

Religious Education as an Academic Discipline, and consequently as a recognised, functional Field of Research

g.rossiter@bigpond.com
12-02-2021

Religious Education in Catholic tertiary institutions in Australia

Historical Background: Giving special academic attention to the spiritual and moral dimension of life was one of the foundational aspects of the earliest universities since they were instituted in the Middle Ages. This tradition has remained in most Catholic universities world-wide where Theology and Philosophy, and more recently, Religious Education, are key areas of the university curriculum. How Religious Education (RE) assumed this position during the 20th century is a separate story. Some would argue that the presence of this 'trio' is the principal, distinctively religious aspect of contemporary Religious / Catholic tertiary institutions. While Catholic seminaries commonly gave attention to ministry and pastoral questions, it was not common for them to be concerned with Religious Education as such.

In Australia, this principle was reflected initially through the way Religious Education became central to programs in Catholic Teachers Colleges since their institution by religious orders early in the history of Catholic education in this country. This specialisation in Religious Education, driven by the need to prepare teachers for Australia's Catholic school systems, became a distinctive feature of the Catholic Teachers Colleges, which amalgamated into Australian Catholic University in 1991, as well as in Notre Dame University of Australia and in other institutions like BBI The Australian Institute of Theological Education. In the Teachers Colleges, and initially in ACU, Theology was structurally a part of the Religious Education Department. This arrangement was bound to change when the institutions became a Catholic university, where the age-old, and naturally expected, prominence of a Faculty of Theology in a Catholic university came into play. The structural positioning of Religious Education, whether it was located within Theology or elsewhere, varied in different institutions, as well as in particular institutions over time. In all of this, the importance of a close association between Theology and Religious Education was never in question. Many would argue that being well-grounded in Theology is essential for a Catholic tertiary Religious Educator.

When ACU formed, some wanted a joint Faculty of Theology, Religious Education and Philosophy with equality of academic disciplines. Others wanted RE as a lesser subset of Theology (reversing the previous situation where Theology was structured as a subset of RE). Others preferred to situate Religious Education within the Faculty of Education. In ACU, Religious Education started off in the Faculty of Arts along with Theology. But when the Faculty of Theology was formed, the group was shifted (against the wishes of all the relevant staff) to the Faculty of Education 1975-2019. It is now located within the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy. It appeared inevitable that the place of both Theology and Religious Education in Catholic tertiary institutions would always be subject to church politics.

Often the key underlying issue for Religious Education academics was the independence and validity of Religious Education as an academic discipline vis a vis Theology. For example: RE is not just a vehicle for delivering theological content. RE is fundamentally interdisciplinary in a way that theology never has been – especially through its relationship with education. RE has scope to attend to cultural and educational contexts, and to the spiritual, moral and religious development of people – concerns that have always been wider than those of theological education.

Some religious educators, especially in the United States have preferred to move their disciplinary self-understanding to a base in Practical Theology rather than in Religious Education. There are pertinent issues, including political ones, that will not be considered here. But what is proposed is that, in Australia, Religious Education is the preferable name and academic home for the discipline because of the need to preserve the integrity of its historical interdisciplinary nature

and its special relationship with education. This seems to be borne out in the RE field of research (with both analytical and empirical studies) where most, but not all, research would owe more to its educational base than its theological one. And this tends to show up in a content analysis of articles/research reports in academic journals for Religious Education and Practical Theology.

The Rise of Religious Education as an Academic Discipline and a field of Research in tertiary institutions

As far as RE as an academic discipline in Catholic institutions is concerned, this development was driven from two complementary directions:-

- From the pastoral concerns of the Catholic church; and
- From a confluence of wider inter-denominational, inter-religious, religion studies and public education domains.

Influence from the pastoral concerns of the Catholic church: The 1965 Vatican document *Gravissimum educationis* (Declaration on Christian education) was a pivotal turning point for Catholic Religious Education because of its special focus on 'education' – a word that the Catholic church did not 'own', like Catechesis etc. This linking of pastoral concerns with the global endeavour of education was both expansive and ecumenical. This prominence given to education then faded in subsequent documents (like the *General Catechetical Directory*, 1971) as it tended to be superseded and replaced by the words catechesis and evangelisation; but it did not disappear completely, and it was taken up the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education and noted specially in its seminal 1988 document *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*.

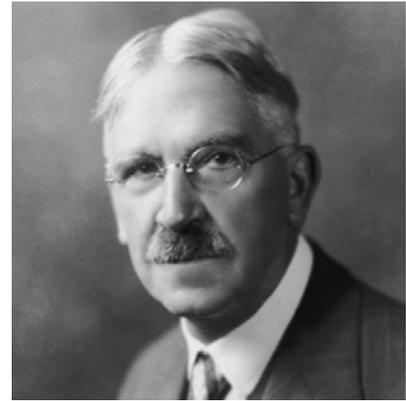
The *General Directory for Catechesis*, Rome, 1997, #73, referred to Religious Education as like a discipline that is "An original form of the ministry of the word, making present the Gospel in a personal process of cultural, systematic and critical assimilation". The clear implication was that *Religious Education* was distinct from *Theological education* (which was at home in seminaries and theological colleges as a desirable study for adult Catholics) – while being educated theologically was always a core part of Catholic Religious Education. The Directories, and other documents, promoted Religious Education as a discipline that attracted special commitment from Catholic Universities – because of its intrinsic importance, along with Theology, Scripture and Spirituality, and because of its relevance to the development of Catholic Religious Education in schools and other settings. One gets the impression from the documentation that the wider, inter-disciplinary capacity of Religious Education together with its scope for exploring the contribution of Religion/Catholicism to Education and to people's spiritual/moral development reinforced recognition that it could take its place alongside theology and philosophy as a valued academic discipline in Catholic tertiary institutions. Since the 1960s, Catholic educators' use of the word Religious Education became common norm around the world, consistent with its perception as a discipline in its own right.

