

# Catholic school Religious Education in a secular, de-traditionalised culture: The formula that is best for both the religious and non-religious students

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**Abstract:** Philip Phenix's (1964) book *Realms of meaning* started the ever growing movement concerned with how school education might help young people in their search for meaning in times of rapid social change. Today, in globalised, digital, secularised, de-traditionalised culture, the importance and urgency of this role have never been greater. Cultural change has accelerated exponentially, and for many – including students in Catholic schools – traditional religious sources of meaning are no longer prominent or plausible reference points. Catholic schools, whether independent or semi-state institutions because of government funding, can make a valuable contribution young people's spiritual/moral education, no matter what their level of religious affiliation or practice. This article, prepared for the research symposium on *Catholic education in a de-traditionalised secular culture* draws on previously published works over the last decade, because all of these have revolved around the central issue articulated in the title of this article – an issue that I consider to be of fundamental importance for the ongoing meaningfulness and relevance of Catholic school Religious Education. The article argues that such a contribution requires change to the discourse or narrative of Catholic school Religious Education (in Australia), with corresponding adjustments to content and pedagogy. Its present trajectory, which is excessively concerned with promoting a Catholic identity in students, needs to be modified. Both the religious and non-religious students, especially in the senior classes, would derive greater spiritual and religious benefit from the inclusion of more life-relevant and issue-related content, together with a critical, research-oriented pedagogy. While focused specifically on the Australian context, the issues are still likely to be pertinent to Catholic education in other countries, while taking into account significant contextual differences.

**Keywords:** Catholic education, Catholic schools, Religious Education, secularisation, de-traditionalised culture

## 1. Introduction: Education and the search for meaning in contemporary, secularised, relatively de-traditionalised culture

It has almost become something of a cliché to say that we live in times of unprecedented change that make it difficult for young people to find meaning and purpose in life; and to propose that school education might be able to make some contribution to help them in this quest. Scholars, psychologists and educators have been saying this for the past 60 years (Postman and Weingartner, 1969; Birch 1975); and during this whole period, what they said was always true. Part of the problem today is that new, challenging issues are continually emerging at a faster rate than ever. From climate change to terrorism, globalisation to the coronavirus pandemic, trade wars to mistrust of politicians, refugee migration to new levels of populist nationalism (Zakaria, 2019), trending memes to online trolls (Gorman, 2019) and AI generated deepfake videos (Lyu, 2020), the list goes on, perhaps often overridden by individuals' anxiety about the performance of their precarious, projected identity on social media. Many secularised, individualistic, young people in Westernised countries appear preoccupied with a consumerist lifestyle, orchestrated by the potent imagery and iconography of media advertising and marketing – while at the same time there are exceptionally high levels of anxiety, depression and mental health issues.

At the end of 2019, few could have imagined the changes to everyday life for people all round the globe that would eventuate over the next two years. The profound effects of the Covid 19 pandemic have meant that widely held assumptions about lifestyle, social interaction, employment, careers, freedoms, economic growth, travel, recreation, sports etc. have been shaken and shown to be contingent. Since 2022, the Russian war on Ukraine, as well as ongoing persecution of minority ethnic groups, megalomaniac national leaders and the propensity for armed conflict and the violent silencing of protesters have generated a world socio-political environment that is precarious, fragile and threatening. In this context, young people (and people generally) can no longer take for granted what they felt were 'immutable principles' for the 'good life' that everyone could depend on. This disruption to what had functioned as people's unquestioned 'pillars' of meaning has exacerbated and accentuated the anxiety, uncertainty and fears alluded to in the first paragraph.

All of this adds another new layer of complexity to the context of de-traditionalised culture. And so the question about how school education might help in some way with young people's construction of meaning has become much more urgent. Educational scrutiny of people's assumptions about life and how these are generated and sustained would be fruitful.

