



## Addressing the problem of 'Ecclesiastical drift' in Catholic Religious Education

Graham Rossiter

To cite this article: Graham Rossiter (2020) Addressing the problem of 'Ecclesiastical drift' in Catholic Religious Education, *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 12:2, 191-205, DOI: [10.1080/19422539.2020.1810998](https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2020.1810998)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2020.1810998>



Published online: 20 Oct 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Addressing the problem of ‘Ecclesiastical drift’ in Catholic Religious Education

Graham Rossiter\*

*The Australian Institute of Theological Education, Sydney*

Philip Phenix’s (1964) book *Realms of meaning: A philosophy of the curriculum for general education* started the ever growing movement concerned with how school education might help young people in their search for meaning, purpose and values in times of rapid cultural change. Today, in globalised, digital, secularised culture, the importance and urgency of this role have never been greater. Religious Education, with core curriculum status in Catholic schools, has both credentials and precedents for studying directly the contemporary human quest for meaning to help resource the spirituality of young people, no matter what their religious disposition. But a ‘course correction’ is needed for the discourse of Catholic Religious Education which has ‘drifted’ almost so exclusively into ecclesiastical terminology that 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. A more outward-looking and less Catholic-centric emphasis would help, without neglecting commitment to the faith tradition. While concerned with the Australian Catholic sector, the article may well have relevance to other countries and contexts.

**Keywords:** Religious Education; Catholic schools; youth spirituality; ‘ecclesiastical drift’

### Introduction: the role of a critical, evaluative religious education in resourcing young people’s spirituality

While the issue remains real, it has almost become something of a cliché to point out 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. People have been saying this for the past 50 years (Frankl 1964; 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, trade wars to mistrust of politicians, refugee migration to new levels of populist nationalism (Zakaria 2019), trending memes to online trolls, the list goes on, perhaps often overridden by individuals’ anxiety about the performance of their precarious, projected identity on social media.

In 1967, this is what prominent Australian biologist and author Charles Birch (1967) thought about the question: ‘The problems 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

---

\*Email [g.rossiter@bigpond.com](mailto:g.rossiter@bigpond.com)

activity of *trying* to comprehend problems and in *trying* to find solutions – even if apparent success and progress always remain elusive. About the same time, Philip Phenix's (1964) book *Realms of meaning* signalled the start of an ever growing movement concerned with how school education might help young people in their search for meaning, purpose and values in times of rapid cultural change. Today, in globalised, digital, secularised culture, the importance and urgency of this role have never been greater, especially where, for many, the traditional religious sources of meaning are no longer prominent or plausible reference points. Rather, many secularised, individualistic, young people in Westernised countries appear preoccupied with a consumerist lifestyle – while at the same time there are unprecedented high levels of anxiety, depression and mental health issues. In the same vein, US 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, 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. Religious Education, with core curriculum status in Catholic schools, has both the history, 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 meant broadening its scope beyond Catholicism to include study of other religions and of the ways in which culture influences spirituality.

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.

As well as providing students with a study of their own religious tradition, Religious Education should help them become knowledgeable of the ways in which various 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). Also, there needs to be a direct investigation of contemporary spiritual, moral and social issues as referred to above. Rossiter (2018) and, Crawford and Rossiter (2006) argued systematically that critical interpretation and evaluation, together with a research-oriented pedagogy, should become a core dimension of Religious Education.

I consider that this evaluative approach and its justifying argument are not just pertinent to current 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 sorts of 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).

### **The rise of ‘ecclesiastical drift’<sup>1</sup> in Australian Catholic school Religious Education**

The above discussion proposes a dimension to Religious Education that is considered to be vital for young people in Catholic schools today. But where is current Catholic Religious Education positioned in relation to it? My interpretation is that it is on a different trajectory that can be called ‘ecclesiastical drift’. And if this trajectory is to be evaluated, there is a need to understand how and why this track has been followed, and how it has affected the discourse of Australian Catholic Religious Education, and in turn, student perceptions and experience.

Through different metaphors and perspectives, ecclesiastical terms can nuance the understanding of Religious Education from the church’s point of view. But there is also a downside – too many normative ecclesiastical constructs can constrain thinking and can stifle freedom and creativity, as well as create confusion about fundamental purposes.

Ecclesiastical drift has occurred in Religious Education where the discourse about its purposes and practices has gradually and incrementally come to be dominated almost exclusively by constructs like faith development, faith formation, Catholic identity, new evangelisation and Catholic mission. Excessive use of this language, at the expense of the word education, turns the focus *inwards* towards Catholicism – at the very time when more of an *outwards* focus on the shaping influence of culture is needed. The purpose of getting young people to engage with the Catholic Church and become regular mass attendees tends to resonate with this emphasis, even if it is not made explicit. The ecclesiastical language dominance eclipses the educational dimension to Religious Education and what suffers is thinking about what it means to *educate* today’s young people spiritually and religiously.

