

Chapter 17

The quest for personalism and relevance in religious education

Student-centredness is rightly judged to be a desirable quality of education; it has long been prominent in religious education in both theory and practice, with varying success. Within the last decade or so, new names have been coined for particular strands in traditional subjects – for example: Mathematics and Society, Contemporary English, People in History. The word ‘Society’ added to Mathematics illustrated the movement to try to make subjects more relevant. In some cases, an unintended consequence of the new terminology has been an implied labelling of these strands as ‘low grade’ for slow learners (for example ‘Vege maths’). Nevertheless, the introduction of such units showed that curriculum developers and teachers were trying to relate subjects to the perceived needs and interests of young people. However, there was ambiguity about what constituted relevance. What were the criteria? Who would judge on relevance – teachers or pupils?

The quest for ‘relevance’ and ‘personalism’ has been an influential motif in Catholic religious education since the 1960s. In the past, efforts to engage pupils at a personal level and to be relevant to their lives were not widely successful because of unrealistic expectations, and inappropriate content and pedagogy. This chapter will argue that both personalism and relevance remain important goals, perhaps even more important now than they were forty years ago; and it proposes a different content/process formula. It begins with a clarification of the meaning of personalism and relevance as educational goals. In proposing how they can be accommodated within religious education, we draw parallels with principles elaborated in Part III concerned with the spiritual-moral dimension of the curriculum, and with ideas in Chapter 10 about education in meaning, identity and spirituality.

17.1 Personalism and relevance as educational goals

The adjectives ‘personal’ and ‘relevant’ as applied to education are closely linked, but for analytical purposes, comments will be made about each separately. The distinction will help establish what it means to have a healthy, natural personal dimension to religious education, together with content and process that can be perceived by pupils as being useful in some way to their lives – and not just an academic exercise that appears to have little or no significance beyond the classroom.

A ‘personal’ dimension to religious education can be identified both in content and process.

17.1.1 Personalism in content

This takes two forms. Content is *notionally personal* where it reports the particular personal views of individuals – expressing their subjective accounts of feelings, beliefs and values. It is autobiographical by contrast with content that is more factual, historical or abstract. It may include contributions from teachers and pupils.

Content has *potential for personal resonance* if it has the capacity to engage pupils' thinking about implications for their lives – if it touches their emotions and they perceive that it has some personal significance for them. It may have perceived links with pupils' experience; or it may alert them to new experience and new personal horizons. Various types of content can have this effect; it depends on the idiosyncratic responses of pupils (factual, abstract, historical, issue-related, value-sensitive, emotive, artistic). While strictly speaking, any content has this potential, teachers would rightly judge that some topics (for example value-related issues) would be more likely to be of personal interest than others (church history, description of religions).

While it is desirable to have personal content, particularly in a subject that naturally deals with meaning and values, it would be a mistake to think that the whole religion syllabus should be like this.

17.1.2 Personalism in process

This has to do with classroom interaction. It becomes personal when students and/or teachers express their own feelings, beliefs and values. The description is somewhat problematic because all classroom interactions are personal to some extent; and in many circumstances, it is difficult, and also artificial, to try to differentiate what is more 'personal' from what is 'impersonal'.

Participants may express views in intellectual debate that may or may not be held as personal values; they can contribute effectively without specifically identifying their own distinctive views. It is inappropriate to try to make judgments about how personal individuals' verbal contributions are. To want to do this harkens back to the problem of excessive personalism in 1970s religious education where too much attention was given to seeking 'self-revelations' or 'faith responses' from pupils as the touchstone of successful teaching.

The approach to personalism in the classroom needs to be consistent with the principles and ethics pertinent to personal interactions in a public forum. It should be principally concerned with content and secondarily with process. The scheme proposed in Chapters 13–14 allows a valuable place for personal interactions, but protects pupils by not making such interactions a requirement or a specified outcome; pupils should never be pressured psychologically to contribute at a personal level. Their personal views are safeguarded from any manipulation within the zone of freedom created around academic investigation; whether or not participants make significant self-revelations is then their option. Thus the best way of fostering personalism in the classroom is not to focus on it directly; rather, the focus should be on informative learning. The most significant personal learnings are then usually worked out in private reflection. Sometimes in favourable circumstances personal views may be shared in class; and they may even become commonplace, helping pupils learn from the personal contributions of others and learn how to develop and express their own insights.

17.1.3 Relevance in religious education

Content principally, but also process, are said to be *relevant* when they have perceived links with the experience, interests and needs of pupils; that is, when the

activity appears to help them make sense of an issue, especially if it has potential implications for their lives.

But the notion of educational relevance needs to be larger than what apparently ‘interests’ the students – loosely defined as any content not labelled as boring. Given the limited life experience of children and adolescents, they cannot be expected to always see the long-term significance of topics judged to be important by their teachers and curriculum authorities (and by parents); they are not in a position to make final judgments about what will or will not be relevant to their lives. They are naturally dependent to some extent on the wisdom of their educators, at school and in the home. Hence what appears to interest the students cannot be given exclusive or excessive consideration, while on the other hand their needs and interests should not be ignored. Some student say in negotiating their learning in spiritual and moral areas is essential. Balance is needed and research information required to inform professional decisions about curriculum content.