In 1967, this is what prominent Australian biologist and author Charles Birch thought about the question: "The problems in life are not out there for us to *solve*. But to solve *us*." In his view, the most realistic and helpful human response is in the activity of *trying* to comprehend problems and in *trying* to find solutions – even if apparent success and progress always remain elusive. This approach was also evident in Philip Phenix's (1964) book *Realms of meaning: A philosophy of the curriculum for general education*. It became a significant educational milestone, precipitating interest in the ways that school education might help young people in their search for meaning, purpose and values. In the same vein, US educators/authors Postman and Weingartner (1969) considered that there were no institutions or processes – including education and schooling – that could reliably solve the problems; but education was at least a good *starting point* because it could skill young people in critical thinking and research, resourcing their capacity to think about the issues and to make better informed decisions.

Australian philosopher of education Brian Hill (2006, p. 55) summed up the potential contribution of education this way.

*Regarding the school:*

"the mission of education is to resource the choosing self"

*Regarding religious education in any school type:*

"The teaching of religion in school has certain *limited* but crucial educational purposes:

- To help students appreciate the importance of the spiritual quest; of working out where they

are going as human beings.

- To help them to *interrogate their own cultural conditioning* and reach a position of being able to develop an adequate personal framework of meaning and value.”

(along with other purposes)

Hill took for granted that the sense of freedom and individuality permeating Westernised cultures would ensure that young people will eventually construct their own meaning, values and beliefs – even if for some (or perhaps many?) this will not be a conscious, reflective process but more a popular, cultural socialisation. Nothing could stop the ‘choosing’; but their choosing could be better *educated*. Hence, knowledge of contemporary issues and critical thinking would be important for informing life decisions, as well as knowledge of what one’s own and other religious traditions were saying about meaning in life. The religion classroom should be the very place where one might expect that students could learn how to appraise the shaping influence of culture.

## **2. The distinctive contribution that Catholic Religious Education might make to educating young people spiritually, morally and religiously in a de-traditionalised culture**

In contemporary teaching in a number of curriculum areas, it is evident that this critical interpretation and evaluation of culture is occurring to some extent – for example in English, Science, History, Geography and Social Studies, to name some subjects. It would be incongruous and disappointing if this strategy was not a prominent part of Religious Education – the one subject you might expect to be especially interested in the spiritual/moral dimension to life.

Religious Education, with core curriculum status in Catholic schools, has both the credentials and precedents for studying directly the contemporary human quest for meaning to help resource the spirituality of young people, whether they are religious or not. This means broadening the scope of its content beyond Catholicism to include study of other religions and of the ways in which culture influences spirituality.

In Australia in the 1970s, some Catholic schools set out to do this in their senior school religion programs. At that time, in an era when School Based Curriculum Development (SBCD) was at its zenith, they were free to implement their own courses without ecclesiastical oversight – a situation which changed when Catholic diocesan authorities and bishops took more control with centralised religion curricula made up mainly of Catholic content. But with the widespread acceptance of Australian, state-based religion studies programs in senior classes (Years 11-12), there is current acceptance that the content for Religious Education at this level does not have to be exclusively Catholic.

My conclusion: In relatively de-traditionalised cultures, Catholic Religious Education in schools can make a distinctive contribution to young peoples’ developing spirituality. To do this, more attention needs to be given to a critical pedagogy with contemporary issue-related content that investigates the influence of culture on people’s beliefs, values and lifestyle. This is pertinent mainly to senior classes while it should not be absent elsewhere in the religion curriculum, but appropriate to the age and intellectual maturity of the pupils.

This can be done without compromising the traditionally important role of providing students with a comprehensive study of their own religious tradition. Religious Education can also help them become knowledgeable of the ways in which other religious traditions are influential in pluralistic society – how they propose to their followers what it means to be human (Grimmitt, 1987; Jackson, 2004, 2018).

If Catholic Religious Education is to give more direct attention to the contemporary search for meaning in a de-traditionalised culture in ways that will enhance young people’s spirituality, it is essential that *religious educators themselves understand something of the complexity of what this search entails*. And this includes an explanation of how and why this is different from the usual meaning-giving function of religion in a traditional culture. In turn, these proposed ‘prerequisite’ understandings will have an

influential bearing on the questions and content that students will be invited to study, as well as on pedagogy. These essential prerequisites will be considered in the next section of the article before discussion of implications for content, pedagogy and implementation.

