

The worlds of the text: a contextual approach to scripture for religious educators

Sandra Carroll · Antoinette Collins

Published online: 19 December 2014
© Australian Catholic University 2014

This paper outlines the importance of a critical perspective on the Bible for beginning religious education teachers. The use of the word ‘critical’ here simply means discussing and interpreting a text, in this case the biblical text, as a significant work of literature and thus utilising a critical literary method of interpretation to better understand the meaning of the text. The first section draws on Schneiders’ (1999) seminal work *The Revelatory Text* to provide a conceptual framework to facilitate beginning religious educators’ engagement with the biblical text. The second part of the paper has a focus on the text of Genesis 22, the sacrifice of Isaac, as an example pertinent to religious educators.

1 Religious educators’ knowledge of the Bible

The need for religious educators to be informed about the Bible is a prominent concern in the apostolic exhortation on *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church* by Benedict XVI (*Verbum Domini*). It presents a positive tone relevant to the work of religious educators in Catholic schools, stating that “we need to help young people to gain confidence and familiarity with sacred scripture so it can be a compass pointing out the path to follow” (Benedict XVI 2010, p. 104). Note the use of words like ‘compass’ and ‘path’, which evoke an open, dynamic image linked to an invitation to journey with a sense of direction. This is in opposition to an approach which can be viewed as closed and limited, defined or constrained.

Under the heading ‘Knowledge of the Bible in schools and universities’ in *Verbum Domini*, specific reference is made to the link between religious education and scripture:

Nor must religious education be neglected, and religion teachers should be given careful training. Religious education is often the sole opportunity available for

S. Carroll (✉) · A. Collins
Sydney, Australia
e-mail: sandra.carroll@acu.edu.au

students to encounter the message of faith. In the teaching of religion, emphasis should be laid on knowledge of sacred Scripture, as a means of overcoming prejudices old and new, and enabling its truth to be better known. (2010, #111)

The task of educating educators is not the same as training the trainer. It is not simply a matter of providing a step by step ‘colour by numbers’ method. As Groome (2011) says “education, at its best informs, forms and transforms” (p. 94). It impacts the mind and heart of people in ways that are powerful and life-giving for the individual, their communities and society more broadly. Engaging beginning religious educators with the Bible as a sacred text and facilitating a critical consciousness of what they are doing is a pivotal issue. Aware of the importance of this task Ryan (2014) writes:

With regard to biblical education: a religious educator has two responsibilities: to help students understand the meaning of individual texts and passages in the Bible, and to help students to understand the nature of the bible as a sacred text, as a significant aspect of the religious life of two religions, Judaism and Christianity. While the school teacher is not required to become a scripture scholar, still, some acquaintance with the products and methodologies of contemporary scripture scholarship is necessary. (p. 190)

The approach to this issue described in the first half of this paper is consistent with the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2013). It aligns with Professional Knowledge, Standard 1, with an emphasis on knowing students, their development and characteristics, and how these affect learning. It also contributes to Standard 2, which addresses knowing content and how to teach it, with a focus on graduate level ability to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of concepts, substance and structure of the content as features that underpin teaching strategies.

Schneiders (1999) identifies a key question about sacred texts as: “What is involved in an integral, that is a transformative interpretation of the biblical text. My answer, in a nutshell, is that integral transformative interpretation is an interaction between a self-aware reader open to the truth claims of the text and the text in its integrity” (p. 3). This interaction needs to acknowledge the multiple dimensions of both the text and the reader. Schneiders proposes that traditional historical-critical exegesis is necessary but not sufficient for integral interpretation because it deals with the text primarily as an historical document. Schneiders elaborates a theory of biblical interpretation that enables a reading of the text that is critical yet “interacts meaningfully with the personal and communal spiritual life of the believing reader” (p. 13). Before providing an examples of how this is fostered in the teacher education classroom, some basic principles of interpretation are provided.

