A Strategy for Putting Religious Education Back on the "Australian Catholic Schools Map"

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Introduction

The Australian bishops' National Catholic Education Commission identified the distinctive place of religious education (RE) in the Catholic school as follows:

- [RE] . . . the classroom learning and teaching of religion . . . which is responsive to changing social, ecclesial and educational contexts . . . [is] the learning area at the heart of the Catholic school (NCEC, 2018, p. 5).
- [RE is] a scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands and the same rigour as other disciplines (p. 6, quoting the Roman *General Directory of Catechesis*, 1997, n. 73).
- [RE] expands students' spiritual awareness and religious identity, fostering their capacities and skills of discerning, interpreting, thinking critically, seeking truth and making meaning (p. 7).

However, there is some concern among Catholic educators that all is not well with this core subject in the Catholic school curriculum. There appears to be some discernible loss of focus for RE, especially in the language used for articulating its purposes. Perhaps an unintended consequence of the special attention given to Catholic identity, faith formation, new evangelisation, and the church's mission has been some growing ambiguity about the *nature* and *role* of RE in the Catholic school. In a sense, RE seems to be slipping off the Catholic school map; and this can affect the morale of religion teachers as well as cloud their perspective on the educational task at hand.

This article briefly identifies the potential problem, and speculates about how to address it in a way that will prompt more reflection and debate among those variously engaged in the enterprise of Catholic schooling. The article is not about the religious "life" of the school, which has always been fundamentally important; but it has never been a substitute for religious "education": the two are complementary. What follows will suggest the need for restating Catholic RE in a way that is meaningful and realistic; this is essential for securing the professional support of all teachers in the schools, and crucial for making it a valuable part of young people's education. It tries to respond to the call in the NCEC (2018) *Framing Paper: Religious Education in Australian Catholic schools* to rearticulate RE to address more effectively the contemporary socioreligious situation of the young people in Catholic schools.

How Catholic schools talk about RE (the discourse of RE) is an important starting point for informing classroom practice. And in times of unprecedented social change and uncertainty, amplified by the current pandemic, it is more important than ever to show how RE can make a valuable contribution to young people's education and their personal/spiritual/religious development. This may help diminish the noticeable and growing divide between the discourse of Catholic RE and the realities of the classroom and young people's spirituality.

Emergence of the Problem of "Ecclesiastical Drift" in the Discourse of Australian Catholic School Religious Education

In 1970, in the article "Catechetics R.I.P.", US scholar Gabriel Moran was one of the first to comment on an emerging problem within the language of Catholic RE. Where idiosyncratic, ecclesiastical terms were used exclusively, the discourse became "in-house" and relatively closed to outside ideas and debate. Since 1981, publications by Rossiter (1981) and Crawford and Rossiter collectively (1985, 1988, 2006, 2018) drew attention to various aspects of this problem, including the multiplicity of ecclesiastical terms as well as the way that devotional and emotional titles, and presumptive language had negative effects on religion curricula and teaching.

More recently, Rossiter (2020) explained the problem he labelled as "ecclesiastical drift". It is said to occur where the discourse about the purposes and practices of RE has gradually and incrementally come to be dominated almost exclusively by constructs like faith development, faith formation, Catholic identity, new evangelisation, and Catholic mission. There is evidence (in diocesan and school documents/websites and in the renaming of former diocesan RE departments, as well as in the rise of new religious leadership roles in Catholic schools) that these ecclesiastical terms have been replacing the term "religious education". For example: in one instance, the rebadged, advertised role description of the former diocesan RE director did not include any direct mention of RE. Also noted in this study, has been a deleterious effect on RE as an academic discipline at Catholic tertiary institutions.

Only some conclusions from the study will be summarised here, where the focus will turn towards what might be done to address this ongoing problem:

- Excessive use of ecclesiastical 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.
- Ecclesiastical language dominance eclipses the educational dimension to RE and what suffers is thinking about what it means to *educate* today's young people spiritually and religiously.
- If students, teachers, and parents are inclined to see RE as an *ecclesiastical* rather than as an *educational* activity, then increasingly they are less likely to see it as a meaningful part of school education.
- Special attention given to Catholic identity gives the impression of exclusiveness that can make the thirty per cent of students who are not Catholic, as well as the non-religious Catholic students, and non-Catholic and non-religious teachers feel uncomfortable and perhaps marginalised.

As noted later in the article, an empirical study has been initiated to investigate the views that teachers and senior students have on these questions.