### 3. Essential, prerequisite questions for religious educators: How do the different contexts in traditional and de-traditionalised/secularised cultures affect people's construction of meaning and spirituality

Religious Education in a de-traditionalised culture needs to be able to take into account how cultural change has affected the way people construct meaning and values. This perspective is crucial for working out what is the most relevant and meaningful approach in this context.

While the term spirituality has a considerable range of connotation, here it refers to the way people construct meaning, beliefs and values – which in turn affects their life expectations and lifestyle (Rossiter, 2018). A proposed approach for Religious Education in a de-traditionalised culture needs to take into account the following:-

1. How and why has *de-traditionalised* culture emerged from the *traditional*.
2. How does the personal construction of meaning, beliefs and values work differently in each.
3. How is religion related to spirituality in each.
4. How the study of these questions needs to be a prominent part of Religious Education.
5. Why the study of tradition needs to retain an important place in Religious Education in a de-traditionalised culture.

Table 1 below summarises contrasts between the characteristics of a traditional Christian religious spirituality and those that are common in a de-traditionalised, secularised culture. This topic is discussed in detail in Rossiter (2018), revolving around the five questions noted above.

In Westernised societies, the dominant cultural theme is an individualist/consumerist/capitalist mixture. It shapes many people's thinking about life and inclines them to construct their spirituality as described in the right column. But there are also people who still retain what can be regarded as a traditional spirituality (left hand column), but they are becoming an ever diminishing minority.

The table shows how religion relates to spirituality in different ways – from being the traditional, authoritative source of meaning to one of a number of possible resources that one can draw from as 'advisory' rather than normative. All summaries like that in Table 1 need to simplify and generalise, and for this reason they do not cover all of the complexity; also, not all individuals will fit comfortably within these descriptions; but nevertheless, the contrasting indicators provide a useful picture of the polarities that emerged in the cultural change process. This summary has been drawn principally and directly from the work of the Australian social researcher Eckersley (2005, pp. 2-15), and to a lesser extent from Crawford and Rossiter (2006) and Schweitzer (2004, 2007).