2 Diverse approaches to reading scripture

One of the first tasks for beginning religious educators is to understand the need for a critical engagement with the Bible for both themselves and the students they will teach. In research related to student attitudes to Religious Education curriculum, Buchanan (2009) identified that senior students:

...desire to want to learn about topics such as how to read the Bible and to understand it by taking into account the literary forms and socio-cultural and historical background pertaining to the books in the Bible. They were concerned that they had arrived at senior school without such skills and abilities. (p. 99)

Schneiders (1999) discusses the diversity of approaches the readers of scripture bring. There are a variety of differing perspectives, including those who approach scripture for spiritual sustenance or those who are open in their search for wisdom and truth. There may also be some who are antagonistic to the claims of the Bible. Boys (1999), writing about engaged pedagogy at tertiary level that is primarily academic, cautions that:

Students may carry with them significant religious ‘baggage’ that complicates their unfettered participation. For example, a student of obvious intellectual acuity may submit a paper that is fuelled by such anger at his or her religious tradition or at God that polemic displaces logic. Learning is an emotionally charged experience, and the encounters our students have with religious tradition may therefore affect their classroom performance. (p. 131)

As Carmody (2004) points out, “how a person understands the nature of the Bible determines how that person will read it” (p. 2). All those who engage the Biblical text, both beginning religious educators and the students they themselves will teach, may be located on a spectrum in their conceptions of the text itself. Experienced religious educators can identify one extreme, they know that some classes they will teach may contain those who are ‘time servers’ in an RE class, those who are convinced that the Bible is a dated and useless guide for contemporary life. At the other end, there are those who hold that because the Bible is inspired, therefore, the text is literally the Word of God. All positions may be challenging for the religious educator.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993) in the document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* writes of fundamentalist interpretation as excluding an understanding of the Bible that acknowledges and interrogates its historical origins and development. Circumventing scientific methods used for the interpretation of scripture, fundamentalist positions support a reading of the Bible which resists questioning and critical research. Thus they also resist:

...any dialogue with a broader way of seeing the relationship between culture and faith. Its relying upon a non-critical reading of certain texts of the Bible serves to reinforce political ideas and social attitudes that are marked by prejudices—racism, for example—quite contrary to the Christian gospel. (1993, p. 74)

Schneiders (1999) identifies the position of those believers who know that, although this text is related to God, it is also a human document that must be approached with all the appropriate critical methods available. At the same time, there is an acknowledgement that a sacred text such as the Bible “is different from other texts because of its role of mediation between God and the believing community” (Schneiders 1999, p. 12). In the teaching–learning process the teacher aims to create structures that facilitate student learning. For educators of teachers the task is to create a learning environment in which student teachers experience the possibilities of encountering the Bible, as the sacred text of the Christian tradition which can function to inform, form and transform them, not as ancient historical data.

3 The nature of interpretation

Second, it is important for beginning teachers of religious education to understand how interpretation brings a focus to the meaning of a text. After the initial resistance to critical methods of biblical interpretation, the Catholic Church enthusiastically embraced the new

critical approaches. *The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum 1965)* from Vatican II supported Pius XII's 1943 encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* recommending an awareness of literary forms in the Bible and knowledge of the cultural/historical situations behind the text. Interpretation allows the reader to enter into the world of meaning that the text presents and as a consequence the reader is changed. Interpretation is both process and product. With a focus on interpretation as process, Schneiders (1999) refers to Ricoeur's description of interpretation as a dialectic between explanation and understanding. Yet understanding is not automatic; it is a fruit of explanation. Explanation involves an unpacking of the text, for scripture this means an investigation using historical and literary criticism to scrutinize the "world behind the text" and "the world of the text". Finally, the subject matter, the concern of the text, can be interrogated in order to focus on the "world before the text".

3.1 World behind the text

Dizdar (2003) writes that readers of the biblical text need a constant awareness that they do not share much of the worldview of the Bible's original audience: "The extent of our shared context is much reduced by the passage of time and the cultural, social, political, religious and linguistic differences (and others), that separate us from them" (p. 252). Many of the basic assumptions of the Bible's first audience, for example an ancient anachronistic cosmology, are not held now. Our post-Enlightenment, post-modern worldview is radically different to the shared assumptions of past millennia.