One important dimension to relevance in religious education – *content relevance* – has to do with the teaching of issue-oriented topics, concerned with meaning and values.

Pedagogical relevance is evident where good teaching strategies help students investigate the potential personal significance of content. For example, teachers may prompt students to see parallels between content and experience, and to consider implications at a personal level. History can be used to illumine contemporary events; similarly, contemporary experience can be a lens for interpreting the past. Such *evaluative pedagogy* highlights the meaning dimension of content.¹ But here too, balance is essential. It would become artificial and counterproductive to try to find personal relevance for every element of content. Also, finding personal relevance can often be left to the students’ own reflection – it does not have to be publicly identified.

In 1970s Catholic religious education, the interest in personalism and relevance was strongly associated with discussion. While well intentioned, it was too ‘low key’ to be taken seriously by students. While not discounting the value of discussions, personalism and relevance are appropriately fostered through content selection and a more ‘academic’ pedagogy; these goals will not be achieved in the classroom in an authentic fashion without academic credibility. For a long time, it was mistakenly thought that an academic approach to studying religion could not be relevant and personal. But components such as student research, investigative reading, interpretation and evaluation are not only central to religious education, but they create the very atmosphere in which class discussion becomes more focused, relevant and often personal.

Negative student perceptions of religious education remain a concern for Catholic educators. Efforts have long been directed towards trying to improve its relevance to students’ needs and interests. But there will always be some discrepancy between what teachers and pupils estimate as relevant. Ongoing research should monitor young people’s perceptions of religion and religious education. Interpreting the results should take into account how the reported level of dissatisfaction with religious education may be masked to some extent by students’ overall satisfaction with their experience in Catholic schools; they have often indicated appreciation of the community spirit, friendships, quality of education and staff commitment to their education and personal development – as well as kindly acceptance of the good will

behind religious education. These same students will point out that the religious education they experience is out of sync with their spirituality, but many of them will not complain, because they are not that interested. It is easy for teachers in these circumstances to mistakenly think that all is well. Students today are not as ready to complain about irrelevance as they were in the 1960s and 1970s.

17.2 Study of issues as a key to personal relevance in the religion curriculum

At the end of the previous chapter it was proposed that more issue-oriented content was needed in curricula before most young people would see that religious education could be personally relevant. Such an approach is consistent with the needs and secularised spirituality of many youth as described in Chapters 8 and 9. In addition, much traditional religious content could be taught with an issues-oriented slant, for example the problematic interpretation of scripture, issues related to the historical Jesus studies, and changing interpretations of what is meant by Christian salvation.

If this philosophy of religious education is accepted, attention then needs to be given to the following practical questions at the levels of curriculum development and school programming:

- determination of the scope for spiritual-moral issues that is appropriate for different age groups
- selection of particular issues for study
- clarification of issues-oriented pedagogies.

A more critically evaluative approach would be appropriate for middle to senior secondary pupils. It would need simplification for use in primary and junior secondary classes; but even at these levels, children need to learn skills in the identification, interpretation and appraisal of issues.

In the previous chapter, it was considered that both Catholic diocesan programs and state religion studies, for different reasons, did not give enough attention to contemporary spiritual and moral issues. In other words, they did not adequately mesh with the spirituality of young people – the points where they experience a spiritual-moral dimension to life. The syllabuses are too ‘domesticated’. They need to be more adventurous in allowing for a study of questions about meaning and purpose. It is not that they should be exclusively issue-oriented, but the proportion needs to increase. Such a change could help make the study of religion more relevant to young people, especially those who are relatively indifferent, but not antagonistic, to religious education. The approach is also considered to be the best way of representing to young people the case for participation in the Church.

While there remains a difference in professional opinion about where the balance should lie, it is unlikely that Catholic diocesan curricula will move significantly in an issues-oriented direction (16.2.3). If an increased emphasis on issues is to be included, then it will need to happen at the local level of school programming, as regards both content and pedagogy.

Some educators may argue that the inclusion of contemporary issues for study in religious education compromises its nature and purposes by adding topics that might stimulate the interest of students, even though the content is not specifically religious. It would be like repeating the problematic formula followed by some in 1970s

religious education where topics on ‘sex, alcohol and drugs’ (‘SAD’ religious education!) were included; it was claimed that this move was personal development education, but not *religious* education. We consider that religion has always been concerned with contemporary issues and that some attention to issues within religious education does not therefore compromise either the nature of religion or religious education (16.2.6).

Increasingly, general education – particularly in English, history, social science and personal development – is focusing on values, questions of meaning and social issues. By contrast, Catholic religious education seems to be giving less attention to issues than was the case formerly; the change stems from the descriptive content in Religion Studies courses that have been adopted in Years 11–12, and it may also be affected by moves to increase the amount of overtly Catholic content. It is disappointing if the most exciting and creative studies of contemporary spiritual and moral issues are to be found not in religion but in subjects like English and social science.

17.3 Examples of issue-oriented content in religious education

A good way of illustrating the formula proposed above is to look at particular topics that might be studied in the classroom. These could be of variable length and could be integrated with the study of more traditional religious content. It is not a whole curriculum, but the kind of topics that could well appear in the secondary school religion curriculum.