Table 1 Traditional and de-traditionalised spiritualities

Characteristics of a traditional religious spirituality	Characteristics of a secular, de-traditionalised spirituality
<p><u>Personal meaning</u> was usually a <u>social given</u>. A religious meaning system was received like a set package; it was 'taken-for granted' and internalised.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was security in having a relatively 'black and white' meaning system and moral code.</li> <li>• Individuals did not have to 'search' for meaning; they had a ready-made package.</li> </ul>	<p><u>Meaning in life</u> was now less a social given and more a <u>matter of personal choice</u>; personal meaning was 'constructed' by individuals for themselves, or chosen from a proliferation of options.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was a challenge to individuals in constructing their own DIY (Do It Yourself) spirituality.</li> <li>• 'Searching' for meaning and taking responsibility for developing one's own personal meaning system could be stressful.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The religious meaning system may have been experienced as somewhat harsh and oppressive, but it helped people make sense of their lives at several levels, answering the fundamental questions: Who am I? Where have I come from? Why am I here?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The speed, scope and scale of economic, social and cultural change have made the past seemingly irrelevant and the future uncertain for many. This seems to have created more ‘cultural agnosticism’ about meaning, purpose and certainty in life.</li> <li>Even if life’s meaning was less clear, life itself became more comfortable, more varied, safer, healthier and longer.</li> </ul>
<p><u>Religious belief:</u> Beyond the mortal realm, people had a religious faith that not only provided them with a road map and moral compass for life, but it also gave them a sense of place in the cosmic scheme of things.</p>	<p>While many retained some form of religious belief, this was not nearly as absolute and binding as it once was. The individual’s own experience tended to become the touchstone for authenticity, and even for what was regarded as the ‘truth’. While nominally linked with religion, some see a clear distinction between their own personal faith and the faith taught by traditional religious institutions.</p>
<p><u>Religious authority:</u> Religious spirituality (in the West) was sustained and validated by church authority.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Its plausibility depended on high regard for the church; the notion of the authority of god underpinned church authority.</li> <li>An emphasis on obedience to religious authorities and to god.</li> </ul>	<p><u>Authority of the individual:</u> The plausibility of religious authorities tended to be low. Increasingly, individuals became their own spiritual authority, deciding for themselves on the basis of their own judgment about particular aspects of spirituality. “People assumed that their lives are not predetermined by birth and social origin, and that everyone has the right and also the responsibility to shape his or her life according to their own wishes and life plans.”(Schweitzer, 2007, p.90). It is taken for granted that everyone has the right to choose their own faith and that no-one should interfere with their choices.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Little if any regard for religious authorities.</li> <li>What suited the individual became the ultimate criteria for the utility of spirituality.</li> </ul>
<p><u>The existence and image of God:</u> There was a strong belief in the existence of god. The image of god included the notions of:- creator, all-powerful, benevolent, loving and caring for each individual, judge of good and bad, rewarder of the good and punisher of the evil, listens to people’s prayers and requests for help.</p>	<p>A <u>natural uncertainty about the existence of god</u> became more prevalent. Belief in a benevolent god was attractive and comforting, but not something that many individuals counted on or thought much about. If there was a god and life after death, then this would be a pleasant ‘bonus’.</p>
<p><u>Family and community ties:</u> Children usually grew up in a close network of family and community relationships that largely defined their world – their values, beliefs, identity and station in life.</p>	<p><u>Family and community ties were loosened.</u> Consequently individuals appeared more open to various life options available in the wider culture, together with more individualism in their choices.</p>
<p><u>The world outside:</u> Most people knew relatively little of what lay outside their world, and of other ways of living (in pre-television times).</p>	<p>People know much more of the rest of the world and how differently others lived and thought. Information about what was happening around the world was available instantaneously.</p>

<p><u>Social change and the predictability of life:</u>  Much of life was predictable and what was not was explained in terms of the supernatural and religious belief.</p>	Rapid social change resulted in much more uncertainty about life and the future. Many accommodated to the uncertainty as ‘natural’. (Others could not cope with the uncertainty so well, and identified with communities where meanings were more definite and authoritarian – a move back towards a more traditional approach).
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As a secularised view of life became established more as the norm for most people in Westernised societies, they tended to see the developments as ‘progress’; old certainties gave way to exciting possibilities through economic growth, social reform, science and technology (Eckersley, 2005).

While acknowledging the progress, Eckersley went on to draw attention to the following challenges that accompanied it.

*Cautions: Eckersley’s reflections on cultural ‘progress’*

- Over the past few decades this faith in material progress has given way to growing doubt. We now live in ‘postmodern’ times, marked by the end of the dream of creating a perfect social order and the realisation that some of our problems may be unsolvable.
- The result is a world characterised by ambivalence, ambiguity, relativism, pluralism, fragmentation and contingency.
- The openness and complexity of life today can make finding meaning and the qualities that contribute to it – autonomy, competence, purpose, direction, balance, identity and belonging – extremely hard, especially for young people, for whom these are the destinations of the developmental journeys they are undertaking. Another vital quality, hope, is also easily lost if life is episodic, and lacks coherence and predictability. Faced with a bewildering array of options and opportunities, we can become immobilised – or propelled into trying to have them all. Pulling together the threads of our postmodern lives is not easy.
- While loosening social ties can be liberating for individuals, and create more dynamic, diverse and tolerant societies, too much cultural flexibility can have the effect of trivialising the convictions and commitments that we need to find meaning and to control our own lives.
- Beyond the risks of excessive choice and freedom is the evidence that these can be, in any case, illusory. Social constraints remain, and in some cases are increasing.
- Western societies present a façade of virtually unlimited autonomy that disguises a powerful preference. We may have abundant choices as consumers, but to choose not to consume requires real will power. We are told, as part of the new pluralism, that traditional values have passed their use-by date.
- We have altered profoundly our notions of the ‘self’, of what it is to be human. We have created ‘the empty self’, stripped of community, tradition and shared meaning. Our era has constructed a self that is, fundamentally, a disappointment to itself, and must be soothed and made cohesive by being constantly ‘filled up’ with consumer products, celebrity news, and the quest for self-improvement and personal growth.
- Lacking quality we seek quantity; in the absence of commitment and certainty we pursue diversity and variety. We see growth at the extremes of self and meaning, a loss of balance: pathological self-preoccupation at one end, the total subjugation or surrender of the individual self at the other. A vast consumer economy has grown to minister to the needs of ‘the empty self’; and religious cults and fundamentalist movements flourish as people struggle to find what society no longer offers.  
(Summary drawn directly from Eckersley, 2005, Ch.1)