There is a need for inquiry about the world from which a given text was generated. Considering the world behind the text involves readers in recognising the issues associated with engaging with a text that is a product of ancient cultures and societal structures. There is a need for appropriate research accessing the insights to be found in scholarly fields such as archaeology and cultural anthropology. Beginning religious educators require some basic awareness of critical approaches such as source criticism, form criticism and socio-historical criticism, and the diachronic methods. The last mentioned critical methodology from the previous list—'diachronic' (literally meaning 'through time'—*dia* 'through' and *chronos* 'time'—from the Greek)—that is looking at the text through chronology or time, is commented on by Sheldrake (2010) when he succinctly states:

What we encounter in a text is not direct experience of another time but what the text claims about it, for all texts employ the conventional categories of their age. In other words, all texts are themselves interpretations of experience, not merely records of it. (p. 43)

As Frigge (2009) points out, the assumption underpinning all biblical criticism is that some knowledge of what the original writer(s) intended to communicate to their audience is foundational for an understanding of possibilities and meaning of these writings for contemporary Christian life.

3.2 World of the text

Schneiders (1999) notes that the second half of the twentieth century saw biblical scholars turn their attention to the text itself. There was a growing focus on approaches that recognise the text as living writing, using the synchronic lens as an aid to interpretation. Synchronic simply means studying the texts from or at a given time without considering historical information. Thus, in this instance, the scriptures are interpreted from a literary perspective.

Interpreting the biblical texts by using literary critical tools presents these texts as the competent, skilful and often beautiful pieces of literary accomplishment that they certainly are. An awareness of literary forms (text types) can help identify the different genres in the Bible such as poetry, songs, parables, prophetic oracles, law, narrative, letters, and so on. The example provided by Dizdar (2003) illustrates how knowing the literary form of a text can be critical for the way a religious educator can read and interpret it:

The creation account in Genesis 1:1–2:4a is a poem (and possibly a *liturgical* poem originally meant to be sung/performed by many voices) and not a scientific paleontological theory. The story that immediately follows it, Genesis 2:4b–3:24, is quite a different creation story—but again *not* science or even “history” in the modern sense of historiography. Ignoring the actual literary form (and assuming an anachronistic one) can lead to all sorts of silliness—like the so-called “science” of creationism. (p. 258)

For the beginning religious educator, some awareness of the tools of biblical criticism and exegesis can enhance an appreciation of the text’s power “by revealing its structures, uncovering its strategies, and placing in relief the enriching internal and external interconnections” (Schneiders 1999, p. 169). The synchronic methods, ways of exploring the text as it is now, provide religious educators with useful insights that can help them focus on the text as living literature. This allows for a movement from emphasis on the origins of the text to its structure and reception. Frigge (2009, p.167) presents some questions as a guide to literary criticism that beginning religious educators could find useful for interpretation and teaching of the texts:

- What genre or type of literature is the biblical book as a whole?
- What are the structure, style, and purpose of the book?
- What subgenres are used within the book, and what is the structure and intended meaning of each?
- How does the book or passage compare and contrast with other, non-biblical literature of the time?

The understanding that is offered through explanation, that is ‘unpacking’ the text, is usually partial and incomplete, according to Schneiders (1999). There is an ongoing process while further questions are explored until the dialectic between explanation and understanding concludes in an experience of meaning that is held to be satisfactory. For Schneiders the goal is transformative understanding, akin to Ricoeur’s term ‘appropriation’. “It is the capacity of understanding to transform the person that grounds the possibility of the biblical text functioning as revelatory medium” (Schneiders 1999, p. 157).

3.3 World before/in front of the text

Recalling Schneiders’ (1999) words about transformative interpretation involving “an interaction between a self-aware reader open to the truth claims of the text and the text in its integrity”(p. 3), the importance of self-awareness becomes a priority for religious educators. Learning is enhanced when a teacher is reflectively self-aware of what he or she is doing when they are teaching and why they are engaging in a particular teaching–learning process (Collins & Carroll 2011).

The practical task for a teacher educator is to facilitate in beginning teachers a self-awareness of these possibilities of sacred text for themselves with a view to enabling them to replicate this process for the students they, in their turn, will teach. Sacred texts call believing communities to

account. We recognize that to appreciate a text as sacred involves an awareness of our own limitations as readers of an ancient text and the need to develop our own understanding of its meaning. Interrogation of pre-understanding of any text through investigative methods makes possible correction and expansion until the final meaning is understood.