Influence from a confluence of concerns from wider inter-denominational, inter-religious, religion studies and public education domains: In the *United States*, Religious Education as an academic discipline started in 1903 when William Rainey Harper (President of the prestigious University of Chicago) founded the Religious Education Association (REA). The keynote speaker at its first convention that year was John Dewey, the renowned education philosopher who set the tone for exploring a productive relationship between Religion and Education.

1906 The REA launched the academic journal *Religious Education*. It still services the REA of the United States and Canada with a world-wide readership. While primarily concerned with adult Religious Education and pastoral ministry in the Christian churches, the REA readily included participation from Catholic, Jewish, Muslim educators and others – and from Religion Studies.



1903 William Rainey Harper founded the Religious Education Association.



1903 REA convention. John Dewey keynote address on the relationship between religion and education.

In the **United Kingdom**, where it was confirmed in 1944 as a key compulsory subject in the public school curriculum, Religious Education became an accepted part of general educational discourse and it developed an academic/research community in the universities. The public school emphasis was quite different from that in the United States where the focus was on Christian church congregational education. While Religious Education in US universities is often church related and church focused, in the UK, it is focused on public education.

In **Ireland**, developments were probably something like what happened in Australia. But there may also have been more awareness of the acceptance of Religious Education as a discipline in the UK, than was the case in Australia.

In **Europe**, in different settings, the word Religious Education also became well established in educational and religious discourses. (Note for example the long standing publication of *ERENews* European Religious Education News by Prof Flavio Pajer in Italy which notes developments, trends and issues in Religious Education in European countries as well as elsewhere. Free registration to get the regular periodical by email is now available at erenews@uniroma3.it Pajer stepped down as editor in late 2020.)

The Nature of Religious Education as an academic and research discipline

A feature of the discipline of Religious Education has been the fluidity and flexibility in the way it has adapted to meet the needs of new contexts and socio-cultural changes. Hence, there are different definitions of its nature and purposes according to context and period of history.

Examples of new dimensions added to the conception of Religious Education over time in different contexts.

- RE as Religious Instruction in the teachings of particular Christian churches
- RE for adults in the Christian churches
- RE as a subject in religious schools
- RE as a subject in the public school curriculum taught by regular departmental teachers who are not representing any particular church (E.g. UK, Norway etc.)
- RE as a subject in the public school curriculum taught as a denominational program by regular teachers who usually require both teacher education and accreditation from their church (E.g. Germany)
- RE for the Jewish and Muslim communities as well as for other religions and denominations.
- RE in various school types when many of the students are not practising members of any local community of faith. “What can RE offer to the education of the non-religious”.
- RE in the form of Religion Studies in various school types.
- RE as contributing to interreligious and intercultural education and dialogue.

RE as contributing to an ideological education – that is, learning about the ways ideologies are developed and disseminated; critical evaluation of ideologies.

RE as contributing to ‘worldviews education’, including non-religious worldviews.

RE as contributing to political education.

RE as ‘public Religious Education’ in relationship with concerns to develop ‘public theology’.

RE as a discipline described by various scholars. E.g. Religious Education needs to be “inter-institutional, inter-generational, inter-religious, and international.” (Moran, G. (1989). *Religious Education as a second language* Birmingham Alabama, Religious Education Press.

Etc.

There is a need for any group of scholars/researchers in a particular context to select the characteristics of the discipline that function best for them. It needs to provide some disciplinary credibility and structural security. It needs to be broad enough in scope to validate current work and flexible enough to allow new developments according to need. It needs to have relationships with other disciplines especially theology and education.

An example of a localised description of the academic discipline / field of research of Religious Education

Religious Education is an academic discipline and a field of research which is primarily interdisciplinary. It was based initially on the relationship between religion and education, and in religious institutions on the relationship between education and theology.

Religious Education draws on various disciplines in its investigations including education, history, theology, philosophy, psychology and sociology.

Religious Education is the discipline whose focus is *what it means to educate people spiritually, morally and religiously* in today’s globalised, mainly capitalist and consumer oriented countries, which exhibit various degrees of secularisation.