A Proposed Strategy for Addressing the Problem of Ecclesiastical Drift

The remainder of the article will summarise principles/issues as parts of an overall strategy that might help bring more balance to the discourse of Catholic school RE by emphasising its educational value and processes. Hopefully, this can assist in reconfiguring the creative tension that needs to exist between legitimate ecclesiastical and educational perspectives.

What follows is in one sense not anything new. It is proposed simply as putting a spotlight on current best thinking and practice. This could be affirming for religion teachers as well as more inviting to teachers who are considering involvement. Detailed academic references for the items have been omitted. This does not mean that they lack academic roots and credibility. The list of principles/issues may well be "old hat" for many religion teachers; if this is the case, and if a high proportion are "on the same page", then I would see this as "good news". Inevitably there are different and conflicting estimates of the nature and purposes of school RE, and individuals will disagree with, and diverge from, the value positions stated here. But as well as proposing emphases that will address ecclesiastical drift, this material will help readers pinpoint more readily which are the issues that they consider still remain controversial and open to debate.

In brief, this is about building a narrative for RE that can give a *meaningful account of the educational value of this core spiritual/moral subject* in the curriculum that can *resource* *the spirituality of young people* for life in the twenty-first century, whether or not they are formally religious or Catholic. Hopefully, this narrative can enhance both the perceptions of RE as well as its classroom practice. In turn, this might help “put religious education back on the Catholic schools map”.

First, there are three main functions for RE:

- giving young people substantial access to their Catholic religious heritage with knowledge (and experience where relevant) of theology, scripture, liturgy, prayer, morality, church history etc.;
- growth in knowledge of other religious traditions that are present in Australia and of their complex interactions with society;
- development of skills in the critical evaluation of the shaping influence of culture on beliefs, values, and lifestyle, together with study of contemporary spiritual/moral issues. This aspect needs to have more prominence in the senior classes.

Elements in the Strategy

(1) Avoid Ecclesiastical Drift Language and Restore Balance by Giving More Attention to Educational and Psychological Accounts of Religious Education

Because ecclesiastical terms are so deeply embedded in the current discourse of RE, it has become difficult for educators to articulate its purposes without recourse to them (Rossiter, 2018, p. 132). But it is educationally rewarding to try to do so—reformulating one’s understanding of RE in terms that are meaningful and relevant for students and teachers. In 1985, Crawford and Rossiter argued why this task is so important—and this is even more critical for Catholic RE now than it was then:

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

(2) Enhancing Students’ Perceptions of the Educational and Potential Personal Value of the Subject, Religious Education

The narrative for RE needs to give more attention to explaining for both students and teachers its educational values. It is the only core subject that is directly concerned with the spiritual/moral dimension to life. It can cover this content to help *resource the personal spirituality* of young people no matter what their religious disposition. Children have a *right* to an informative education in their own cultural religious tradition; at their own personal level they will respond differently and not all will become active members of the church. But all need to become properly *educated* citizens, and this includes systematic knowledge and understanding of religion.

In addition to the above educational values of RE, attention can be given at different places in the religion curriculum to highlighting the following:

- While RE is about *educating* young people spiritually, morally and religiously, the process hopefully will enhance their capacity to find meaning and value in life, and in decision-making while trying to navigate a happy life in a challenging culture, in difficult times. The current pandemic has amplified the uncertainty and fears that many young people were already experiencing; previously secure and stable presumptions about lifestyle, freedom, career, travel, media, communications, peak experiences etc. now seem more contingent and fragile, making it more pressing to give attention to clarifying personal values and goals in life. Education cannot make young people wise—but it can *resource their wisdom*. Hopefully, the knowledge and skills gained from RE can help them become more capable of learning from their life experience.
- Students' awareness of contemporary spiritual/moral issues and the value of analytical and interpretative skills for their evaluation; growth in confidence that they can research important questions and make better informed decisions.
- Research indicates that young people with reasonable theological backgrounds are less likely to be "conned" into joining religious cults.

- As noted in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, being educated in religions has been a valuable background for people engaged in various roles of public service (e.g., doctors, nurses, paramedics, other healthcare workers, teachers, police, lawyers, etc.).

(3) The Importance of a Core Spiritual/Moral Subject in the School Curriculum

This is a long-held key element in Catholic educational philosophy and arguably the most distinctively Catholic religious aspect of Catholic schools. Catholic educational philosophy has always abided by the principle that *any school curriculum (even in state schools) that does not have a learning area that attends specifically to the spiritual/moral dimension would be judged as deficient*. This is the rationale for having RE as a core element in the curriculum of Catholic schools since their origins in Australia in the early 1800s. Arguably, *religious education is the most distinctive Catholic religious feature of Australian Catholic schooling*.