Critiques from a religious perspective [heading part of box]

Appraising the values – or lack of values – that underpin economic rationalist thinking.

Globalisation policies and free markets: whose interests are being served?

How do film and television influence people’s meaning, identity and spirituality?

What are the links between contemporary music and youth spirituality?

Theological issues

Critical interpretation of scripture increasingly approximates to the intended meaning of the authors, which needs to be understood within the cultural framework of its time.

The contemporary research on the historical Jesus: implications for the beliefs of Christians.

The evolution of doctrines such as original sin, redemption and atonement.

Current debates about the role of women in religion: the problem of patriarchy and gender bias in the Christian church.

Psychological spirituality

The development of identity – secular, ethnic, and religious – and its influence on human behaviour.

The possible links between identity (including religious identity) and problems like racism, violence and ethnic cleansing.

The role of religion in providing answers to fundamental questions about meaning, purpose and transcendence in life.

Science and religion

Analysis and interpretation of historical conflicts between science and religion.

The new Physics: its impact on religion, and on people’s ideas of God and creation.

An appraisal of Creation Science and Intelligent Design theory.

World religions

Judaism: Understanding the meaning of the Holocaust for contemporary Judaism; Jewish controversy over the religious and secular significance of the state of Israel; Controversy in Jewish views of out marriage and homosexuality.

Islam: Islamic teachings and terrorism; The interpretation of Jihad or holy war. Islamic fundamentalism.

Sects and cults: Why do people join them? Are cult members attracted because of their psychological needs or because of their personality type? How harmful is membership for their psychological and spiritual health?

[Box not styled]

This proposal remains controversial and it needs further consideration and debate.

One might be inclined to think that scripture and theology could be taught much as they were before. However, scripture and theology are problematic in contemporary Western culture; it would therefore be inappropriate not to acknowledge theological issues in religious education, especially with senior secondary students.

Clearly there needs to be balance in content selection. However, the overall credibility in the representation of the Catholic tradition may be jeopardised if Catholic school religious education is perceived by students as too concerned with maintenance of the institution, and not sufficiently interested in addressing the spiritual and moral issues of the day. Religious education should both resource and enhance young people's spirituality, whether or not this eventually involves participation in a parish community.

Issue-oriented religious education requires theologically well-educated teachers who are able to identify and explore questions at an appropriate level for students of different ages. The example topics above would not be suitable content for primary and junior secondary classes where acquiring a basic knowledge and understanding of religion is one of the main goals; but some evaluative study of issues is still important at this level. Also, teachers' knowledge of the complexity of doctrinal development will affect the way theological concepts are taught to younger students – avoiding the need to 'unlearn' some naive interpretations at a later stage.

17.4 The relevance of religious education and the relevance of the Church

As well as their educational role, church school religion teachers carry an additional responsibility in that they stand at the interface between young people and the Church. To some extent, they represent the Church and their role is interpreted theologically as a ministry; it acknowledges and accepts the aims of handing on the religious tradition and contributing to the evangelising mission of the Church. We consider that these responsibilities are best honoured when teachers are thoroughly educational in their approach, which means unconditional respect for the freedom and privacy of students while giving them good access to their religious heritage. However, because of the desire to commend church membership to the young, there is often a feeling of discouragement in religion teachers because their pupils seem uninterested. Even though they know they are not responsible for young people's acceptance (or rejection) of the Church, they may still feel that somehow they are not successful. Hence they may look for ways of improving religious education in the hope that this might result in winning more young people over in favour of the Church.

These feelings need to be put into perspective because they can not only be a source of distress for religious educators but can affect classroom delivery negatively. Teachers should acknowledge that young people's participation in the Church will not be determined exclusively by the quality of the religious education they experience. No amount of religious education can generate faith or bring about committed participation in a parish. Hence it is not a matter of thinking 'If we can present the Church in a relevant light, more students will embrace it'. Teachers may well be able to improve the *perceived relevance of the religious education process*, but this does not automatically affect the *perceived relevance of the Church*; the latter is a much larger question influenced by many factors. So the discussion of relevance in religious education needs to take this distinction into account: it is about making the classroom process more supportive of the emerging spirituality of young people, and this may or may not contribute to their view of the relevance of the Church. Correspondingly, when Catholics are thinking about improving the image of the Church, they should not expect that this can be brought about by religious education.

It is to be hoped that young people will see that religious and moral education can help them learn how to identify and address a spiritual and moral dimension to life, and that the quest for relevance in this endeavour is authentic, and not an institutional trick to help make religion teaching more palatable to uninterested youth. Its educational process should be regarded as valuable for students whether or not they are formally religious.

While our concern is with the relevance of religious education, some comments are made about the perceived relevance of the Church.

17.5 Religious language and the perceived relevance of the Church

As noted in the discussion of secularisation in earlier chapters, many young people do not have a high regard for the Church and they do not value its potential contribution to their lives. Adult Christians know, in a more tolerant way than youth, that the Church is a human organisation that inevitably has human faults and limitations. The perceived relevance of the Church for people today, including both adults and young people, is a multifaceted question. We draw attention to one aspect, the relevance of religious language.

