers does no good*</td>
<td>.734</td>
<td>.758</td>
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<td>The idea of God means much to me</td>
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<td>.855</td>
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<td>I believe that Jesus still helps people</td>
<td>.843</td>
<td>.862</td>
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<td>I know that God helps me</td>
<td>.892</td>
<td>.908</td>
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<tr>
<td>I find it hard to believe in God*</td>
<td>.798</td>
<td>.815</td>
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Alpha coefficient/percentage of variance**

| FSAC | .977 | 66.7% |

* These negative items were reverse scored
** Percentage of variance explained by the first factor

Table 2
**Correlation of religious indicators and age with FSAC total score**

| FSAC | .65* |
| Frequency of prayer | .62* |
| Frequency of worship | .51* |
| Frequency of religious experience | .82* |
| Frequency of feeling guided by God | .04 |

Discussion

Results supported the unidimensionality and internal consistency reliability of the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity among Christian undergraduate students in Australia. Furthermore, its construct validity as a measure of positive attitude towards Christianity among Australian Christians was supported by positive associations with frequency of religious behaviours (prayer and worship attendance) as well as experiential religious indicators (frequency of feeling guided by God and of religious experiences). Lack of gender differences in religiosity in the present sample contrasted with prior findings in British Christians (O’Connor, Cobb, & O’Connor, 2003; Loewenthal, MacLeod, & Cinnirella, 2001). Indeed,
Loewenthal and colleagues suggest that such differences are culture-specific. The result might reflect less influence of gender on religious attitudes in the Australian Christian context. However, power to evaluate gender differences was limited by the predominantly female composition of this psychology student sample.

The scale can be recommended for further use within Australian Christians and should facilitate valuable cross-cultural and cross-religion comparisons in an empirical psychology of religion. It is now appropriate to organize appropriate databases from which scale norms could be established for the different religious and cultural contexts.

References
This is an extremely useful book, primarily, for two reasons. Firstly, it gives a very clear and accessible account of action research methodology and how it can be used in an educational setting. Action research is often incorrectly used and described by students and in the wider literature. This study provides good documentation as well as plentiful examples of appropriate use of an action research methodology and as such will greatly assist those who are contemplating empirical work in religious education. O’Grady’s second chapter notes that there is no single definition or normative practice for action research. His own interest in the methodology arose from his converging graduate studies in religious education and a desire to improve the quality of religious education in the school in which he worked. Action research, therefore, is directed toward a specific problem in a particular setting. It values the voice of the participant and the progress of the project is monitored against the goals that are set out at the beginning of the project. In O’Grady’s case he is concerned with giving the adolescents in his classes greater control over their learning and, thereby, making them more engaged in the learning process.

Secondly, the book provides a good overview of the interpretive approach to religious education developed by Robert Jackson at the University of Warwick. This is an emerging paradigm, especially in the United Kingdom, and is particularly suited to religious education in secular, non-denominational setting. Jackson’s first chapter lays out some of the major dimensions of the interpretive approach and also gives some insight into how it can be used, and misused, in the classroom setting. Jackson points out that the interpretive approach is not intended as a metatheory designed to be used alone or in opposition to other theoretical stances. Rather, the strength of the interpretive approach is that it allows great flexibility, especially with regard to pedagogy. It is particularly well adapted to areas where phenomenological assumptions about universal or ideal types of responses are unfounded. Instead of using predescribed categories the researcher is invited to interpret what he or she sees against their prior knowledge of familiar concepts. In terms of process, the interpretive approach follows a number of stages beginning with representation. This involves describing, as accurately as possible, the religious tradition that is being studied. Jackson borrows heavily from anthropology here as the representation of the religious tradition is premised on careful and skilful research and observation. Following representation the next three stages all follow in sequence. Interpretation is an examination based on prior knowledge and suppositions of what has been represented. In this regard the interpretive approach makes no claims about lack of bias but rather seeks to establish a dialogue between what the researcher/observer knows and what they are engaging with. Reflexivity involves a deeper reflection on the dialogue that has been already established. The final phase, edification, involves encouraging a positive attitude towards diversity and seeing the meeting point between people of differing beliefs and practices.