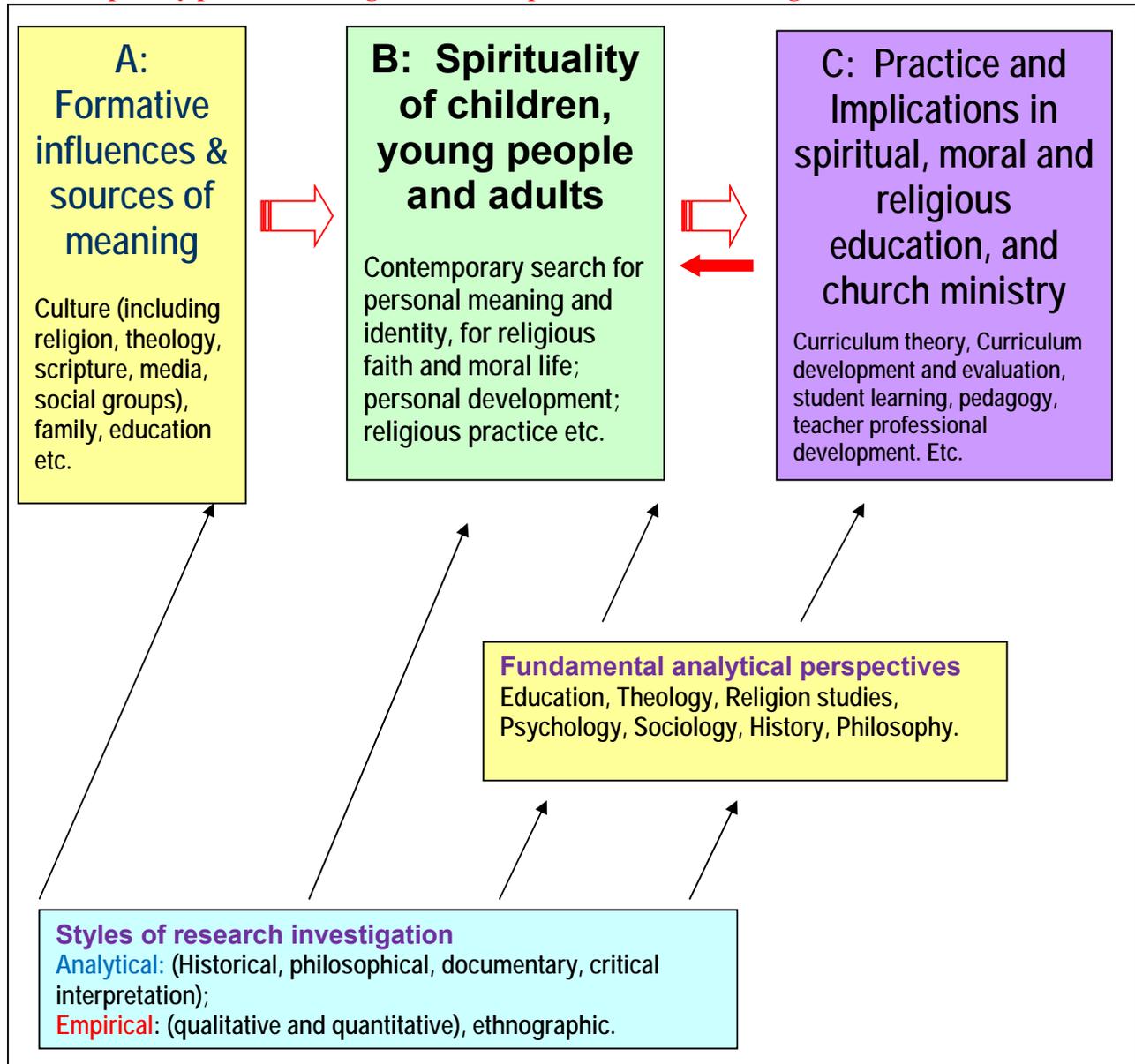
In Australian Catholic institutions it is specially concerned with all aspects of education for handing on the Catholic religious tradition and promoting the personal, spiritual and religious development of people, particularly young people in Catholic schools as well as for Catholic children in public schools. It is a discipline committed to the service of Australian Catholic education.

There is a prominent focus on spirituality as a construct which was originally religious but which now has a broader connotation, covering the contemporary search for meaning and values in a secularised culture. This includes study of cultural factors that can influence personal development as well as aspects of contemporary education such as equality, environmental and sustainability concerns.

Below is an attempt to illustrate this scheme diagrammatically.

Religious Education as a field of Research: Relationships between different research areas in Religious and Moral Education

Interdisciplinary problem solving research in spiritual, moral and religious education



This diagram shows how the *spirituality of children, young people and adults* can be used as an integrating focal point for problem solving research in Religious and Moral Education. While a range of research questions can be addressed from different perspectives and with different methodologies, they can be interrelated to make up a concentrated ‘thrust’ of research.

While some research focuses directly on the process in which young people construct meaning and identity (psychological development and formative influences), other studies look at young adults’ attitudes to religion and education. Some studies examine the appropriateness of different approaches to religious education curriculum and pedagogy/teaching, and the relevance of ‘school culture’. Historical studies seek to put curriculum development and teaching into wider perspective.

The interdisciplinary nature of Religious Education research is a fundamental distinguishing feature. This fosters relationships with research in other areas (Theology, Education etc. and facilitates potential collaborative research in Australia and overseas.)
