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Life to the full: the changing landscape of contemporary spirituality: implications for Catholic school religious education

by Graham Rossiter, Professor of Moral and Religious Education, NSW, Australia, ASMRE 2018, 140pp, (PDF) ISBN 978-0-9808681-5-9. Free download available from <https://asmre.org/book.html>

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BOOK REVIEW

Life to the full: the changing landscape of contemporary spirituality: implications for Catholic school religious education, by Graham Rossiter, Professor of Moral and Religious Education, NSW, Australia, ASMRE 2018, 140pp, (PDF) ISBN 978-0-9808681-5-9. Free download available from <https://asmre.org/book.html>

‘Life to the full: The changing landscape of contemporary spirituality: Implications for Catholic school Religious Education’ makes an invaluable contribution to the understanding of Catholic school religious education (RE). Rossiter identifies and examines the critical issues besetting Catholic RE in a rapidly changing society; he contests an ecclesial understanding of RE and promotes innovative approaches to address these challenges.

The book is rooted in Australian Catholic schools’ context, yet it has an international relevance for Catholic religious educators, teachers, students, and teacher educators. It should also be of interest to all within the Catholic faith who hold responsibility for developing young people’s faith and spirituality in a Catholic school context. This book has the advantage of being readily accessible to practitioners and researchers as it is available as a free downloadable PDF.

The book comprises 12 Chapters, some of which have been previously published in a variety of journals. Each chapter stands alone, but together they form a significant work on classroom RE in Catholic schools. Rossiter evaluates theory and practice in Catholic RE, with a strong emphasis on practical application in Catholic schools. He draws on the experience of many years of teaching and researching in religious education, and his writing is informed by critical feedback from teachers and postgraduate students. The ambitious aim for the book is to promote a theory of Catholic education that enhances young people’s experience of RE, and which both gives access to the rich heritage of the Catholic tradition and also resource their spirituality ‘*in ways that helped them negotiate a more meaningful life in an increasingly complex and challenging culture*’ (p. x). A detailed reading of the book should motivate Catholic educators to question whether their experience of Catholic RE realises Rossiter’s aim.

The book is structured in three main parts: Part A -The changing landscape of contemporary spirituality – a ‘need to know’ for Religious Educators; Part B - Issues for Catholic school Religious Education; and the concluding section Part C- Leadership in demonstrating a spiritual and moral dimension to Australian school education. While each chapter stands alone, a reading from Chapter 1 to 12 leads the reader on a journey through the changes in interpretations of spirituality, through an innovative exploration of contemporary secular spirituality to an examination of the issues for Catholic RE, and concludes with some pertinent recommendations for Catholic RE if it is to be relevant for future generations. Key themes

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woven throughout the book, are the importance of understanding and acknowledging contemporary secular spirituality, the need for classroom RE to be relevant to the lives of all young people in Catholic schools, and the imperative to restore a creative tension between ecclesial expectations and a commitment to RE as an educational activity.

The first short Chapter (pp.1–4) sits apart from sections A, B, and C. It sets out an understanding of the nature and purpose of Catholic school RE.

[It] is about educating young people spiritually, ethically, and religiously. It is not primarily a religious experience, but it essentially teaches young people about religion and spiritual and moral issues from a Catholic viewpoint. (p.1)

For Rossiter, Catholic RE should enable young people to have knowledge and understanding of Catholicism and other religious traditions; it should provide a critical evaluation of culture and academic study. RE must help young people be informed critical thinkers and promote their spiritual, moral, and religious development (p.2). This Chapter introduces a theme echoed throughout the book: the tension between framing Catholic religious education in exclusively ecclesial terms and a commitment to young people's spiritual education. If Catholic RE is only viewed in ecclesial terms, it has limited relevance for pupils who do not identify as a church-going Catholic.

Part A (pp. 6–82) comprises seven chapters (Chapters 2–8) that examine spirituality's changing landscape. Chapter 2 (pp. 7–19) offers a detailed analysis of three key terms: Religion, Faith, and Spirituality. Rossiter (p.15) suggests RE is aligned more with theology than religious faith and should concentrate on educational purposes and step away from '*an unrealistic preoccupation with changing individuals' faith and religious life.*' A way forward is to view spirituality as a '*central bridging construct between religious and secular thinking.*' This leads to exploration in the next five chapters of how the landscape of spirituality has changed.

The development of secularisation is considered in Chapter 3 (pp.20–26), while Chapter 4 (pp.27–37) offers an exploration of the contrasts between medieval Christian and *the development of a relatively secular, individualistic spirituality* (p.27). The relevance of this for Catholic RE is that Catholic educators need to accept secular spirituality is the norm, and seek to diagnose and address its needs constructively, rather than seek to eliminate and replace it (p.37).

The next three chapters, 5, 6, and 7, examine whether a new consumerist lifestyle is more appropriate than secularisation. Chapter 5 (pp. 38–49) examines research literature about the relationship between media, religion, culture, and advertising. The film studies term of '*mise en scene*' is introduced and employed as an analytical tool for exploring how religions create this background of meaning. Rossiter argues that the consumerist lifestyle functions psychologically like a dominant global religion (p. 51), and thus because it can be interpreted as a religion, it should be studied critically in RE.