Reflecting on the nature of understanding, Schneiders (1999) acknowledges that Gadamer has been one of the influential thinkers in regard to the post-positivist approach to inquiry. As Schneiders sums up, the knower is always implicated in the knowing and therefore in the known:

What Gadamer has helped us see is that the mind is not a pure capacity for the intelligible but itself an historical reality shaped by the tradition within which it participates. The language in which we think, the culture in which we participate, the education both formal and informal that shapes our questioning, in short, all the effects of history on our intelligence influence the process of knowing and the resulting understanding. (Schneiders 1999, p. 159)

4 Reflection on student–teachers’ background

If it is the case that the knowing is always implicated in the knower. What, then, might this mean in the teacher education classroom? One way to raise self-awareness, with regard to the language in which the students think and the culture in which they participate, is to teach them a strategy to facilitate consciousness of what they, as readers, bring to a text in terms of their own social and historical location. The purpose of this strategy is to facilitate, for student teachers, a conscious awareness of the dynamics of their thinking in relation to their own cultural and historical location with a view to introducing a critical perspective on the Bible to the high-school students they will teach. The focus of the exercise is to heighten the awareness of the context in which the student–teachers work, whilst remaining alert to the realm of interiority, manifested in feelings and emotions. The following exercises are examples of this work.

4.1 Student–teacher reflection exercise

Describe yourself:

1. Your gender, age range, cultural background, early memories of family, parish, school, religious practice
2. Understanding of the Bible in your family of origin
3. Comment on your early memories/understanding of/attitudes to the Bible
4. Think about yourself now
5. In what ways have your approach to scripture/understanding of the bible changed/is different from/same as your family of origin?

4.2 Reflection on student background

4.2.1 Choose one student (from your practicum) in your RE class (do not identify)

1. Create a profile for this student, including gender, age range, and cultural background.
2. Describe the spiritual milieu/world of this student. How is the Bible seen/understood by this student?

3. What difference does this milieu make to the teaching/learning strategies you will use to engage students with the Bible?

The second part of this article draws on a specific Biblical text as an example of how Schneiders' three-part structure for interpretation can be applied.

5 Interpretation of a biblical text—Genesis 22:1–19: The near sacrifice of Isaac

This text, concerned with the testing of Abraham, is one of the most problematic in the Old Testament, given its focus on human sacrifice. Schneiders' model, which addresses the worlds of the text, is a useful tool for religious educators to understand the importance of context for biblical interpretation. This narrative within Judaism is known as the *Akedah* or 'binding of Isaac', a slightly different description from the usual Christian description of 'the sacrifice of Isaac'. As we know, Isaac was not killed by his father, hence the above title. For many a surface reading of this narrative raises issues related to our image of God. Readers sometimes bring to the text questions that the text was not designed to answer, such as: What sort of God would ask for the life of a beloved son? This is an issue that requires some explanatory context about the contemporary worldview of the time of the original story. Any consideration of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 must delve into the difficult historical question of human sacrifice, particularly child and infant sacrifice.

5.1 World behind the text

Canaanite archaeology provides us with the sad evidence of children's bones buried in the thresholds of homes and city entrances in and around Canaanite territory, indicating that infant sacrifice was widely accepted by Israel's neighbours, as the biblical polemic against child sacrifice in 2 Kings 16:3 and Micah 6:7 clearly demonstrates (Vawter 1977). The fact that children were buried in the thresholds of homes would also indicate an unusual ritual of some kind rather than just an ordinary burial, caused by high rates of children mortality. Although human sacrifice is condemned in the Bible there is some evidence that it may have been conventional in early Israel, as Genesis 22 suggests. Israel's laws and the prophets vociferously detest it as an abomination. Furthermore Israel, it seems, created the longstanding practice of redeeming the first born by sacrificing an animal in place of the first born child, as Abraham is shown in Genesis 22. Exodus 13:11–16 and 34:19–20 also indicate that Israel recognised that the first born belonged to God.

In 2 Kings 3:27 we read with horror of the sacrifice of the eldest son of the King of Moab in the presence of the attacking Israelites. There are two books of Kings in the Old Testament and, as their name suggests, they record the history of the kings of Israel, the northern kingdom, and the kings of Judah, the southern kingdom. The kingdom of Moab was a neighbouring kingdom on the east bank of the Dead Sea close to Judah. The narrative of the books of Kings spans a time frame from about 970–562 BCE, about 400 years. Of course the texts were edited and, indeed, written later than the dates and events they cover. The example of child sacrifice in 2 Kings 3:27 occurred during the Moabite war when the Israelite and Judean kingdoms combined against the Moabite kingdom because Moab had rebelled against Israel. The combined Hebrew forces were winning in this ancient Moabite war. The King of Moab then "took his eldest son who was to succeed him and offered him as sacrifice on the city wall. There was bitter indignation

against the Israelites, who then withdrew, retiring to their own country” (2 Kings 3:27). Thus the Moabite war seems to end with the Moabites angry at the Israelites because they have caused the death of their crown prince. It would also appear that the Hebrew forces withdrew because human sacrifice was abhorrent to them at this stage on their faith journey.