In an address late in 1998, author Morris West identified the problem as follows:

Our primal interest is to survive. It is only later that we count the cost of survival and the damage our decisions may have caused to ourselves and others. It is for this reason, I believe, that many good Christian folk find themselves alienated from the Church, which almost inevitably in today's world has evolved into a highly centralised, imperial institution ... whose language has become more and more juridical and less intelligible to the ears and understanding of ordinary men and women.²

Some religion teachers echoed West's interpretation.

The language of the Church in its doctrinal expressions do not mesh sufficiently with most people's experiences of the main issues in life. They are not likely to listen when the Church apparently has nothing to say.

The Church is in the meaning-making business; it has enormous resources in spirituality – 2000 years worth. But if this is not directed to the points where people are struggling to find

meaning in their lives, then these resources will remain museum pieces of interest only to the initiated few.³

These comments suggest that one critical factor in the perceived relevance of the Church is whether or not its language seems to correspond with ‘real life’ as people experience it. If not, then they will have no time for official religion, believing that they can get by well enough without it.

This was not always the case in Catholicism. Before the 1960s there was a relatively strong cohesiveness. How and why things have changed need consideration.

The following are words from a hymn that was prominent in Australian Catholic piety at that time.

Soul of my Saviour sanctify my breast
 Body of Christ be Thou my saving guest.
 Blood of my Saviour bathe me in Thy tide.
 Wash me with water, flowing from Thy side.
 Deep in Thy wounds Lord, Hide and shelter me.
 So shall I never, never part from Thee.

Most churchgoing Catholics today would have little difficulty seeing the lack of congruence between this religious language and contemporary experience or spirituality, so they would regard this type of hymn as inappropriate and irrelevant. They could think: ‘Fortunately we do not have that problem now.’ But they are wrong. While the current language of Catholic theology used in parish churches is nowhere near as sentimental as was the case in ‘Soul of my Saviour’, its perceived lack of relevance to the experience of many young people remains a fundamental problem. In church circles there does not appear to be enough awareness of the radical extent to which a lack of relevance in religious language remains a problem for youth and adults. And what compounds the problem is that this perceived lack of relevance is not a concern to them – they do not expect religion to be helpful.

While this problem has no easy, quick answer, it would certainly be beneficial to find and use more relevant religious language. Change in religious and theological language and concepts in tune with social and cultural development have always been evident in the history of Christianity (and in other religious traditions). But this has become much more of a problem in recent times because rapid social change has outstripped the capacity for evolving relevance in religious language.

In the 1960s, teachers reported some angry pupil reactions against religion. This is no longer evident; but what is more prominent now is a distinct lack of interest. A cool response is more difficult for teachers to deal with. For example, comments about particular beliefs like the Immaculate Conception and the Virgin Birth of Jesus – ‘You mean, some people still believe that!’ – show a type of detached, clinical anthropological interest in religion. It is there, people believe it, and it may have some interesting aspects – but it appears to be an outmoded belief structure of older generations, and of little consequence for life today. Hence many youth have little expectation that religion should be meaningful. Theology faces a considerable challenge in addressing this problem.

Religious and theological language can become more relevant if it makes greater use of the constructs meaning, identity and spirituality. These seem to be more attuned to the contemporary social situation; they can function like a *new* religious language in secularised culture. Making use of a *language of meaning* would articulate messages for human development within a framework of *reasons for living*.

For a long period of its history, Catholic theology was expressed mainly in Thomistic and Aristotelian language (we do not want to debate here its relevance for any of that period). But what is needed now is expression in language and concepts that have more purchase on the problems in modern life. This proposal does not mean abandoning traditional theological constructs in favour of vague secularised ones that have more popular appeal, but it suggests that the faith tradition will increasingly lose its potential for inspiring people's lives if it does not try to express its religious messages within interpretations that are more evidently connected with the spiritual-moral issues people experience today. This is not just trying to be trendy, but seriously engaged with the content and processes through which people draw on cultural elements in their search for a meaningful human life.

A good example of healthy movement in this direction of 're-languaging' Catholic theology was considered in sections 8.2 and 16.2.1 – *psychological spirituality*. It is concerned with the interplay between people's personal development, religion and the complex social environment. While focused on self-development, at its best, it fostered a healthy spirituality while avoiding potential excesses in individuality by emphasising community and social justice. It provided intellectual tools for learning how to hold in creative tension the challenges in religious faith, expectations of freedom and individuality, and the security and responsibilities derived from group identification. It also provided input into the critical evaluation of culture from a religious perspective (taken up later in the chapter). Psychological spirituality was one of the most important developments in Catholicism since the Second Vatican Council.

The quest for relevance in spirituality is even more crucial now than it was earlier, because at present many young people (and adults) seem to be questioning the basic spiritual competence of the Church. The language of psychological spirituality assists in translating gospel values and theology into contemporary psychological principles, and in relating the Christian gospel to people's lives. This approach has helped Catholics and other Christians retain their confidence in the Church at a time when a significant decline in mainline Christianity has been evident because the words the churches have traditionally used to encapsulate Christian teachings have lost much of their force. However, the benefits of psychological spirituality have been more or less limited to those who have studied Social Sciences and Theology/Scripture (and related spirituality) from this perspective. It has not yet made its presence felt widely in the homilies in parishes, although the situation is still changing. It is interesting to note that the movement called *Spirituality in the pub* in Australia in recent years is an example of this development, along with the programs in adult religious education and counselling institutes.