Four examples of the rise of ecclesiastical drift will be given and then its historical emergence will be traced and evaluated.

1. From the Australian Catholic bishops.

My concern has not been with [Religious Education] curriculum issues, but more with faith formation programmes, seeking to know ‘what works’.

*In a letter from a bishop who had served as chair of the Bishops’ Committee for 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 and their attendance at Sunday mass.

*Key ideas from the homily of an Australian Catholic bishop*

2. Changes in the names of Diocesan Catholic School Religious Education Departments and for the role of school Religious Education coordinators, where the words education and Religious Education were gradually disappearing.

3. From the literature tuned in to ecclesiastical drift.

Learn how to put the Catholic back into Catholic schools.

*From the website advertising a new Australian book on Catholic mission in education.*

An Educator’s Guide to Mission in Practice: Discipleship in Action in Catholic Schools  
*Title of a new book on Catholic schooling (2019)*

4. From a new Catholic school Religious Education programme for years 11-12.

In the draft syllabus of a NSW Catholic schools programme *Studies in Catholic Thought*, the word Catholic is used 538 times, while the word religion appears 9 times.

### ***Historical perspective***

It was only after the end of what might be called the catechism or doctrinal era in the early 1960s, that the name Religious Education became normative and the emphasis was on *educating students religiously*. In my own professional experience of that time I found that few if any religion teachers (all members of religious orders) thought about their role exclusively in terms of getting young people to go to Mass on Sundays. They never saw Religious Education as just an ecclesiastical activity. Trying to address the personal development needs of youth was prominent in their understanding of Religious Education – resulting in a constructive, creative tension between ecclesiastical and personal development purposes.

While at the time there were some diocesan religion syllabuses, schools and religion teachers had great freedom and independence, and this supported extensive experimentation in times when SBCD (School based curriculum development) was in vogue. Only gradually, after the securing of state funding for the maintenance and growth of independent school systems, came the emergence of diocesan Catholic Education Offices and Religious Education consultants, together with the introduction of mandatory, centralised syllabuses and guidelines. This effectively ended the widespread experimentation and coincided with the rise and general acceptance of a ‘subject-oriented’ understanding of Religious Education as a core element in the Catholic school curriculum (Rossiter 2018, 86).

From this time, the discourse of Catholic school Religious Education became more coherent and unified under the leadership of diocesan Religious Education authorities/consultants/advisers. How these personnel formulated their understanding of Religious Education and how this was propagated in the dioceses through documents

and professional development programmes determined in large measure the key words and concepts that were to be used for articulating the purposes of Religious Education. Employed directly by diocesan offices, they would be likely to be more deferential to the views of bishops than the average religion teachers and more attentive to ecclesiastical expectations and language.

It was not that there was a conscious conspiracy to make ecclesiastical concerns the exclusive focus of Religious Education. But diocesan personnel, along with religious educators at tertiary level, while setting out to develop and enhance Religious Education, *drifted incrementally* into ways of thinking and talking about Religious Education that had unintended negative consequences. There ended up being such a strong and relatively unquestioned ecclesiastical emphasis in the language of Religious Education that its educational dimension was eroded. Religious Education tended to become a subset of Catholic identity or evangelisation rather than the reverse. Ambiguity in both the theory and practice of Religious Education followed.

### ***Increased attention given to ecclesiastical constructs***

Rossiter (2018) analysed the historical pattern in key word usage in 6 principal Catholic Church documents since the Vatican II 1966 document *Gravissimum Educationis* (Declaration on Christian Education, Vatican II 1966), which focused on the word *education*. In subsequent documents, education, which had an expansive, outwards-looking and ecumenical connotation was gradually superseded by ecclesiastical words like catechesis and evangelisation, sowing the seeds for the rise of ecclesiastical drift. Here, only the construct Catholic identity will be examined. Detailed evaluations of the use of faith development, faith formation and evangelisation are provided elsewhere (Crawford and Rossiter 2006; Rossiter 2018, 2020)

***Faith development:*** The construct faith development made its first appearance in the discourse of Australian Catholic Religious Education after the publication of Westerhoff's *Will our Children have Faith?* (1976) and Fowler's *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning* (1981). Subsequently, it became an ecclesiastical buzz word and was ubiquitous in the discourse<sup>2</sup>; in some instances it displaced the term Religious Education.