Also in the second book of Kings the reforming Judean King Josiah ordered the destruction of the furnace in the valley of Ben-hinnom (just outside Jerusalem) “so that no one could make his son or daughter pass through fire in honour of Molech” (2 Kings 23:10). Molech was one of the local Canaanite gods to whom child sacrifice was made. So the name is definitely Semitic in origin indicating that both Canaanite and Hebrew groups were involved as both had Semitic backgrounds: “The Canaanites were as much ‘Semites’ as were the Hebrews” (McKenzie 1968, p.117). The fire used to immolate children to this Canaanite god Molech was in the valley of Ben-hinnom (Son of Hinnom) which was also the local rubbish tip that would often self-combust, as rubbish does, so there was usually a constant fire in the Valley of *Hinnom* that never went out. The word in Hebrew for valley is *gē’* so the valley of *Hinnom* is *gē’ Hinnom* which becomes *Gehenna* in the New Testament, thus an actual historical place, not hell in the afterlife.

1 Kings 16:34 also indicates that during the reign of King Ahab (874–853 BCE), in the mid ninth century BCE, the sacrifice of children is written into the story of a ritual of consecration of a new gate/city or sometimes even home by Hiel of Bethel. “Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho; he laid the foundations at the price of Abiram, his first born; its gates he erected at the price of his youngest son Segub” (1 Kings 16:34); thus, his two sons were offered as foundation human sacrifices. Hiel of Bethel’s ethnic or religious affiliation is not stated. Whether we accept the historicity of the Ahab narratives or not, the event is recorded and must be considered as part of the whole discussion related to the so-called sacrifice of Isaac.

In this context the book of Exodus also reminds us that the first born child, as well as the first born of the flocks or the first fruits of the harvest, belonged to God (Ex 13: 11–16 and 23:19) as the Canaanite customs described above indicate. Nonetheless the book of Exodus also clearly states that the first born child (and donkeys) must be redeemed with a substitute animal sacrifice (see Exodus 34:19–20). The practice of redeeming the first born by substitute animal was most probably developed to prevent child sacrifice from taking place within Jewish communities. This would seem to be the model of behaviour that the story of the sacrifice of Isaac is providing here in Genesis 22. As the Book of Leviticus states in chapter 20:1–5, the parents who hand over their child to Molech must be stoned to death themselves! It is worth noting here that in the New Testament, in the gospel of Luke, Jesus as Mary’s firstborn child is redeemed by an animal sacrifice according to the Torah/law (Luke 2: 22–24).

5.2 The World of the text

Looking at Genesis chapter 22 contextually—that is, within in the actual biblical text itself—we find that it is situated between two highly charged and significant events in Abraham’s and indeed Isaac’s life. They are the birth of Isaac to very elderly parents—Abraham and Sarah—in Chapter 20 and the death of their much loved wife and mother, Sarah, in the following Chapter, Genesis 23.

The story of the sacrifice of Isaac is widely regarded by biblical scholars and commentators alike as “one of the great masterpieces of narrative art in the bible” (Viviano 1992, p. 60). It is a story that could be called a parable because of the challenging and

unexpected actions that almost take place. However the reader knows more than the characters. We know right from the start that Abraham is being tested—and tested severely. The opening verse tells us: “It happened sometime later that God put Abraham to the test” (Gen 22:1). The entire story is poignant in its literary techniques as the text dramatically leads us through a series of emotional statements: “take your son, your only child Isaac, whom you love ... you shall offer him as a burnt offering” (Gen 22:2). Every phrase here seems to accentuate the value of this son to Abraham. These tender and emotionally intense words begin the story and prepare us immediately for the heart wrenching “test” Abraham is about to undergo. On the third day we are informed Abraham sees the place for the sacrifice, Mount Moriah. Incidentally Mount Moriah has been often identified with the mount on which the Jerusalem Temple stood and so certainly became a place of sacrifice about a 1,000 years after the possible timing of this event. We are not told how Abraham feels at the sight of Mount Moriah but the unpretentious strength of the drama within the text is profound and touches us with Abraham’s pain.