The earlier discussion of youth spirituality (Chapter 9) may have appeared unsatisfactory to some Catholic educators because it concentrated on the problem areas where young people's spirituality is secularised and out of phase with the Church, even though there is a more positive side to the spiritual life of young people that we did not have the space to address. But it is precisely the problem areas that need to be explored in religious education; this will not solve all of the difficulties, but it does acknowledge that for many young people the Church – and to some extent religious education – is at a crossroads as far as perceived relevance is concerned.

17.6 Religious education and the pursuit of a language of relevance for religion

Because exploration of the nature and psychological function of religion is such an important topic for religious education, it is inevitable that pursuit of a relevant religious language will be one of its principal tasks.

While the perceived relevance of the Church is not the responsibility of religious education, it is a good topic for investigation in the classroom. This is an appropriate forum for appraising the place of the Church in society and its influence on people's lives; the relevance of religious language is part of this topic. However, if not investigated in a transparent fashion, the topic could be perceived by students as just an attempt to promote church membership. If it is not open to critical evaluation, then religious education in a committed context can readily (and deservedly) be labelled by some students as too identified with the authoritative position – and therefore closed to considering change. Maintaining such openness does not mean denying identification with the aims of the sponsoring church. In addition, this evaluation needs to look critically at the stereotypes of religion because they can be a source of unjustified criticism. Teachers need to avoid falling into the trap of assuming and adopting, rather than questioning, stereotypes about the irrelevance of religion.

The language in syllabuses (topics and units of work), student resources and classroom interactions needs review to ensure there are connections with contemporary spirituality. If not, then youth – even those who are not antagonistic – may feel that religious education (and religion itself) has little consequence for their search for meaning and values. It is this search that is now a crucial matter for young people; many of them no longer accept that their own religious tradition will automatically satisfy their spiritual needs. Acknowledgment of this search should be evident in the purposes and practice of religious education. Otherwise there will be problems in student perceptions because they sense that the more or less exclusive emphasis in their teachers' purposes is: 'How can we more effectively communicate the Catholic tradition?' This framework is too institutional; it needs to be more strongly referenced to pupils' personal development. A framework more in tune with their spiritual starting points is: 'How can we better help young people explore the spiritual and moral dimensions of life?' Within the latter, the case for Catholicism can be better presented; and it can enhance the scope and pedagogy for studying religious traditions. It can help them see how the Church and its theology have tried to respond to the perennial search for ultimate meaning in life.

This orientation is consistent with the aim of religious education to enhance religious literacy, especially a critical literacy.⁴ It helps young people develop a relevant religious language in which they can not only frame their own questions of meaning and purpose, but also achieve better access to Catholic theology, as well as to the wisdom of other traditions.

17.7 The prominence of the theme 'search for meaning and identity' in Catholic school religious education

First, a comment about the changing cultural context of Catholic religious education and the extent to which 'search for meaning' figured in the deliberations of religious educators:

The 1950s: The idea of search for meaning was not prominent in religious education at this time. The ecclesiastical climate was such that teachers might have asked: 'Why search for meaning when you already have absolute truth?' Meaning would have been thought to reside primarily *outside* the individual; one believed what

the Church proposed, whether or not it seemed plausible. The focus was on saving one's soul; this life was a preparation for the next. If you wanted to do something special for God, you could join the many young people entering the priesthood and religious life.

The late 1960s and 1970s: A significant shift was occurring in religious meanings. Religion needed to make sense of this world, and not just the next. Religious truth came to be perceived by many Catholics as less absolute (particularly in matters of Church discipline). Meaning became more existentially focused and revolved around social justice and the quality of human relationships. This resulted in a shift in emphasis towards religious meaning *inside* the individual rather than in the institution. Gradually the expectation grew that religion needed to be *relevant* to experience. The dominance of priestly and religious order-style spirituality began to diminish. Hence it was understandable that 'experience', 'personalism' and 'relevance' emerged as desirable qualities for religious education – with content and pedagogical implications as described in Chapter 16. The notion of searching for meaning was not explicit.

1980s to 2000s: Along with rapid social and political change, together with a generally more frenetic pace to consumer-oriented lifestyle, came a more conscious acknowledgment of increasing uncertainty about meanings and values. A pervasive questioning eroded the credibility of traditional sources of meaning.⁵ Religious responses to this cultural postmodernity were various. Conservative religious people reaffirmed their beliefs – with an emphasis on certainty and orthodoxy; in the extreme, this involved authoritarian and fundamentalist meanings, together with condemnation of whatever appeared to be in opposition to their views. Others adapted their religious meanings to make better sense of the new cultural and lifestyle situation; this contributed to the differentiation between religiosity and spirituality. Many remained puzzled by the ongoing dissonance between their life experience and traditional religious meanings, sometimes with harmful consequences. Still others got on with their busy lives with little or no attention given to spiritual or religious meanings, and with a feeling that this aspect did not need much attention anyway. In this cultural climate, experience and relevance became even more important as touchstones of authenticity for personal meaning; meanings became more private and individualistic, often with tenuous links to traditional community meanings. Questions about meaning and purpose became more prominent in public discourse, while at the same time secularisation diminished the prominence of religions. Meanwhile, 'commercial spirituality' and psychology contributed to the 'meaning market' along with religions. Because contemporary questioning seemed to know no limits, it led to cynicism about the chance of finding any worthwhile meaning in life. What was thought to be the 'truth' seemed less absolute and more a question of contextual interpretation. There has been a cultural shift from 'false certainties' to 'true uncertainties',⁶ and this signalled a move from absolute truth to interpretations that increasingly approximate to the truth. Questioning is no longer just about relevance (How can we improve life and make it more enjoyable?); increasingly there is concern about fundamental meaning (Is there any worthwhile meaning at all? What are the reasons for living?).