***Faith formation:*** Now it is the term 'faith formation' that is being used increasingly as a substitute for Religious Education. The episcopal preference for faith formation over religious education was noted in the quotation at the start of this section. It appeared as far back as 1987, exemplified in the comments of a priest Diocesan Director of Catholic schools: 'What we need is faith formation and not religious education'. Questions need to be addressed about why this term was replacing religious education<sup>3</sup>; and about how one might unambiguously differentiate a faith forming process from one that was 'merely' educational. The etymological roots of faith formation in Australia lay in the tradition of religious order houses of formation in the first half of the twentieth century – those who experienced this first hand could well have described it as a type of 'religious Marine Boot Camp'.

***Catholic identity:*** The first reference to Catholic identity in the literature of Australian Religious Education was in an article in *Word in life* (Now *Journal of Religious Education*) in 1997. It focused on Catholicity which was the preceding antonym for

Catholic identity. Since then more than 50 articles in the journal have used these words. This article considered that the catalyst for the emerging interest in Catholicity/Catholic identity were ‘concerns . . . that [Catholic schools] are not distinctively Catholic, and that they are not as effective as they might be in communicating a sense of Catholic identity.’ It acknowledged the importance of the Catholic school and Religious Education in resourcing the personal identity development of young people. It went on to propose that.

The nature and development of religious identity are very complex. If considerations of the issue are to be discerning and are to lead to useful implications, then simplistic solutions need to be avoided. The real possibilities and limitations of a school for helping foster a sense of religious identity have to be understood. (Rossiter 1997, 20).

The estimate of the term and cautions about its relevance to religious education appear to be just as relevant to current discussions of Catholic identity as they were in 1997.

The article judged that the initial driving force behind the concerns about the Catholic identity of schools was from Catholics who were anxious about secularisation and the decline in church attendance; and they unrealistically blamed the Catholic school and Religious Education for the problem. This criticism mirrored the complaints about Catholic schools/Religious Education made by the group Catholics Concerned for the Faith two decades before in the mid-1970s (Rossiter 1977). These sorts of concerns have long been registered by a minority of Catholics. For example, in 2015, the Australian Catholic journal *AD 2000* reported the following letter from concerned Catholics.

We firmly believe that the Church has a major problem with its delivery of Religious Education in her school system and think that urgent action is required to improve her performance.

A mere 20% of students in the Catholic school system attend Mass on Sunday during their schooling, but 72% of them stop practicing their faith by the time they are 29 years of age. . . .there is something drastically wrong with the curriculum and the way it is being taught.

. . . While the school factor appears to be the major factor causing students and ex-students to stop practicing their faith, other factors also contribute such as the family situation, mass media especially TV and social media.

. . . The crisis in Catholic education suggests that the curriculum is lacking. Children need to be made familiar with the Catholic Catechism, the Bible references and the importance of going to Mass every Sunday at the very least. (Kennedy et al. 2015)

The above discussion suggests that the *first impulse* in the emergence of the term Catholic identity as a key word in the discourse of Catholic religious education came from anxiety about the future of the church which was in decline. It is not unlikely that this same impulse motivates concerns about the Catholic identity of schools today to varying degrees. For example, the advertising comment quoted earlier ‘Learn how to put the Catholic back into Catholic schools’ is misleading. It appears to be making an emotional appeal. What Catholic elements have gone? How and why did they go missing? And how might they be ‘re-injected’ into Catholic schools? Unfortunately, the term Catholic identity is readily perceived as an ambiguous slogan that does not promote realistic expectations of Religious Education.



The *second impulse* driving the current interest in the Catholic identity of schools came from a very different direction. It originated in European Religious Education and theology (mid 1990s and 2000s) which had taken up a strong interest in personal identity development. It was from this background that the work of Catholic University of Leuven theologians, Lieven Boeve and Didier Pollefeyt, came to have the most potent of all influences on Australian interest in the Catholic identity of schools.

***The Enhancing Catholic Schools Identity Project (ECSIP)***: Beginning in 2006, the Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project is the largest and most ambitious empirical research and action activity in the history of the Catholic school sector. It aimed at renewing the culture and identity of Australian Catholic schools (Pollefeyt and Bouwens 2010, 2012; Sharkey 2017). At the heart of the project, and in my opinion, its driving force, has been Boeve's (2003, 2007, 2016) theology of interruption and recontextualisation. He thought that cultural upheavals brought about discontinuities in the way religious traditions were handed on from generation to generation. But in the spirit of Pope John XXIII's exhortation to 'read the signs of the times', Boeve saw the interruptions as opportunities for Christianity, and theology in particular, to recontextualise and re-orient their endeavours to dialogue critically and constructively with culture to address the spiritual needs of the new situation. This is quite different from impulse 1 above which tended to come from fear (and even panic) about the impact of cultural change on the church. Boeve (2003) wrote 'Every new context challenges the Christian tradition to recontextualise its presentation of meaning and purpose in a cogent and credible fashion.'