The remainder of the book, twelve chapters, examines the use of action research in religious education. Three chapters will be mentioned here. Firstly, Whittall looks at developing appropriate principles and
strategies for teaching gifted students in religious education. She notes that these students can be neglected in the religious education classroom, as often teaching is directed to more typical students. Fancourt examines reflective assessment in the classroom using the interpretive approach. He observes that one of the most fruitful uses of the interpretive approach is its capacity to open up innovative assessment techniques. Whitworth examines developing primary student teachers understanding and confidence in teaching religious education. This is considered within the context of differing teacher backgrounds, in both a cognitive and affective sense.

For those interested in using action research as a research tool or to improve classroom practice this book is highly recommended.

Richard Rymarz
St Joseph’s College, University of Alberta


One of the constants in the recent history of the Catholic Church in the USA is the slow but relentless decline in the number of students enrolled in Catholic schools. In 1964, for instance, there were over 4.5 million students attending Catholic elementary schools. In 2009 the number had declined to just over 1.5 million (p. 10). Geographically the decline in Catholic schools is greatest in the Mid East and within cities in poor urban areas. This study is directed toward addressing this demise and is aimed, primarily, at those who work within the Catholic educational system. As such it is not a scholarly text but is an extremely useful overview of the key issues facing Catholic schools in the USA. It seeks, in a concise fashion, to come up with a strategy for ensuring a future for the historically critical Catholic school sector. The emphasis here is on finding solutions, a sentiment spelled out in the foreword,” there will be no more prizes for predicting rain: only for building arks.”

The study list six reasons for why Catholic schools close. These are; declining demographics; weak leadership; weak Catholic identity in fact or perception; academic problems; family financial circumstances; strong competition; families not sufficiently valuing Catholic education. Many of these factors point to a loss of Catholic identity in the wider Church as a key factor in understanding what has now become established as a clear trend. There was a time when Catholic schools in the USA, and elsewhere, could rely on the strong commitment of Catholic parents to maintain the ongoing links between families, schools and parishes. To be sure, some of this was reflective of a mentality that preserved Catholic identity at the expense of greater integration with the wider culture. It is, nonetheless, an extremely strong motivating factor for parents to send their children to Catholic schools if they see this as both a religious and cultural obligation – a sense that their choice of education is a reflection of their relationship with God and the child’s place in the world. This mentality has been gravely weakened and as a result the Catholic school must now compete with other schools for students.

The considerable handicap that Catholic schools face is the financial burden that they impose. In the USA Catholic schools receive no funding from government sources. In the absence of strong religious or cultural motivation, the key question that Catholic education faces is why should parents spend thousands of dollars a year to send their children to Catholic schools? The authors suggest that Catholic schools should cultivate a sense of adding something extra, such as a strong sense of community or a set of moral values. A recent development, however, has undermined this strategy, namely, the rise of charter schools. Charter schools, in brief, allow parent to have more control over the education of their children by establishing schools with other like minded parents that stress a particular educational position. These schools cannot, however, have any religious affiliation. So parents wanting a greater sense of discipline, or more focus on academics, can establish a charter school with these qualities at the forefront. These schools, importantly, will receive government funding. The authors do propose the intriguing idea that in some jurisdictions the possibility of establishing religious charter schools be explored.
The authors suggest a number of strategies to best equip the “ark” of Catholic education to see it through the current storm. Chief amongst these are ensuring financial stability by innovative and extensive fundraising and by renewed support of schools by Catholic parishes. The idea of enhanced fundraising is viable in the United States which has an ingrained culture of philanthropy. More contentious is the idea of parishes supporting schools. There is a parallel movement in the United States where the number of Catholic parishes is also declining so it is unclear where additional parish funds for schools will come from. Other strategies such as improved leadership, greater focus on special programs especially academic ones, are worthwhile goals but can they really give the Catholic school a decisive advantage over public or charter schools? The key issue of elevating Catholic identity is raised but reviving this seems to be the critical aspect in maintaining Catholic schools because this is an educational element that only the authentic Catholic school can provide.

Richard Rymarz  
*St Joseph’s College, University of Alberta*


School choice is impacting upon market forces in many western countries with local and system levels responding in a number of interesting ways. Despite increasing numbers of Catholics generally, the American situation presents a decrease in enrolment figures within the Catholic education sector. Schmiesing, a writer on Catholic thought and economics, calls for a review of government funding, as well as a re-energizing of Catholic identity, to encourage and empower parents in selecting a school.