In these conditions, it was not surprising that the role of education generally, and of religious education in particular, was now more explicit about helping young people identify and evaluate meanings. There was a sequential change in emphasis from *religious knowledge* (1950s), to *experience and relevance* (1970s) to *meanings and interpretations* (1990s and 2000s). Both the content and pedagogy of religious

education need to address the new situation; if not, there is a risk that for many young people their sense that religious education is not relevant to meaning in life will be further reinforced.

Therefore it is proposed that the construction of meaning and identity should become more prominent focal points for Catholic school religious education, together with acknowledgment that religious education is essentially a hermeneutic activity – where dealing with questions of interpretation is central to the process.⁷

The school as an educational agency can help, but its input is naturally limited. Schools, and particularly religious education, may well seek to be more influential because of the decline in the relevance of other agencies which traditionally give support for meaning and purpose in life. But schools cannot solve the problem – they are not a substitute for the community and its various agencies. What school religious education can do is give young people access to the wisdom of their own religious tradition (and other traditions) as well as skills in the identification and evaluation of meanings. It can thus make a valuable contribution to what was described in Chapter 10 as an education in meaning, identity and spirituality.

Thus Catholic school religious education has two principal responsibilities to its students: provision of access to their religious traditions – to which they have a right; and help in learning how to explore spiritual-moral issues that are prominent in the culture and that have a bearing on their personal development. Young people are comfortable with the idea of being given access to their traditions, which may be of value to them at some future stage. This appeals to their sense of freedom and lessens the likelihood of a negative reaction to any perceived pressure to conform. This interpretation has significant pedagogical implications. Respect for pupils' freedom is also freeing for teachers; they can concentrate energies in devising rich studies of traditions without being locked into a mentality that is too timid about serious study of traditions because of a fear that this will not interest the students or will not be perceived as relevant. While committed to the ideals of achieving personalism and relevance, religion teachers should not be handicapped by unrealistic expectations.

A good balance is needed in the way these two dimensions are reflected in content and classroom practice: *tradition* – attention to religious traditions; and *meaning* – questions more directly related to young people's meaning and identity. The two dimensions are not exclusive – meaning can be pursued both in and through the religious tradition. But if the former is over-emphasised, a negative student reaction is likely (see **16.2.6** on Nipkow's interpretation of religious education perceived as 'institutional maintenance'). If the latter is over-emphasised, the process becomes excessively individualistic, fostering students' personal meanings while disconnecting them from community meanings. It is inappropriate to expect individuals to forge a complete meaning system by themselves; they need some reference to a community of shared beliefs and meaning as a baseline. While young people should learn that individuality and personal autonomy are valued, it is also important for them to understand that divisiveness and alienation can flow from individualism which is not tempered by community, responsibility and a sense of the transcendent. It is not that Church maintenance and communicating Catholicism are undesirable hopes for religious education, but that these concerns need to be balanced with more evident attention to pupils' personal development. An imbalance between these two responsibilities occurs (at the levels of syllabus, resources and teaching) when there is a presumption of active, committed Church membership on the part of pupils, and

where insufficient attention is paid to their relatively secular spirituality. On the other hand, when there is acknowledgment of pluralist, secular, consumer-oriented influences on youth spirituality, the approach is more likely to be relevant – and that means more likelihood that it will promote young people’s spiritual development.

Thus classroom religious education in the church-related school should be able to help confirm and challenge the faith of the youth who are actively involved in the Church, and at the same time help foster the spiritual development of those who are ambivalent about Church membership. We have long maintained a special interest in the role of religious education for this latter group, because it can make a valuable and at times crucial contribution to their lives by helping them learn to deal with the spiritual and moral aspects of life in an increasingly complex society. Our experience suggests that if this is done well, then at the same time it provides the most relevant religious education for inviting them to consider the option of active participation in the life and worship of the Church.

From the Church’s perspective, this approach to religious education can have an evangelising dimension for secularised youth because it may be one of their few points of formal contact with Catholicism. Also, an approach aimed specifically at those who are not interested in drawing much spiritually from their religious traditions will not necessarily be irrelevant for the youth who are religious, because they too need a spirituality that is relevant to the times.

Much contemporary writing on youth spirituality seems to presume a starting point from *within* the Church and a spiritual practice that is Church-oriented and theological.⁸ While this may be appropriate for committed adults and youth involved in parish life, it may not help much in understanding and fostering the spirituality of those who may never enter a zone of voluntary catechesis; Catholic school religious education retains a commitment to this group.