Boeve was also interested in identifying what sort of institutional culture (or identity) would be most helpful for responding creatively to secularised society. Pollefeyt followed this through for Catholic schools with empirical measures of their spiritual/religious culture. The ultimate purpose was to foster a recontextualised Catholic spirituality, informing school culture and practice. In my view, Boeve's approach is continuous with the long tradition since Vatican II, trying to re-imagine how Catholicism might best respond to the modern world. His ideas on recontextualising are both important and challenging; but I think that linking and badging them with the term Catholic identity has handicapped the recontextualising agenda, mainly because of the problematic nature of that term. When people hear the words Catholic identity, most do not readily associate this with Boeve's challenging, recontextualising agenda for Catholicism – instead they may well think it is about 'Making the Catholic Church great again' – in short, what Boeve and others would interpret as a problematic restorationism.

Pope Francis' comments are pertinent here – a negative view of restorationism and implied affirmation of recontextualisation.

If the Christian is a restorationist, a legalist, if he wants everything clear and safe, then he will find nothing. Tradition and memory of the past must help us to have the courage to open up new areas to God. . . . those who stubbornly try to recover a past that no longer exists – they have a static and inward-directed view of things. In this way, faith becomes an ideology among other ideologies. (Pope Francis I 2013, 8, 11).

***Catholic identity and Religious Education***: It is important to distinguish the concerns of ECSIP with *school culture* from its potential impact on *Religious Education* (Rossiter 2018, 117–120). Here the interest is only in the latter – the success of the project in



terms of its own purposes is not in question here. I think that the ECSIP has not had any negative effects on Catholic Religious Education directly. But there appear to be unintended negative consequences for Religious Education where the new preoccupation with Catholic identity is applied to Religious Education. Negativity is generated because echoes of impulse 1 (noted above) seem to come into play. Students/parents perceive Catholic identity as church-focused and not directly concerned with individuals or their education; it appears to be inward-looking and about re-establishing the church, and not outward-looking about how culture affects people's spirituality. For the 30% of students who are not Catholic, and for non-Catholic teachers, the term can readily be felt as exclusivist and repressive.

The preoccupation with Catholic identity in Catholic schools is also evident where a number of new leadership positions have emerged to replace those formerly related to religious education – as illustrated earlier in Table 1, which also showed how former Diocesan Office Religious Education Departments were re-badged with ecclesiastical titles. One might wonder about the negative implications in the change of names where the words religious education often disappeared – as well as being concerned about *why* these changes were made. This development would have to create some ambiguity about purposes and expectations for Religious Education (Buchanan 2019, 140), and would reinforce the impression that it was an ecclesiastical rather than an educational activity. While religion teachers may take a progressive or a restorationist view of Catholic identity, it will not ultimately matter what they think about the term if most of the students dismiss it as irrelevant.

Boeve's theology aims at recontextualising Catholicism and it has been used to promote recontextualised Catholic schools. Both tasks are very complex and difficult to achieve because they depend ultimately on changing people's attitudes and spirituality significantly in the direction of a post-critical belief that 'interrupts and

Table 1. New religious leadership roles that have replaced former religious education roles.

Changed names for Diocesan Religious Education Departments (Some examples)	New names for Catholic school Religious Education Coordinators (Some examples)
Evangelisation and Catholic formation	Head of Catholic Identity and Action
Catholic Mission and Identity	Assistant Principal Identity.
Enhancing Catholic School Identity	Assistant Principal Religious Education, Identity and Mission
Department of Mission	Director of Identity and Student Formation
Catholic Life, Education and Mission	Director of Mission and Catholic Identity
Identity, Mission and Religious Education	Dean of Mission.
Faith Education and Formation	Director or Evangelisation
Learning, Teaching and Catholic Identity	Director of Religious Education and Evangelisation
Faith and Life	Director of Faith and Outreach
Catholic life and Mission	Director of Faith and Mission
Faith Education and Learning	Faith Development Coordinator
Mission and Evangelisation	Ministry coordinator
Catholic Identity and Mission	Director of spiritual activities
Catholic Identity and Evangelisation	
Identity and Liberating Education	

Sources: New names for former diocesan Religious Education Departments and for new school Religious Leadership roles were drawn from Australian Catholic diocesan websites and from individual school websites.

reconfigures the context' opening it 'anew towards the reality of God' (Boeve 2007). There are Catholics who have been trying to do so since the Second Vatican Council. While their own lives have been transformed, how much recontextualising has affected bishops and clergy remains an open question. On the other hand, it is much easier and quite feasible to recontextualise the Catholic school Religious Education curriculum. The first steps simply need changing the syllabus content and methodology. However, the human factor remains critical and not much will happen until the Religious Education authorities are prepared to acknowledge and address both the problem of ecclesiastical drift in their discourse and the reality of secular spirituality in most families with children at Catholic schools.