This argument suggests that RE should be regarded as philosophically the most important subject in the curriculum. The fact that it has low status and how this fuels students' dislike of RE will be considered later (see item 5, below).

(4) Religious Education as a Challenging Academic Subject Across the School Curriculum

RE should be an academic subject that in no way suffers by comparison with the academic demands made by other regular subjects. For this principle to work, it has to apply from the earliest primary school years. What is considered to be "academic" will naturally be different depending on the age and level of maturity of the students. For example, in the early years a literal "hands on" approach is a part of being "academic".

This principle means that RE should abide by all the standard protocols for student study, assignments, and examinations and assessment procedures. Where a challenging academic study is not experienced by students, they are more likely to consider RE as of little consequence in their schooling.

What happens in religion classes should be comparable with what happens in other standard academic subjects in the school curriculum. Hence, there should be a transfer of good teaching methods and skills into religion lessons.

(5) Acknowledging and Addressing the Problem of Negative Student Perceptions of Religion and Religious Education

Because of the relatively low regard for religion among many people in secularised Western countries, it is inevitable that this will flow over into poor perceptions of RE by Catholic school students and their parents. While RE is philosophically the most important life-related subject in the curriculum, its perceived life-relevance is "subverted" by a number of sociocultural and educational factors. This is explained in detail in Crawford and Rossiter (2006, chap. 14, esp. pp. 307–309).

There is no formula that will completely solve this problem. Even where students have said they "like RE" and acknowledge that they can learn something valuable about life from it, they will still feel that it is of little importance by comparison with the subjects that "count" like English, Maths etc. Acknowledging the problem as a sort of "natural" one these days is important for RE teachers—and for their mental health. Anything that can be done to enhance students' experience and perceptions of the subject, including the proposals here, will be helpful.

(6) The Potential Place for the Teacher's Own Beliefs and Commitments in Classroom Interactions: The Ethics of Teaching

This and the following four sections as a block, deal with topics that have significant ethical implications for teachers as well as students. They are concerned with the interactions and learning transactions that occur in the classroom. They have a considerable bearing on both content and pedagogy, and on expectations of what should be achieved in RE. For many years I have been puzzled why diocesan RE documents do not address these questions in any depth. While I believe that most religion teachers follow their own healthy professional instincts on these questions, there remains some ambiguity and uncertainty that, in my view, have been created and sustained by the ongoing problem of ecclesiastical drift, which affects teachers' understanding of the nature and purposes of RE.

This topic is an issue at the heart of the educator's ethics of teaching. One of the very best and most useful accounts of the question has been in the writings of Australian philosopher of education and Christian education scholar, Brian Hill. A detailed presentation of his views is provided on the Agora for Spiritual, Moral and Religious Education (ASMRE) (2020) website. The code of ethics for teaching referred to here is derived from Hill (1981).

The teacher's personal and professional commitments should not be confused. The teacher is to help students engage with the content. Teachers may refer to their own personal views only if, and when, they judge that this makes a valid educational contribution to the classroom transactions; and the same applies to the students. Their personal views are content along with the other provided content and should be subject to the same sort of academic class evaluation. The teacher should not "privilege" their own personal views. Neither should they compromise church teachings and other content by substituting their own idiosyncratic interpretation.

Pope John Paul II made a strong statement about this potential problem in *Catechesi tradendae* in 1979:

> [The religion teacher/catechist] will not seek to keep directed towards himself and his personal opinions and attitudes the attention and the consent of the mind and heart of the person he is catechising. Above all, he will not try to inculcate his personal opinions and options as if they expressed [adequately] Christ's teaching and the lessons of his life. (n. 6)

No one (teacher or student) should ever be made to feel any psychological pressure to reveal their own personal views. Anyone can "pass" if they do not want to talk about them. If any personal sharing occurs naturally in class, that is fine and it should be valued and acknowledged. But personal testimony is not the purpose of classroom RE (while it is often more natural and prominent in voluntary religious commitment groups). Content needs to be presented impartially. The teacher should be able to model responsible, respectful, critical evaluation.

Evidence suggests that such an ethical regime in the classroom not only protects students and teachers' privacy and personal views, it makes it more likely that personal statements may be made comfortably, precisely because of the ethically respectful class environment (cf. item 7, below).