Another Australian scholar Philip Hughes’ take on the changed landscape of spirituality is congruent with Eckersley’s interpretation.

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

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

The whole trajectory of the argument being proposed across this article can be summarised as follows. *Catholic Religious Education in a de-traditionalised culture needs to **educate** young people in thinking about the issues raised in the above analysis in Table 1 and in Eckersley's cautions about finding a meaningful life in contemporary secular culture.*

This analysis is fundamentally important for Religious Education which tries to *maintain a creative tension between handing on the religious tradition and **resourcing the spirituality** of students* – especially because the majority of them would sit within the right column description.

Rather than fit neatly into the picture in either of the two cultural patterns, individuals may find themselves spread across the two in a complex idiosyncratic way. And the pattern in their own personal spirituality may change with age and life experience.

People can readily see that there are problems with both spiritualities. Many would not feel comfortable being exclusively within either as they are described here. So there is an evident need for scrutinising one's spirituality, whether it is traditional or not, and whether it is religious or secular. Any healthy spirituality needs critical evaluation – and this is where a relevant and meaningful Religious Education becomes so important in young people's (and adults') overall education.

#### 4. What is entailed in a critical study of contemporary issue-related content

To this point, the article has argued that in addition to the study of Catholicism and some other religious traditions, Religious Education needs to give more attention to a direct investigation of the contemporary search for meaning in a largely secularised, de-traditionalised, consumer-oriented culture. While the implications for content and pedagogy are explained in detail in Rossiter (2018), the following summarises the key points.

- More *contemporary, issue-related content* needs to be introduced. For example, the prerequisite questions considered above about secularisation and what constitutes human progress provide many important avenues for study.
- The *approach needs to be critical* – that is an open, inquiring, *information rich* study with an emphasis on *interpretation* and *evaluation* of issues.
- The pedagogy should be *student centred* with a strong component of *student research* with feedback on findings shared with the class.
- It is essential not to downplay the *important role for study of religious tradition* within a Religious Education that is considered to be meaningful in a de-traditionalised culture (Finlay, 1987, 2005).
- *Informed student debate* about issues is an important element in student learning, while there should be caution about the potential problems in thinking of productive student dialogue in terms of 'personal faith sharing' or 'witnessing to one's personal faith journey'. (Rossiter, 2021B)

A crucial question underpinning the relevance of studying contemporary issues in senior school Religious Education is that such issues are fundamentally important for today's young people – whether or not they are religious. At first sight such issues may not appear formally religious – as in theology

and scripture. But they are particularly relevant to the contemporary search for meaning and values, as explained earlier.

To illustrate this point, an example fully online student study of one such topic can be examined on this site. <https://asmre.org/BCERML.html> It was prepared for the new Brisbane Catholic Education senior school program *Religion, Meaning and Life* (BCE, 2019). The very name of this program is based on the presumption that these aspects are inextricably linked. The first paragraph of the course rationale reads:

Young people are confronted by the complexities, dilemmas and conflicting interpretations of life's meaning and purpose. They require, more than ever, the skill of critical thinking in order to navigate an uncertain and pluralistic world. As there is no final answer to life's ultimate meaning and purpose in which intellectual certainty is possible, human knowledge is always partial and limited. Consequently, students are invited to explore within *Religion, Meaning and Life* (RML) the inexhaustible mystery of human existence, as glimpsed primarily through the lens of the Catholic Christian Tradition, as well as other religious traditions and help render this mystery meaningful in their lives. (BCE, 2019, p. 1)

The proposed issue-related content is just as important and relevant for religious students as it is for the non-religious.