The issues raised here are controversial. Research, not only in Australia, has identified both the 'secular' spirituality of most students in Catholic schools and negativity in their views of school religious education.<sup>4</sup> While problems with the use of ecclesiastical language for Religious Education have been identified as far back as 1970 by Moran (1970; see also Rossiter 2018), so far there has been no systematic empirical investigation of perceptions of ecclesiastical drift. The time is ripe to test the views of students, parents and teachers on the issues raised in this article. But this would require courage and openness to ask the difficult questions.<sup>5</sup>

### **The effects of ecclesiastical drift on Religious Education in Catholic tertiary institutions**

Ecclesiastical drift has affected Religious Education in Australian Catholic tertiary institutions, and in some instances, the influence has been even more dramatic than in the schools – mutually reinforcing its negative effects on the whole Catholic education enterprise. This is reported in Rossiter (2020).

### **Conclusions: ecclesiastical drift and the future of Australian Catholic school Religious Education**

Ecclesiastical drift has resulted from efforts intended to rejuvenate the Catholic Church; it emphasised a church perspective on enhancing the religious life and practice of students, and this created ambiguity about the educational purposes of Religious Education. One can understand the legitimate *hopes* of bishops, clergy and Catholics generally that young people will engage with the church, and that a Catholic school education will favourably dispose them in this direction. But this hope is not a realistic or appropriate *immediate purpose* of Religious Education – it can educate them very well religiously, but this does not automatically generate personal faith and active church membership. Ecclesiastical drift tends to make the unrealistic presumption that what happens to pupils psychologically during religion lessons will change their faith and religious practice. A successful, relevant Religious Education cannot adequately be appraised in terms of traditional religiosity performance indicators like Sunday mass attendance. As long as the debate remains focused on Religious Education as a major factor in promoting church engagement, the real issues behind the decline in Catholic Church active membership will not be faced.

The problem derives primarily from thinking that Catholic schools and Religious Education can create church-going Catholics. Ironically, children are now becoming Catholics just to get into Catholic schools. Some non church-going parents are having their children (5-8 year olds) baptised and sacramentally initiated because in

their context this is necessary to secure entry to a desirable Catholic school; in the long run, it does not change the families' level of religious practice.<sup>6</sup>

Ecclesiastical drift has affected students and their parents' perceptions of Religious Education; it inclines them to see it an *ecclesiastical* activity, and not an *educational* one. It is like a nominal requirement of Catholic school authorities that they accept and go along with because they value Catholic schooling highly. But it is regarded as largely irrelevant to the personal development and education of the students. This reinforces their impression that Religious Education was not really an integral part of the curriculum. They tend to see the focus on Catholic identity as coming from a 'Catholic ghetto' mentality. As far as any study of beliefs, values and lifestyle was concerned, most students tended to shun any inward-looking institutional approach; they were naturally attuned to a more outward-looking, democratic, and expansive view of life.

The idea of *forming* the faith of Catholics is an unrealistic and inappropriate purpose for Religious Education where most of the Catholic students are not church-going and about a third of all students are not Catholic. *Educating* the spirituality and faith of all students is what Religious Education is about.

It appears that ecclesiastical drift has contributed to the erosion of the perceived academic status of Religious Education in Catholic schools, which was at a higher level in the 1990s. It contributed to a decline in young people's perception of how meaningful and valuable Religious Education might be – with consequences for their level of engagement and readiness for an academically challenging study. In Years 11–12 in a large number of Australian Catholic secondary schools, Religious Education takes on the format of government approved religion studies courses with university entrance academic credentials (E.g. *Studies of Religion* in NSW and Qld., and similar programmes in other states). The persistence of these programmes in Catholic schools may well help significantly in 'keeping an academic flag still flying' for Religious Education. By contrast, there is growing evidence that approved school and system developed religion courses (not contributing to university entrance) like *Catholic Studies*, have very low perceived academic status and are often considered by students to be a waste of time; but they may be preferred over religion studies because they make few if any academic demands on their time when they are under considerable pressure to perform well in the academic subjects that count toward future education and career options; if they have to do some religion, then the Catholic Studies option will provide the least interference in their secular studies. (Rossiter 2018, 131)

As state funded, Australian semi-state Catholic schools are accountable to the governments and the wider community for their responsibility to educate young Australians. They need to be able to explain their distinctive religious dimension in a way that is consistent with section 116 of the constitution which does not permit funding for activities that might constitute the 'establishment of a religion'. When this issue went before the Australian High Court (1978–1981, the Defence of Government Schools case), it was decided in favour of the Catholic church because there was sufficient evidence of an *educational justification* for educating young people religiously, especially with respect to their own tradition. It could be argued that such a Religious Education also contributed to the common good. If there is an extravagant emphasis on ecclesiastical processes and outcomes for Religious Education, this could in the long term be seen as contravening Section 116 and thus endangering the

constitutionality of government funding for Catholic schools which has become essential for their economic survival and growth.