The whole event is shrouded in secrecy. Abraham does not take his young retainers with him but takes only Isaac to the place of sacrifice. Even Isaac himself has to ask about the absence of the animal for sacrifice: “Father ... where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” (Gen 22:7). “God will provide” (Gen 22:8) is the simple, poignant answer. The journey to the place of sacrifice seems to be a silent one. Are both Abraham and Isaac scared, anxious or afraid? We are not told but are left to imagine the feelings of these two main characters. The simplicity of the text allows us to do just that, such is the skill of the writer. Even in the binding of Isaac we are left to imagine how father and son felt now knowing that this nightmare was turning into a reality. When the angel calls out to Abraham to prevent him from killing Isaac, Abraham answers with the same words as he did at the beginning of the story “Here I am”, *hinnēni* in Hebrew, although some translations change them slightly. The reply is all the more moving because it is the same at the beginning and the end of the story, despite the ordeal both characters have been through.

Jewish tradition refers to the Genesis 22 incident as the binding or *akedah* of Isaac, not the sacrifice of Isaac, which has developed later in the Christian tradition. Christianity tends to view the story from the perspective of Jesus’ death, and Christianity parallels this text with the sacrifice of Jesus’ life as God’s only son. There is a difference here in this comparison because, in Jesus’ case, there is no substitute victim that prevents his death. However we must allow this ancient Hebrew story of a father and a son to stand alone in its own culture and context with its own merit. It is part of the great epic of the Hebrew patriarchs and matriarchs. It is part of the narrative of the foundation of historical Israel and their father Abraham. So it must be permitted to take up a unique position with its own distinctive message and meaning.

5.3 The world before/in front of the text

The story of the sacrifice or binding of Isaac “continues to fascinate philosophers and theologians down to modern times” (Collins 2004, p. 97). A plethora of interpretations arise from this text. What can it mean for us today?

In any interpretation of a biblical text, particularly difficult and controversial ones such as this, it is entirely appropriate to ask questions of the texts. The obvious question here is: “What kind of a God is he? How can a compassionate God of the Bible be portrayed as asking for the sacrifice of a child?” (Plaut 1981, p. 150). The whole story challenges our image of God and even Abraham. “The tradition continued to praise the obedience of Abraham but there is evident discomfort both with the idea that God gave such a command

and with Abraham's willingness to carry it out" (Collins 2004, p. 97). What if Abraham had actually carried out the sacrifice? In Jewish tradition and interpretation, God, by replacing the sacrificial offering, taught Abraham that God "demands the response of the living, respect for life and love; God does not call for death. A new level in humanity's God-awareness had been reached" (Trepp 2000, p. 227). Of course, as noted already, the story of Abraham and Isaac comes from a time when human sacrifice was acceptable. Many scholars see it as a polemic against human sacrifice as the later legal texts, mentioned above, indicate (Vawter 1977). Thus "while child sacrifice is not (explicitly) repudiated in Genesis 22, it was emphatically rejected by the later tradition" (Collins 2004, p. 97).

Like any biblical text it can also ask questions of us: Would we be prepared to give up what is most precious to us? Abraham learned "to give up control over his own life that he might receive it as grace" (Clifford & Murphy 1990, p. 25). Is it possible to have such faith in God? Abraham's life is completely entwined in his son and heir. The promise of God to Abraham of descendants as numerous as the sands on the sea shore and lands further than the eye could see (Gen 12: 15, 17) would be broken or lost with the death of Isaac. His entire future would be gone. Hence the understanding from some commentators on the text that Abraham has learned to sacrifice control over his own life that he might receive it back again as gift (Clifford & Murphy 1990).