The large majority of students in Australian Catholic schools have what has been described by researchers as an individualistic, DIY (Do-It-Yourself), secular spirituality (Schweitzer, 2007; Crawford and Rossiter, 2006; Hughes 2007, 2017; Mason *et al.*, 2007; Smith and Denton, 2005; Smith *et al.*, 2014). Some generations back, most people were socialised into the religious spirituality of their family. And this was the taken-for-granted and relatively unquestioned system for referencing their meaning, purpose and values. These days, many, including those who identify as being religious, have a functioning spirituality (and 'religion') that is constructed in a DIY fashion in an eclectic way. They are more focused on *lifestyle* than on spirituality itself. Their spirituality may not be developed consciously. Rather, it is evident in the values they adopt, their commitments, lifestyle and motivations. In this sense it is an *implied* spirituality, and it may draw little from their religious tradition. It is often a spirituality that has absorbed uncritically the compelling world view that underpins contemporary consumerist lifestyle, which is orchestrated by the potent imagery and iconography of media advertising and marketing.

Statistically, 30% of the Australian Catholic school students are not Catholic (NCEC, 2012); and about 5% of the Catholic students (less than 4% of total students) are, or will be, regular participants at Sunday Mass.

Two conclusions:

- A religious education that concentrates almost exclusively on Catholicism will be perceived as largely irrelevant by the students.
- Contemporary secular spirituality – especially its consumerist dimension – needs to be evaluated in terms of its cultural origins, psychological influence and principal values; it is like the new global 'religion'. Such evaluation ought to be an important task for Religious Education.

Undertaking such an investigation of spirituality can make Religious Education more meaningful for young people, whether they are formally religious or not – precisely because it taps into the areas of their lives where spiritual and moral issues/values come into play. Religious Education can *resource* their capacity to look critically at the ways that culture can have a shaping influence on people's imaginations of life, values and lifestyle. This approach tries to engage at the psychological points where young people's hopes and life expectations are generated – the same points that are the principal targets for commercial exploitation by the consumerist complex.



This might at first sight be regarded as just a psychological study and not ‘proper’ religious education because it seems to have little to do with Catholic theology. But one can argue that this is being true to the core purposes of Religious Education which tries to educate and thus enhance the basic human spirituality of young people no matter what their religious disposition. If the de-traditionalised character of today’s culture is taken into account, this reinforces the meaningfulness and relevance of the proposed approach.

I consider that this evaluative approach and its justifying argument are not just pertinent to Catholic Religious Education. They are just as applicable to state-developed Religion Studies courses. Elsewhere, it was argued that these courses in Australia are still mainly replicas of the descriptive world religions courses in the United Kingdom in the early 1970s. In brief, their content is ‘too tame’ for contemporary relevance (Crawford and Rossiter, 2006).

### **5. Headwinds that inhibit the implementation of a more relevant Catholic Religious Education in de-traditionalised culture**

I consider that the principal problem inhibiting the development proposed here is the current trajectory of the discourse (or narrative) of Catholic Religious Education.

The *discourse* of Religious Education consists of the words and ideas used by educators to articulate underlying assumptions, purposes and practices, and for the evaluation and development of the discipline. A synonym for the discourse is the *narrative* for Religious Education where connotation refers to the ‘story line’ that is used to give an account of Religious Education, its history and progress, how it is understood today and how it might change and develop in the future.

The words used by educators when talking about Religious Education are important because they frame the aims, content and pedagogy. In 1985, Crawford and Rossiter argued that there was a need to evaluate the language of Catholic Religious Education because the multiplicity of ecclesiastical terms being used was confusing for teachers, students and parents; it tended to create ambiguity and distract from the task of articulating a meaningful and relevant Religious Education for contemporary youth.

This task is even more critical now than it was then.