### ***The future trajectory for Catholic school Religious Education in Australia***

In the light of the issues discussed here, one might wonder what the future trajectory for Catholic Religious Education will be. Will it continue in the direction described as ecclesiastical drift, and for how much longer? Will Catholic authorities ever stop assuming that Religious Education – a part of compulsory education paid for mainly by the state – is, against all the evidence, primarily about changing the religious practice of students? Or is there any chance there could be a course correction as proposed in the first part of the article? In my professional opinion, school Religious Education (but not the Catholic school system) is at a crossroads. The purpose of this writing is to advocate that the questions raised about long-term purposes and direction (with inevitable implications for content and pedagogy) need to be addressed with urgency. If not, I fear that ecclesiastical drift will further erode Religious Education, devaluing its perceived academic status and its important core position in the Catholic school curriculum, as well as diminishing its capacity to enhance the education and personal/spiritual development of students.

A type of ‘geological fault line’ has gradually developed between the normative discourse of Catholic Religious Education and the real situation in the classroom. If ecclesiastical drift is not going to further widen this fault line, the discourse needs to shift away from the current dominant, inward looking, ecclesiastical metaphors towards more outward looking concerns about how to *educate* young people spiritually, morally and religiously. This needs to happen first to facilitate changes in content and pedagogy. As considered earlier, such an approach is just as important for religious, as well as relatively non-religious, young people. It does not substitute for, or replace a good education in the Catholic religious tradition. But it can help Religious Education become more capable of helping young people make better sense of the very complicated spiritual/moral climate of these times, informing their decision making as they try to chart purposeful happy lives (Hughes 2017).

Whether or not there might be a course correction ultimately depends on the Catholic Religious Education authorities. The diocesan Religious Education personnel across the country would need to be persuaded that such change is necessary; and they would then need to secure the approval of the bishops. Some Individual teachers and schools have already shown indications that the change agenda is being addressed; there will always remain some scope, even if limited, for flexibility and creativity in content and pedagogy; my many years of postgraduate teaching indicate that religion teachers readily endorse the argument put forward here because it makes sense of their experience. But the sort of grass roots, widespread changes in Religious Education that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s could not occur again within the now more centralised Catholic school systems. Given the recent history in which ecclesiastical constructs like Catholic identity, faith formation and evangelisation have strongly coloured (and even supplanted) understandings of Religious Education, it is difficult to hope that any signs of change would appear on the horizon any time soon. It is hard to change one’s language when talking about Religious Education if the currently accepted normative key constructs/words are deeply embedded. When they become buzz words or clichés, they tend to have presumed, but vague, universal meaning that stops educators from carefully thinking through how best to articulate the

purposes of Religious Education in non-jargon terms (Rossiter 2018, 132). Also, for some there is the problem explicated by Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory (1962), where they do not pay attention to the evidence that contradicts or raises questions about the way they construe things to be. Ecclesiastical drift seems to have become such a well-established and unquestioned norm in the thinking of Catholic Religious Education authorities that it has been difficult to promote any dialogue about it, even though dialogue and debate would be very valuable. My own professional experience has found it an issue that many secondary religion teachers readily identify and are concerned about. But approaches to Religious Education authorities have so far met with 'no comment'. Hopefully, this article will promote some of the dialogue and debate that the issues warrant.

If ecclesiastical drift continues, one might expect that the place of Religious Education in the senior school will be further diminished. Some schools are already thinking about how it might be discontinued, or minimalised with an alternative that shows that some sort of 'religious flag' is still flying.

If such a negative prognosis eventuates, perhaps the greatest disappointment that religion teachers will feel is that Religious Education is being stifled just when the need for a relevant Religious Education is much greater and more important than at any former time. Young people today live in a culture where the expectation is that they construct their own meaning, values and beliefs in an individualistic fashion. This is not going to change. But their education could help them address the many puzzling and threatening questions that they are constantly facing as they make their way through the maze of contemporary culture. Religious Education could be adapted to be the one subject area in the curriculum that takes up this agenda formally and realistically. Hill's comments (quoted earlier) saw this role as 'Resourcing the choosing self. . . helping them to interrogate their own cultural conditioning'. This is potentially one of the most important needs in contemporary education in any sort of school, public and private – at a time when employment-oriented and economic agendas, allied with excessive 'quality control industry' practices, are dominating Australian education.

There appears to be some anomaly in the current situation because, while there have never been more theologically well qualified religion teachers in the history of Australian Catholic Religious Education, the status of the subject is low and there is considerable student and parent disinterest. I believe that ecclesiastical drift leaves religion teachers somewhat hamstrung because they are caught up in a web of unrealistic, inappropriate expectations, without the opportunity to change purposes, content and method in ways that may improve the meaningfulness and relevance of the subject, as well as its academic status. But they could at least start a process of change by not using the problematic ecclesiastical terms and by talking about Religious Education in ways that make more sense to teachers, students and parents.