Chapter 6 & 7 propose an appropriate pedagogy for this. Chapter 6 (pp. 50–62) looks at the pedagogy to evaluate medieval Christianity and secular spirituality's '*mise en scene.*' It provides a fascinating consideration of medieval Christian spirituality with its focus on the spiritual realm and the next life and explores how this contrasts with today's dominant spirituality, with its focus almost exclusively existential on the here and now. Looking at the implications, Rossiter returns to an

underlying theme that RE needs to help young people identify and evaluate contemporary life's values and images. Chapter 7 (pp. 63–72) offers a critique of the beliefs and values of 'consumerist religion' and highlights the need for evaluation of different spiritualities. Rossiter raises a critical issue for religious educators: encouraging young people *to become critical interpreters and evaluators of contemporary cultural meanings ... can be perceived as an attack on their lifestyle (p.71)*. To mitigate this perception, Rossiter suggests that employing the comparative model avoids appearing as an attack on individual lifestyles and encourages people to interpret and evaluate the visual imagery associated with the different spiritualities (p. 72).

Chapter 8 (pp. 73–82) stands apart in this section as it looks at the contrasts between children's and adolescents' spirituality and raises some pertinent questions for primary school RE. Rossiter highlights the contrasting approaches in the research literature, children's spirituality is usually described in favourable terms, while research on adolescent spirituality draws attention to its absence. One interesting reason for the perception of decline is that children acquire 'school uniform religiosity' which is never updated and wanes with age (p. 79).

Rossiter suggests that early socialisation for many children entering the Catholic primary schools will be into their parents' contemporary secular spirituality. They grow up in the 'divine absence' and only hear about God when they enter a Catholic school. Thus the Catholic primary school will be significantly extending their spiritual and religious horizons; religious education will seem like a '*second language*' to that spoken at home (p.79).

The crux of this book lies in the final sentences of this chapter. Rossiter raises the question of Catholic schools' value if children are not religious before they come or when they leave. This observation should be

a potent catalyst for reinterpreting the Catholic schools' mission to enhance and resource the basic human spirit of both students and their parents, whether or not they are engaged with a local parish (p. 81).

Part B (Chapters 9–11) identifies and examines the issues for Catholic school RE. Chapter 9 (pp. 84–94) picks up on one of the threads woven throughout the book that Catholic RE is seen primarily as a religious activity. Rossiter argues that RE is limited if the Catholic Church determines the language, and he highlights the problems generated by the variety of ecclesial terms applied to RE, such as its relationship with 'faith formation.' Throughout this section, Rossiter stresses that there needs to be a restoration of the creative tension between *ecclesiastical concerns and teachers' views on pupils' spiritual/moral needs* (p. 86), to ensure the relevance of RE and encourage research and innovation. He concludes that the biggest problem facing religious education in Australian Catholic schools today is the perception that it is essentially an *ecclesial* rather than an *educational* activity.

Chapter 10 (pp. 95 -104) argues the need for a critical, dialogical, inquiring pedagogy, and issue-related content, which will require a re-orientating of the Catholic RE curriculum. It will need to provide young people with the skill to interpret and evaluate cultural meanings critically. In seeking to enhance young people's spirituality, Catholic RE could make a valuable contribution to education in general.

The interaction between personal and institutional identity is explored in Chapter 11 (pp. 105–124), with Rossiter concluding that a more appropriate and realistic way of approaching education in religious identity is to *resource young people's identity*

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development, especially by giving them *educational access to their religious heritage* (p.116).

Part C Leadership in demonstrating a spiritual and moral dimension to the Australian school education consists of one Chapter 12 (pp. 126 - 134). This chapter looks at how Catholic education could or should provide leadership in spiritual and moral education. Rossiter concludes with recommendations: the need to build up the critical dimension in the RE curriculum; to acknowledge the relatively secular spirituality of young people; the need to take into account young people's disposition towards Religious Education, to simplify the language of RE and provide leadership in Australian education. The chapter concludes with the clear message that underpins all twelve chapters.

Educationally resourcing the spirituality and identity of young people helps them negotiate a more meaningful and fulfilling life in a complex and challenging culture. (Hence the title "Life to the full"). If RE is not recontextualised, it does not include a critical study of contemporary life for many young people; it will be irrelevant. (p.133)

The challenges and the opportunities that Rossiter identifies for Catholic RE deserve careful consideration. The challenges must be addressed if we are to avoid Catholic RE becoming an irrelevance. There is a need and opportunity for Catholic Religious education at times of crisis, such as the present when young people seek help to *negotiate a more meaningful and fulfilling life*. Although this book is rooted in Australian Catholic schools, the issues are recognisable to any Catholic educator in a western context. I would highly recommend this book as of interest to all who are involved in Catholic religious education.

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