The language of Religious Education structures the discussion of the subject. In effect, it determines many of the possibilities that will emerge; it has a formative influence on teachers’ expectations and on what and how they teach; it influences presumptions about the types of responses they will seek from students; it provides criteria for judging what has been achieved; it influences teachers’ perception and interpretation of problems in religious education; it even influences the way teachers feel about their work – “Am I a success or a failure?” This language can be oppressive if it restricts religion teachers to limited or unrealistic ways of thinking and talking about their work (Crawford and Rossiter, 1985 p. 33).

In 1970, in the article *Catechetics RIP*, US scholar Gabriel Moran was one of the first to comment on an emerging problem within the language of Catholic Religious Education. Where idiosyncratic, ecclesiastical terms were used exclusively, the discourse became ‘in house’ and relatively closed to outside ideas and debate. Ever since then, Moran in particular, and other scholars have persistently sought to clarify the language of Religious Education (Moran, 1980, 1998; DiGiacomo, 1984). Publications by Rossiter collectively (1981, 1985, 2006, 2018) have drawn attention to various aspects of this problem, as well as to the way that devotional and emotional titles, and presumptive language had negative effects on religion curricula and teaching.

More recently, Rossiter (2020) explained the problem labelled as ‘ecclesiastical drift’. It is said to occur where the discourse about the purposes and practices of Religious Education has gradually and incrementally come to be dominated almost exclusively by ecclesiastical constructs like faith development, faith formation, Catholic identity, new evangelisation and Catholic mission. There is

evidence (in diocesan and school documents/websites and in the re-naming of former diocesan Religious Education departments, as well as in new religious leadership roles in Catholic schools) that these ecclesiastical words have been replacing the term Religious Education. I consider that ecclesiastical drift is *the* major ongoing problem for the future of Australian Catholic Religious Education. Only some conclusions from that study are noted here.

Excessive ecclesiastical language, at the expense of the word education, makes Religious Education *too Catholic centric* and *inward looking*, at the very time when it should be looking *outwards* on the shaping influence of culture. Consequently, what suffers is thinking about what it means to *educate* young people spiritually and religiously in today's de-traditionalised culture.

If students, teachers and parents are inclined to see Religious Education as an *ecclesiastical* rather than as an *educational* activity, then increasingly they are less likely to see it as it is a meaningful part of school education. Its educational credibility as a valuable spiritual/moral school subject has been eroded, creating an ever widening discontinuity with the realities of the classroom and young people's spirituality.

Preliminary empirical evidence that Catholic religious educators see ecclesiastical drift as a major problem is noted in Rossiter (2021A). Addressing this problem is not only important for the ongoing health of Catholic Religious Education (Rossiter, 2021B), it is essential for a 'course correction' in its professional discourse if it is to be relevant for young people living in a de-traditionalised, secular culture.

## **6. Conclusions: Leadership in making the trajectory of Catholic Religious Education more meaningful and relevant for students in a de-traditionalised culture**

My academic experience in postgraduate programs for religion teachers (especially those who teach at secondary school level) suggests that many of them would welcome a change in the discourse of Religious Education which avoided the problem of ecclesiastical drift and proposed greater attention to a critical study of issue-related content. This was confirmed in an empirical study of this question, where a significant minority of religious educators acknowledged the effects of ecclesiastical drift. But there was very strong support for a narrative of Religious Education which emphasised its critical educative dimension, and there was similar support for increased study of contemporary issues (Rossiter 2021A). At present, the main difficulty inhibiting implementation of the changes proposed here lies not with the religion teachers, but in getting the Australian Catholic bishops and diocesan Catholic school authorities to consider favourably the arguments put forward in this article. Hopefully, this material may help in furthering discussion about the best trajectory for Catholic Religious Education in this country.

The leadership exercised by the German Catholic bishops on this matter is worthy of emulation. As far back as the 1974 Synod of Wurzburg, the German bishops put in place a 'convergence' argument that Religious Education needed a balanced rationale that included both educational and theological/ecclesiastical justifications – a view that still remains in force (Altmeyer, 2020). One consequence was the inclusion of content about world religions as a standard part of the German Catholic Religious Education curriculum in state schools.