May there be Christian witnessing in the classroom? It is pertinent here to note the problem sometimes caused by misunderstanding the implications of the teacher being a Christian witness. Christian witnessing is about how Christlike individuals are in the way they relate to other people and the environment etc. This is about how the core values in a person are manifested. Witnessing goes on all the time both inside and outside the classroom. But witnessing is not a classroom pedagogy. And it is not an un-ethical licence to purvey one's own views in the classroom. See also item 8 below.

The Place for Personalism and Relevance in Religious Education (Items 7–10)

(7) Personalism: What Does Making RE Personal Mean? What Is Healthy, Authentic Personal Sharing in the Classroom? What Is Faith Sharing? How Does Personal Sharing Foster Personal and Spiritual Development? What Ethical Caution Is Needed to Prevent Manipulation?

The stance that teachers take on the issues signposted here strongly influences what they will try to achieve in their classroom interactions with students and in interactions between students. A more detailed discussion of "The Quest for Personalism and Relevance in Religious Education" is given in Crawford and Rossiter (2006, chap. 17, pp. 391–408).

Since the 1960s, one of the principal driving motifs in Catholic RE was the intention to make it more *personal* and *life relevant* for young people (Buchanan, 2005; Rossiter, 1999; Ryan, 2013). Not all the efforts in this direction were successful. In particular, where so named "personal sharing" discussions came to dominate RE, they were perceived by students as contrived rather than authentically personal; they felt uncomfortable with any perceived psychological pressure to reveal the inner self. This same problem exists to some extent in contemporary RE when too much attention is given to "sharing your personal story" or "witnessing your faith journey" (cf. 8 below)—an approach that is more relevant in retreats than in the classroom; but even in retreats it causes problems.

The desirability of healthy personalism and relevance in RE has never been in question. Perhaps now they are more pertinent and important than at any previous time. The critical questions are about how much and what sort of personalism and relevance are desired, and how teachers and the RE curriculum are to promote this in healthy and ethical ways.

Crawford (1982) in a seminal article showed that it was really *informed debate* rather than *personal sharing* that was "at home" in RE; and that a challenging academic study with the right sort of content provided the best natural context not only for such debate but also for personal insights from students when they felt comfortable enough to contribute freely to the learning process in this way. Her study also showed how wrong it was to claim that RE could not be *personal* if it was *academic*; the two are in no way incompatible. See also items 9 and 10 below, especially the need for personal/life-related content.

There is an interesting parallel evident in the discussion approach to British state school religious education in the mid-1960s. It was influenced by the writings of Loukes

(1961, 1965, 1973). But what proved problematic in both in the United Kingdom and in Catholic school discussion-oriented RE was the pedagogy. Uninformed discussion could amount to little more than sharing ignorant opinions. And the intention of having "deep" personal discussion was usually counterproductive. It could not sustain student interest for long. Also, this approach was perceived by students as a low-grade pedagogy in a subject that had little academic status; the crucial missing ingredient was a high-grade pedagogy: a serious study of the issues, in the light of up-to-date expert information. Here dialogue or discussion was one useful part of the whole study exercise—like an informed debate—and not like a time-filling, non-directed, relatively purposeless activity.

(8) The Relevance of "Sharing Your Personal Story" and "Witnessing Your Faith Journey"

The religion program *Sharing Our Story* originated in the Parramatta diocese (Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Parramatta, 1999) and was adopted or adapted in some other dioceses. It was based on Groome's (1980) Shared Christian Praxis approach. There were also references in diocesan and other literature stating or implying that "personal faith sharing" was a fundamentally important process in RE. It was regarded as the transaction in RE in which personal faith "developed".

The interest in personal sharing spread widely in RE in the 1970s following the impact of Carl Rogers' (1961, 1969) relationship-centred, humanistic psychology, where the idea of intimate personal sharing in encounter groups became popular with the religious personnel who accounted for most of the Catholic school religion teachers at the time. It influenced their thinking about, and practice of, personalism in the RE classroom. And in the next decade, this morphed into the idea of personal, *religious* faith sharing in the wake of the great popularity of Fowler's (1981) *psychological* faith development theory. The term *faith development* still remains prominent in the contemporary Catholic RE discourse.

From fifteen years of conducting adult retreats, I have regularly experienced and valued the sharing of personal insights in groups. No doubt it was important for the participants and they would see it as helpful for their own lives. Whether it was the participants' fundamental faith/fidelity relationship with God that was being shared or a "lesser" personal matter, I was never interested in wanting to know. I could comfortably leave all the details of personal faith in the hands of God and the believer. I also have firsthand experience of young people sharing personal insights in voluntary commitment groups and camps, and to a lesser extent in school retreats. In these settings, especially where participation was voluntary, there seemed to be an unspoken acceptance that sharing of personal insights was natural and healthy. But it could not be authentic if there was any psychological pressure to contribute at this level.