Set within the American context, this publication has broader application for policy makers involved in issues of financial and legal freedoms for parents/carers, as well as for academics, and diocesan workers and school leaders and staff communicating Catholic education’s identity. Surrounding the political, legal and historical descriptions of the US experience are insights into universal theological understandings, as well as discussions of practical applications. Chapter and section headings enable readers to choose their areas of interest, as well as to pursue further information through footnotes and references on what is obviously a well-researched subject.

The Church urges parents to consciously choose a direction of schooling that will progress the dignity of the child, develop the Christian concept of the human person and encourage relationships that are based on solidarity with others and participation in ecclesial community. Fulfilling these exigencies is, according to Schmiesing, a major focus of the American Catholic Church, which is currently contributing financial, personnel and spiritual resources to the cause of opening up options for parents. It is facing the question of continuing to invest massive resources towards the “conventional Catholic schooling model” (p 19), and the challenge of maintaining a strong Catholic identity, given the decreasing numbers of Catholic students enrolled in the schools.

At the centre of this challenge are the purposes underpinning an education in the Catholic tradition: firstly, the potential to pass on generational faith within the family unit, and secondly, the wider effect of contributing to society through moral and intellectual formation, creating positive engagement in the contemporary world.

Schmiesing describes the state of Catholic education in the USA as being built on a “flawed system” (p 3), whereby Catholic parents who select a Catholic school pay twice for education: once through their tax support of the government system, and again in the direct support of Catholic schools, if these are their schools of choice and access. While not wishing to devalue the work of staff in public systems, Schmiesing claims that Catholic parents from poor families have little option other than government schooling.
While the detail of the American context may have relevance for a limited readership, the arguments presented on right-of-entry to Catholic education have wide application.

The success of various systems within the US is outlined, making it clear that for some parents, the exercising of choice is indeed a freedom they pursue. However the argument underpinning Schmiesing’s message (p 4) is that for the “common good of all children” the power of school choice for parents must be returned to them, by reversing the Government’s hold on education finance. In his view this step would empower parents to pick schools based on purpose and performance according to the parents’ own values, and would create opportunities for private schools to become more educationally stable and offer more options. For Catholic schools the effect could be an opening of opportunities to respond to the needs of families and students across a broader social spectrum, irrespective of religious persuasion and socio economic status.

Schmiesing (p 19) offers two solutions to the current American situation: school renewal programs emphasizing a distinctive Catholic education, and the political action of pursuing a more sustainable means of ensuring financial support for families seeking the choice of Catholic education. Some readers will benefit from details surrounding the political process as a pathway towards safeguarding the Catholic education system. Others will gain insights from the concept of renewal of Catholic education “from the inside” (p 44), whereby schools have a duty to present themselves in ways that appeal to parents/carers and increasingly, to the children as decision makers.

*Catholic Education and the Promise of School Choice* presents a considered discussion on advancing the rights of US families in obtaining juridical freedoms in accessing Catholic schools. It also advances the argument that ‘choice’ leads to healthy competition from which school improvement efforts grow. However Schmiesing warns against the temptation to compete to an extent to which schools lose sight of the foundational values of the Catholic education mission and opportunities to promote the Catholic identity. In the changing dynamic of contemporary Church and the competitive, educational market place, this monograph holds relevant messages for those interested in Catholic education.

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Articles on the following are welcomed:
- religious education in various contexts;
- the religious needs of young adults in the immediate post-school period;
- various models of faith communities in which evangelisation and catechesis may take place besides the Catholic school;
- religious education of children and adolescents;
- continuing religious education for adults;
- family ministry and youth ministry.

Submissions
- All articles submitted should be approximately 5000 words in length and prefaced, on a separate page by an abstract of no more than 150 words. Please use Calibri 11 font.
- Any tables should be attached separately but there should be a clear indication in the manuscript as to their placement within the article.
- A COVER sheet should contain the title of the paper, author’s name, brief biographical details, institutional affiliation, postal address, phone, fax, email address, where available.
- Please submit your article electronically as a Word attachment to EditorJRE@acu.edu.au
- Authors will receive a copy of the issue of the journal in which their contribution appears.

Contributions on the following are welcomed:
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- Internet Resources
- Research
- Conferences
- Notes on Resources
- Correspondence – relevant to topics discussed in the journal
- Current Issues

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The views of the contributors are not necessarily those of the editorial advisory committee of Journal of Religious Education.

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