A German academic colleague (Kropac, 2021) considered that Catholic Religious Education in that country had begun adapting its narrative and practice to take into account pluralisation, de-traditionalisation and secularisation as far back as the 1960s and 1970s. It moved away from the excessive Catholic-centric emphasis that still dominates Catholic Religious Education in Australia, with the new German focus being “[not on communicating Catholicism] but educational *diaconia*: selfless service of the Church to the general education of young people. Of course, there were and there are bishops for whom this is not enough. They want [the communication of] Christian faith. However, the vast majority of [German Catholic] bishops have realised that this is an illusion.”

Another example of German Catholic leadership pertinent to this discussion was demonstrated by

bishop Kohlgraf of Mainz (2019). He identified the problematic way the ecclesiastical term evangelisation had become a “battle cry” or slogan when used ubiquitously without relevance to the wider world. He felt that such usage tended to cripple the discourse about a contemporary, meaningful faith because it created a gulf between the Church’s narrative and the reality of people’s daily lives. His use of the term battle cry is significant and pertinent to the ecclesiastical drift problem in Religious Education – as one Australian teacher said recently “the Catholic Church’s language for Religious Education has now become *weaponised*”. The bishop was also concerned that when ecclesiastical terms became clichés, the real issues to be faced tended to be ‘trivialised’ – and this is exactly what has happened in the wake of ecclesiastical drift in Religious Education.

By contrast, the Australian Catholic Bishops continue to project a Catholic church-centred view, as if the primary goal of Religious Education is to increase young people’s engagement with the church.

Progress toward significantly increased attendance at Sunday Mass, and deeper involvement in the life of the local Church by students and ex-students.

*Key performance indicator for the success of Catholic schools* (Bishops of NSW and the ACT 2007, p. 20).

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

*In a 2016 letter from the chair of the Australian Bishops Commission on Catholic Education.*

The only purpose of Catholic schools is to fulfil the Catholic Church’s mission. They should increase young people’s engagement with the church to become regular attenders at Sunday mass. 2008, *Key ideas from the homily of an Australian Catholic archbishop.*

Archbishop Fisher said he was concerned about the erosion of Catholic DNA within Catholic schools. . . “An increasing proportion of those enrolled in our schools are not even nominally Catholic or Christian . . . the disconnection from church is glaringly obvious when children or families find themselves in unfamiliar territory at mass, unsure of how to comport themselves, respond, even recite the most treasured Catholic prayers,” he said.

Schools should respond by more deliberately teaching the Catholic faith, to counteract outside forces.

*From an article on Catholic schools in the Sydney Morning Herald, (J Baker, May 2021) quoting the current chair of the Australian Bishops Commission on Catholic Education.*

A final word:

Young people today are generally not much interested in formal religion. But they are interested in learning about life. If their Religious Education has something to say about life, in the way of engaging them in an informative study, they will be more inclined to value its purposes and practice. If not, then the low status of Religious Education and student disinterest will be likely to persist and even increase. This article is not a naïve apologia for what might be called ‘progressive’ Religious Education, brushing the study of traditions aside. Rather, to be meaningful to young people in a de-traditionalised culture, study of one’s own religious tradition is essential for Religious Education. But if there is nothing more than this, then it becomes counterproductive. If Religious Education does not include a strong component in the critical study of contemporary life, then it will appear to most young people as having nothing worthwhile to say to them.

It is understandable that religious educators have high hopes that what young people learn through the school religion curriculum will be important for whole lives. Nevertheless, it is likely that many will not remember much of the content details they have studied. However, if they have learned ‘how to learn about life’ and if they remember the orientation of their school religious education – that the impact of culture needs to be scrutinised and evaluated – then this may well make a valuable contribution to their wisdom and personal decision-making in a de-traditionalised culture. And also, in the long run, such a *realistic* Religious Education is likely to be the best that can be offered to keep them open to the option of engaging with the Catholic Church.

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