The religion classroom in Catholic schools is a type of public educational forum. It is not like the voluntary retreat. Hence, I take the position that "sharing of personal/faith insights" is not a principal, or even a desirable, activity to try to make happen in this setting. The ethical principles noted in item 6 above should apply to both students and teachers in the classroom—in RE and all other subjects. It is not that personal sharing is wrong. It is not banned. It is good and healthy when free, authentic, and not contrived. And as noted in item 7, it often occurs naturally within a sound academic study; but this is a valuable, somewhat serendipitous event. It is an unintended healthy by-product of academic study and a respectful, accepting class climate, and not a programmed or expected outcome that is essential for RE. In most cases, how young people integrate learning in RE within their own beliefs, values, and lifestyle will happen privately and slowly over many years.

Problems with misunderstanding of witnessing were noted in item 6. In a study of retreats in Catholic secondary schools, Rossiter cautioned about the strategy of teachers (and others) telling their "personal faith journey" as a stimulus to get students to do the same. While students naturally are interested in any personal details volunteered by their teachers, the faith journey approach can be counterproductive, particularly if it appears contrived and rehearsed, and if there is unwelcome psychological pressure on young people to make revelations about their personal thinking and values. I expect that adolescents are uncomfortable if they feel the teacher is manoeuvring them towards talking about their "faith journey". I heard a report from some students who have labelled teachers who tried this as "over-exposures" or "over-sharers". There are related difficulties where a student personal RE journal or diary is required and even more so where this is to be inspected by teachers.

(9) Relevance in Pedagogy: The Need for Critical, Evaluative, Research-Oriented Pedagogy, Especially in the Senior Classes

Brian Hill described the mission of education as "resourcing the choosing self", while RE could make a special contribution through helping students "to *interrogate their own cultural conditioning* and reach a position of being able to develop an adequate personal framework of meaning and value" (Hill, 2006, p. 55, italics in the original; see also Hill, 2004).

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.

A critical pedagogy and issue-related content can be a part of religious education across the whole curriculum. How it is employed will depend upon the age and academic maturity of the students. The same style of pedagogy can and should be applied when teaching formally religious topics.

A good student-centred religious education always includes the following pedagogical elements in an age-appropriate fashion: information-rich study; knowledge of traditions; critical interpretation; informed debate; the experiential dimension; student research.

Much more detail on an inquiring, evaluative pedagogy is provided in Rossiter (2018). Examples of presentations from students, as well as from postgraduate RE teachers that illustrate mini-research projects on contemporary spiritual/moral issues are posted on the ASMRE (2020) website.

(10) Relevance in Content: Including Something on World Religions and on the Contemporary Search for Meaning, Including Contemporary Spiritual/Moral Issues

It is difficult to sell the idea of a religion curriculum that is relevant to students' lives if all the content is exclusively Catholic. While in Catholic schools it is to be expected that Catholicism would be the principal content of RE, it is recognised that most of the students are not very religious and for them a broader content would be beneficial. But even for the religious, regular churchgoing students, just studying Catholicism would be an inadequate religious education. They need the second and third elements mentioned earlier just as much as the non-religious students.

Attention to world religions has long been a part of Catholic RE, even if most diocesan syllabuses make little mention of it. In German state schools, where denominational RE is taught by regular, trained departmental teachers, study of world religions has been for many years a mandated part of the Catholic religion curriculum.

But just including some world religions content is not enough. There is a need for more issue-oriented content that is pertinent to contemporary life, including spiritual and moral issues and study of the search for meaning in a secularised, consumer society. This is important if young people are to see RE as making a valuable contribution to their education and personal development (cf. item 2). Note, for example, an elective unit in the new Brisbane Catholic Education (2019) syllabus for the course *Religion, Meaning and Life* is titled "Identity and Meaning: How People Construct Personal Identity and Community in a Consumerist Culture".

Because Catholic school Y11–12 students can already study state ATAR courses like *Studies of Religion* and *Religion and Society*, and non-ATAR *Religion and Ethics*, it has been acceptable to have "other-than-Catholic" content in RE programs at this level. So the principle of allowing for the study of spiritual/moral questions that at first sight are not formally religious can be claimed as already established in Catholic RE. At this point it is noted that in my professional opinion, the state-accredited courses can be judged not to have enough life-relevant content because they have for too long stayed with the descriptive world religions approach that dominated UK school courses in the early 1970s (Crawford and Rossiter, 2006).