This discussion highlights the bridge-building role that religious education has in trying to link the culture of youth with the culture and spirituality of the Church. A plurality of belief styles needs to figure in the process because what nourishes the spirituality of various groups is different; the key role of religious education is to resource the spiritual development of pupils. Educational efforts to communicate particular religious meanings and identity do not need to be ‘unilateral’ in tone, as if trying to impose a package deal that precludes individuals’ growing involvement in a more autonomous, reflective process of spiritual development. There can be the *hope* that young people might later affirm, embrace and enhance their religious identity; but they will decide what happens.

From this discussion there arise many implications for both content and pedagogy. It justifies further the need for a study of spiritual-moral issues in an open-ended, research-oriented way as noted earlier. Just as the teaching of history has changed significantly from the older emphasis on facts and dates to interpretation of primary and secondary sources, so religious education needs to become more concerned with appraisal of theories and interpretations of the meaning of life. This approach enables the study of religion under themes that appear more relevant in the secularised mood of contemporary Western cultures, and more in tune with young people’s spiritual starting points. Not all Catholic religious educators feel comfortable with this proposal because it appears to question the presumptions out of which some of them work; they may feel, mistakenly, that the teaching of religion is being secularised, compromising the comfort they took in what was felt to be a strong presentation of

the Church. On the contrary, we consider that this is the more appropriate and effective route for giving the large group of secularised young people satisfying access to the spiritual traditions of the Church. And it does not hold back the students who are more strongly identified with a parish.

Religious educators need an understanding of spirituality and identity issues that will serve as an interpretive background to their educational work and personal interactions with youth. They need to be more aware of contemporary youth spirituality and of the complex life-world within which young people seek meaning and identity. This can provide insight into what is happening in the lives of individuals and groups, and it can inform comments made in class, as well as a range of transactions from silent, knowing empathy to personal advice. They need to show through their language that they are sensitively aware of the questions and issues that young people are dealing with. They should also be role models as the wise, adult ‘searcher for meaning’ and ‘critical interpreter of culture’.

17.8 Religious education as the critical interpretation of culture

Religion and culture are inextricably connected. Each affects the other. Both are fundamentally important for religious education, particularly their interaction.

Critical evaluation of culture has long been a core concern of Catholic religious education. This emphasis was central to the encyclical *Evangelii nuntiandi* (Evangelisation in the modern world) by Pope Paul VI in 1976,⁹ and has remained prominent in religious education in various contexts (schools, youth ministry, adult education, theological education) ever since. Integral to the evaluation of culture is hermeneutics or interpretation; understanding cultural dynamics is a prerequisite for making judgments and considering possible social action.

As noted in section 12.4.1, much has been written about education itself as a process of critical interpretation of culture. Critical theory and hermeneutics, including philosophical and sociological perspectives, have stressed the need for interpreting what is going on in culture; and in turn, this is proposed as a task to which public education can contribute. Hill described this role as the ‘interrogation of one’s cultural conditioning’.¹⁰

Critical evaluation of culture addresses the following:

- exploration of the shaping influence of culture on people’s thinking and behaviour;
- identification of the influences on decisions and events; uncovering the historical, ideological and political forces at work, identifying who stands to gain or lose;
- ‘deconstructing’ the components of writings so that they can be understood within their original contexts; this will inform potential meanings in different contexts;
- searching for the underlying economic and commercial interests that affect a situation;
- highlighting justice and environmental issues;
- calling ideologies to account.

The critical evaluation of culture is an integral component of the ‘issue-oriented religious education’ referred to earlier; it needs to enter into classroom practice across all year levels, while content and method need to be adapted to suit the maturity of

pupils. Also, as stressed earlier, a balance with other content and approaches is essential.

Making judgments about situations in the light of stated values, and even the consideration of potential action that needs to be taken to address social problems, are part of the process. This is what is meant by the phrase ‘evaluation from a gospel perspective’. The teacher should help pupils learn these evaluative skills, while at the same time modelling the process.

This approach has also been described within Catholic religious education as ‘raising critical consciousness’ or ‘conscientisation’ – a phrase that was prominent in the discussions of catechesis by South American Catholic bishops in the 1960s and 1970s. Their documents had a wide influence within ministry and religious education.¹¹ It paralleled the impact on education by Paulo Freire’s ideas on ‘praxis’ (shared reflection and action) and the ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ (12.4.1). These themes were reflected in Thomas Groome’s approach to religious education called Shared Christian Praxis.¹² Through these and similar influences, Catholic religious education today retains prominent motifs of liberation and social justice.

Interpretation of culture in the classroom involves social analysis. It can help young people become more discerning of what is happening in politics and culture. They are naturally very critical, but may be somewhat naive as regards the political, manipulative and exploitative aspects of culture.

Critical interpretation is a starting point for what the Warren has called ‘cultural agency’.¹³ Drawing on the work of Welsh sociologist Raymond Williams, he proposed that one of the aims for religious education is to encourage and skill young people to go beyond being ‘passive consumers of culture’ to become ‘active constructors of culture’, with greater social engagement in the community. This acknowledges that culture is socially constructed and open to evaluation, not something that is a given and hard to change (15.9).