The sort of leadership that one might hope for from Religious Education authorities was demonstrated recently by Archbishop Kohlgraf of Mainz in Germany (2019). He identified the problematic way the 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 pertinent to the ecclesiastical drift problem in Religious Education – one teacher recently told me he considered that the 'church language for RE has now become *weaponised*'. The archbishop was also

concerned that when ecclesiastical terms became clichés, the real issues to be faced tended to be trivialised – similarly for Religious Education. Another teacher’s reaction was as follows: ‘The RE terminology now sounds like a repetitive TV advertisement trying to sell something that you have no interest in’.

Religion has long served as the standout, lone spiritual/moral subject in Australian school education (ethics and philosophy have had a small presence, with contributions from personal development education); it can deal with spiritual and moral issues as its direct content. Because of the current centrality of Religious Education in their curriculum, Australian Catholic school systems have by far the great bulk of the country’s religion teaching resources. It may seem fanciful to say this, as the prospect is unlikely in the present circumstances, but these schools have the potential to be a lighthouse for Australian education in showing how a spiritual/moral dimension is fundamentally important for the curriculum in all schools. And they could model the way this could be addressed in different subject areas. Catholic Religious Education, suitably adapted to address contemporary spiritual/moral issues (along with its commitment to teach about Catholicism), could show a way forward. But to do this, it would need to be more broadly focused on resourcing the spirituality of young people and not on Catholic identity and faith formation – and this applies mainly at the senior class level.<sup>7</sup> As long as ecclesiastical drift dominates the discourse of Catholic Religious Education, it will have little that is meaningful to say to the rest of the country – let alone to its own students – about how best to educate young Australians spiritually, morally and religiously.

### **Notes on contributor**

**Graham Rossiter** is adjunct Professor of Moral and Religious Education at The Australian Institute of Theological Education, Sydney. Email [g.rossiter@bigpond.com](mailto:g.rossiter@bigpond.com)

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### **Notes**

1. ‘Ecclesiastical drift’ is defined as the problem in Catholic School Religious Education where its discourse about purposes and practices has gradually come to be dominated almost exclusively by constructs like faith development, faith formation, Catholic identity, new evangelisation and Catholic mission – with what are considered to be unintended negative consequences.
2. It is difficult to explain why some words rather than others become popular in any educational discourse and why they have a distinctive appeal. In this instance, I consider it was mainly a ‘follow the leader’ phenomenon as the word ‘faith’ (and its derivatives like faith formation) became prominent in Vatican church documents related to ministry, with follow up in diocesan documents and in the literature of religious education.
3. I think that when bishops and leaders in Catholic schooling used the concept ‘faith formation’ to replace ‘religious education’ there were implied assumptions that the former was more effective in changing the religious faith and practice of students; and that faith forming activities could somehow be readily differentiated from ‘merely’ educational activities. These assumptions are questioned in Rossiter (2018, 87–93.).
4. Researchers Smith and Denton (2005), Mason, Singleton, and Webber (2007), Crawford and Rossiter (2006), Hughes (2007), Maroney (2008), and Kenyon (2010) have written about the secular spirituality of youth – and this could be expected to be typical of most students in



Australian Catholic schools; the last 4 references also noted how poorly they regarded religious education – Kenyon (2010, 234) reported that some teachers regarded Religious Education as a teacher “health hazard”. Finn’s (2011) empirical research on the views of Religious Education teachers and parents reported evidence of the effects of ecclesiastical drift, without using this terminology; he found that a sample of both teachers and parents were respectful of the ecclesiastical terminology used by authorities, but they felt that such language was confusing and had little useful meaning.

5. Currently, an online survey of the views of teachers and senior students about the potential problem of ecclesiastical drift has been developed and data collection has been initiated. See <https://asmre.org/>.
6. There has been no empirical research on this question; but teachers have reported anecdotally that it is not uncommon in their experience.
7. One might ask “Does the Catholic system have the teachers capable of implementing this more open and inclusive approach to spiritual, religious and moral education?” My answer is a definite Yes.