(11) Participation in Research Concerned With the Discourse of Catholic Religious Education

Currently, trial data collection has commenced in a survey that investigates the extent to which teachers think that there is a problem with excessive use of ecclesiastical terms in RE (ASMRE, 2020). This is an opportunity for those engaged in RE to have their say.

Ecclesiastical terms have become so embedded in the fabric of Catholic RE that any questioning of their relevance and utility tends to be resisted, because it feels somewhat uncomfortable—as you would feel if you were questioning key words in the country's founding constitution. These terms have acquired a resilience in the discourse of RE and they are likely to remain prominent for a considerable time to come. It seemed unlikely then that, initially, the survey would show a high proportion of teachers who readily identified the problems in ecclesiastical drift. Hence the principal purpose of the questionnaire was to serve as an initial stimulus for religion teachers to think about the issues and potential problems. I called it the "stop and think!" or "reflective" questionnaire. It may perhaps incline religion teachers towards a more discerning and frugal use of ecclesiastical constructs.

The first part of the questionnaire asks for a simple valuation of various ecclesiastical and educational words for explaining the purposes of RE. This is followed by some brief narratives or scenarios for RE where an exclusively ecclesiastical narrative can be compared with others that have an educational focus.

Then questions are raised about potential problems with excessive use of ecclesiastical terms where they have displaced the term "religious education" from the RE narrative. Attention is then given to particular constructs: faith formation and Catholic identity. In addition to investigating ecclesiastical drift, the survey has items looking at the possibility of giving more curriculum space and time to critical evaluation of culture and study of the contemporary search for meaning and values in a relatively secularised society.

The questionnaire takes about fifteen minutes to complete. However, some trial participants noted that it takes longer because it prompted them to pause and think about the issues, resulting in some clarification of their views. The proportion of participants who choose the "not sure" option for questionnaire items could end up being significant as an indicator of a "stop and think" approach to the survey.

In the trial, some found it more difficult answering the initial questions evaluating the various terms; they said it was easier to answer questions than to identify potential problems related to the excessive use of ecclesiastical language. While the initial trial data has not yet been analysed and while no Catholic school systems have yet participated systematically, I anticipate that the same pattern in the results of an earlier small-scale study of the views of teachers and parents by Finn (2011) would show up again. He found that teachers (more so than parents) were respectful of ecclesiastical terms. But both groups found "the language was generally confusing and not helpful for understanding religious education" (Finn, 2011, p. 84; cf. pp. 89, 111).

Hopefully, it will be possible to get Catholic diocesan school systems interested in participating in the survey.

(12) Taking Into Account the Relative Secular Spirituality of Most Students in Catholic Schools

An important "need to know and understand" for religion teachers is the extensive secularisation of culture in Australia and elsewhere that has an inevitable bearing on how one approaches RE. Most of the pupils in Catholic schools are, or will be, non-churchgoing. Nevertheless, no matter what their religious affiliation and level of religious practice, RE can make a valuable contribution to their education and personal development resources (Rossiter, 2018).

Conclusion

This article has attempted to raise awareness about what is considered to be a significant problem for Australian Catholic school religious education going forward. And hopefully it may catalyse further research and debate on the questions considered.

To address the problem of ecclesiastical drift, it has compiled a set of principles/issues considered to be in line with best practice; it is not proposing any new approach. It recommends that efforts to revitalise the narrative of RE as a particularly valuable learning area in the Catholic school curriculum should give more attention to these aspects. And to stimulate and resource a contemporary reconfiguring of the narrative of RE, it has proffered ideas and unambiguous language that may help get RE better appreciated by teachers and students for its great potential in resourcing young people's spirituality and enhancing their capacity to construct a meaningful personal narrative for their own lives.

Also this discussion, by giving attention to the educational dynamics of RE, may help affirm what religion teachers do best: *educate*. It can help both current and prospective RE teachers by projecting more realistic *expectations* about the knowledge/skills student outcomes of RE, together with *hopes* about how it might enhance their personal spirituality. And this lessens the problem of evaluating RE in terms of changing the young people's level of religious practice. This may help give RE a more realistic, but also more prominent and important, place in the larger discourse of Australian Catholic education. In brief, these efforts may help "put religious education back on the Australian Catholic schools' map"—front and centre.

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