Nonetheless this story can shock modern readers. Yet is it a story of hope? Both characters in the text—Abraham and Isaac—in their silence seem at least resigned to their fate. Or is their silence more than resignation? Is it hope against hope? When we read the Abraham texts in Genesis 12–25 it is very evident that Abraham's relationship with God is indeed a strong and personal one. God has promised him a figurative 'rose garden'. At the end of this intensely dramatic tale is another "Godly" promise, an even more generous repetition of previous promises:

I swear by my own self—it is the Lord who speaks—because you have done this, because you have not refused me your son, your only son, I will shower blessings on you, I will make your descendants as many as the stars of heaven and the grains of sand on the sea shore ... All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants. (Genesis 22:16–18)

Abraham is certainly a person of faith who did believe in the relationship he had with a provident God, even against hope, and God did provide. The biblical text is full of stories like this, a God who threatens to punish but cannot. "My heart recoils from it, my whole being trembles at the thought ... I am God not man" (Hosea 11:8–9). Perhaps while God was testing Abraham, Abraham was testing God. And found him to be a God of love as that other friend of God—Moses—also experiences. "The Lord passed before him and proclaimed 'The Lord, the Lord, a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithfulness'" (Exodus 34:6). So in this dramatic story we find meaning for our suffering world today, a message of faith and hope and loving providence.

6 Conclusion

This paper has addressed the sometimes contentious issue of introducing a critical perspective to the Bible as part of the preparation of teachers of Religious Education. Insights drawn from Schneiders' (1999) *The Revelatory Text* have been proposed as a conceptual framework for beginning religious educators' encounter with the Bible. To raise awareness

of what each reader brings to a text, a reflection strategy that focussed on the background of both teacher and student was outlined. In order to illustrate the value of considering a text in its original context to inform contemporary interpretation, the narrative account of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22) was discussed. The view that this story serves as a polemic against human sacrifice suggests a rationale for its enduring relevance. Indeed, it serves as an excellent example of how to engage with the foundational question that applies to any Biblical text: "Why was the story told?".

References

- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. (2013). *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*. Retrieved from <http://www.teacherstandards.aitsl.edu.au/>
- Benedict, XVI. (2010). *Verbum Domini*. Retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini_en.html
- Boys, M. (1999). Engaged pedagogy, dialogue and critical reflection. *Teaching Theology and Religion*, 2(3), 129–136.
- Buchanan, M. (2009). Senior school religious education curriculum: What do students' want? *The International Journal of Learning*, 16(2), 95–101.
- Carmody, T. (2004). *Reading the Bible: A study guide*. New York, NY: Paulist Press.
- Clifford, R., & Murphy, R. (1990). Genesis. In R. Brown (Ed.), *New Jerome biblical commentary* (pp. 8–43). New Jersey: Geoffery Chapman.
- Collins, J. J. (2004). *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Collins, J. F., & Carroll, S. (2011). Teaching practical theology: Implications for theological education with reference to Lonergan's theoretical framework. *Australian eJournal of Theology*, 18(2), 166–174.
- Dizdar, D. (2003). How to read the Bible. In M. Ryan (Ed.), *Reading the Bible* (pp. 250–266). Tuggerah, Australia: Social Science Press.
- Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation [Dei Verbum] (1965). Retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html
- Frigge, M. (2009). *Beginning biblical studies*. Winona, MN: Anselm Academic.
- Groome, T. (2011). *Will there be faith? A new vision for educating and growing disciples*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- McKenzie, J. (1968). *Dictionary of the Bible*. London, UK: Geoffrey Chapman.
- Plaut, W. G. (Ed.). (1981). *The Torah a modern commentary*. New York, NY: Union of American Hebrew Congregations.
- Pontifical Biblical Commission. (1993). *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. Boston, MA: St. Paul Books & Media.
- Ryan, M. (2014). Teaching the Bible in the primary school. In J. Grajczonek & M. Ryan (Eds.), *Growing in wisdom: Religious education in Catholic primary schools and early childhood* (pp. 177–192). Hamilton, Australia: Lumino Press.
- Schneiders, S. (1999). *The revelatory text: Interpreting the New Testament as sacred scripture* (2nd ed.). Collegeville, MI: The Liturgical Press.
- Sheldrake, P. (2010). *Explorations in spirituality: history, theology and social practice*. New York, NY: Paulist Press.
- Trepp, L. (2000). *Judaism*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Vawter, B. (1977). *On Genesis*. London, UK: Jeffrey Chapman.
- Viviano, P. (1992). Genesis. In D. Bergant (Ed.), *The Collegeville Bible commentary—Old Testament* (pp. 35–78). Collegeville, MI: The Liturgical Press.