## References

- Birch, L. C. 1967. Personal communication.
- Birch, L. C. 1975. *Confronting the Future: Australia and the World: The Next 100 Years*. Melbourne: Penguin.
- Boeve, L. 2003. *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*. Louvain: Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 30.
- Boeve, L. 2007. *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval*. New York: Continuum.
- Boeve, L. 2016. *Theology at the Crossroads of University, Church and Society: Dialogue, Difference and Catholic Identity*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Buchanan, M. T. 2019. “The Transmission of Religion: Reconceptualising the Religious Education Leader”. In *Global Perspectives on Catholic Religious Education in Schools: Volume II*. Singapore: Springer Nature.
- Crawford, M., and G. Rossiter. 2006. *Reasons for Living: Education and Young People’s Search for Meaning, Identity and Spirituality. A Handbook*. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Festinger, L. 1962. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Finn, A. 2011. *Parents, teachers and religious education: A study in a Catholic secondary school in rural Victoria*. (EdD Research Thesis) Sydney: Catholic Schools Office, Diocese of Broken Bay.
- Fowler, J. 1981. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. Melbourne: Dove Communications.
- Frankl, V. 1964. *Man’s Search for Meaning*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Grimmitt, M. H. 1987. *Religious Education and Human Development: The Relationship Between Studying Religions and Personal Social and Moral Education*. Great Wakering: McCrimmons.
- Hill, B. V. 2006. “Values in Free Fall: Religious Education and Values in Public Schools.” *Journal of Religious Education* 54 (2): 51–58.
- Hughes, P. 2007. *Putting Life Together: Findings From Australian Youth Spirituality Research*. Fairfield, VIC: Fairfield Press.
- Hughes, P. 2017. *Educating for Purposeful Living in a Post-Traditional Age*. Melbourne: Christian Research Association.
- Jackson, R. 2004. *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Jackson, R. 2018. *Religious Education for Plural Societies*. London: Routledge.
- Kennedy, J., et al. 2015. “Call for Urgent Action on Religious Education. Open Letter.” *AD2000* 28 (9). Accessed 15 September 2019. [https://www.ad2000.com.au/call\\_for\\_urgent\\_action\\_on\\_religious\\_education.html](https://www.ad2000.com.au/call_for_urgent_action_on_religious_education.html).
- Kenyon, D. 2010. *What constitutes success in classroom religious education? A study of secondary religion teachers’ understandings of the nature and purposes of religious education in Catholic schools*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Australian Catholic University, Sydney.



- Kohlgraf, P. 2019. *La Croix* Report on Archbishop Kohlgraf's comments. <https://international.la-croix.com/news/german-bishop-opposes-evangelisation-as-a-battle-cry-against-reform/11018#> Accessed November 2019.
- Maroney, M. 2008. *An exploration of a contemporary youth spirituality among senior students in three Catholic schools*. Unpublished EdD Thesis, Australian Catholic University, Sydney.
- Mason, M., A. Singleton, and R. Webber. 2007. *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia*. Melbourne: John Garratt.
- Moran, G. 1970. "Catechetics R.I.P." *Commonweal*, 18 December, 299-302.
- Phenix, P. 1964. *Realms of Meaning: A Philosophy of the Curriculum for General Education*. New York: McGrawHill.
- Pollefeyt, D., and J. Bouwens. 2010. "Framing the Identity of Catholic Schools. Empirical Methodology for Quantitative Research of the Catholic Identity of an Education Institute." *International Studies in Catholic Education* 2 (2): 193–211.
- Pollefeyt, D., and J. Bouwens. 2012. *Identity in Dialogue: Assessing and Enhancing Catholic School Identity. Research Methodology and Research Results in Catholic Schools in Victoria, Australia*. Melbourne: CEVC and Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.
- Postman, N., and C. Weingartner. 1969. *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Rossiter, G. 1977. "The Place of Knowledge in Religious Education: The Debate Over Doctrine in Religious Education." *Our Apostolate* 25 (4): 214–223.
- Rossiter, G. 1997. "The 'Catholicity' of Catholic Schools and the Development of Students' Religious Identity." *Word in Life* 45 (2): 20.
- Rossiter, G. 2018. *Life to the Full: The Changing Landscape of Contemporary Spirituality. Implications for Catholic School Religious Education*. Sydney: Agora for Spiritual, Moral and Religious Education.
- Rossiter, G. 2020. "Re-contextualising Catholic School Religious Education: Educating Young People Spiritually, Morally and Religiously for the 21st Century." Paper presented at the International Conference on Religious Education in Catholic schools, Melbourne, February 2020. <https://asmre.org/>.
- Second Vatican Council. 1966. *Gravissimum Educationis*. The Vatican: Vatican Website.
- Sharkey, P. 2017. "Better Understanding of the Context of Religious Education: The CEVC Leuven Research." In *Religious Education in Australian Catholic Schools: Exploring the Landscape*, edited by R. Rymarz, and A. Belmonte, 53–76. Melbourne: Vaughan Publishing.
- Smith, C., and M. L. Denton. 2005. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Westerhoff, J. H. 1976. *Will our Children Have Faith?* Melbourne: Dove Communications.
- Zakaria, F. 2019. *GPS. Global Public Square*. Program for discussion of contemporary social and political issues on CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/shows/fareed-zakaria-gps>.