Religious worldviews are sustained by social interaction within the faith community. Thus Warren considered that the faith community could be one important reference point where beliefs and values were used to question the authenticity of media-conditioned imaginations of the world and of human development that have such a strong influence on young people. He quoted the following passage from Pope John Paul II as a challenge, encouraging them:

to develop your culture with wisdom and prudence, retaining the freedom to criticise what may be called the ‘cultural industry’ remaining all the while deeply concerned with truth ... faith will ask culture what values it promotes, what destiny it offers to life, what place it makes for the poor and the disinherited with whom the Son of Man is identified, how it conceives of sharing, forgiveness and love.¹⁴

Many of these same concerns are woven through the religious education theory of prominent European Catholic religious educators. Lombaerts and his colleagues, for example, stressed the hermeneutic role of religious education because cultural postmodernity has changed radically the way people regard religious traditions as potential sources of meaning and values.¹⁵ Pajer emphasised the development of individual identity as influenced by cultural identities in a pluralist secularised society.¹⁶

Because of the close relationship between meaning and religion, below we look at implications for the evaluation of cultural meanings.

17.9 The identification and evaluation of social meanings

Religion as a provider of meaning has always done this at three levels: personal, social and transcendent. It gives believers personal psychological meaning and social meaning – how they understand themselves and how they interpret what is going on in their community and society. The third level has to do with the ultimate mysteries of life: God, death and the afterlife.

Formerly, religious meanings were mediated through the comprehensive worldview of the religion. People were prepared to accept the interpretations given to them on the basis of religious authority. They accepted ‘the faith’ in a relatively unquestioning way. Also, they may not have fully understood the teachings; they may have had misgivings about how appropriate some of them were, but they still tended to accept them obediently. Thus they subscribed to a lot of religious teachings, whether or not they seemed useful or relevant. Today, in secularised Western countries, many people, but not all, do not accord that same level of respect for, and faith in, religious authority and teachings. They are more questioning and more ready to judge for themselves whether they will believe something and be committed to it or not. For these people, there has been a significant change in the role of religion as a source of life meaning. This applies especially to young people.

In the secularised situation, individuals are often not prepared to accept religious teachings unless they themselves sense that the meanings are appropriate and useful at personal and social levels. As far as the transcendent dimension is concerned, they feel that they do not have the capacity to judge the appropriateness of religious beliefs about God or life after death (unless they are too extravagant and implausible), but they remain hopeful; life would be harder without these beliefs. They hold onto beliefs about transcendence, while being more choosy about religious teachings related to their personal and social life – here they are more likely to be critical and selective. While previously they may have accepted the whole religious belief package on authority, now they tend to select according to subjective views and felt needs. In their sort of world, with its fast pace to life and its expensive lifestyle, they do not have much time for beliefs for which they see no significant or useful function. If religious teachings do not seem relevant, if they have little perceived connection with life, or if they cut across people’s own personal views and lifestyle, they may be ignored; people feel that they can get by well enough without them – when you are already busy and stressed with life, why burden yourself with beliefs that do not help? Or, it may be that the beliefs do have relevance, but they are expressed in language and concepts that have no substantial meanings for particular people. If they have no meaningful access to those beliefs, they will be less likely to look to them for life guidance. Or, if they have little respect for their religion, or if they are disaffected or alienated, they will hardly look to religious teachings for life interpretations and inspiration.

If religious traditions are going to be beneficial to these people, they will need to give special attention to communication at these personal and social levels.

These principles have much significance for religious education in the church-related school. It should pay attention to personal and social meanings at two levels:

First, access to church theology and teachings will be more helpful to youth if they use a relevant language of psychological and social meanings; study of explicitly religious material needs to make use of ideas that mesh with their understandings and experience. Second, a study of meanings is important for young people in its own right, and not just as a vehicle for trying to make theology more interesting.

Religious education should investigate social meanings, their generation, history and psychological functions. As well as making the subject more relevant, this approach has wider significance in helping make young people's whole education more meaningful. Students can take their exploration to another level – not necessarily then and there in the classroom – enhancing their own interpretation of life. However, their aspiration to become critical interpreters of culture is not likely to be fostered by teachers who are unsure about the importance of this dimension to education. Educators do not need to have perfect answers for all the students' questions, but they too should evidently be engaged in that same searching and questioning activity as the students. In practice, many teachers model these characteristics, helping students learn how to enquire for themselves and how to think critically. What we are suggesting is that this role be more clearly articulated as a fundamental dimension to education with specific content and pedagogy, and not just left as a desirable but vague part of the process.

For their part, teachers need to hone their hermeneutic and evaluative skills, and to acquire a better understanding of the topography of culture that affects young people's meaning and identity. Greater familiarity with the pertinent issues, language and concepts will filter through into their interactions with students both inside and outside the classroom.

17.10 Conclusion

This chapter has revisited the 1970s quest for personalism and relevance in Catholic school religious education, suggesting that these goals remain valid and important today. But it has proposed a reinterpretation of what this means in terms of issue-related content and evaluative pedagogy. While the discussion has been concerned mainly with the relevance of religious education as such, in the Catholic school context this inevitably has some links with the question of the relevance of the Church.

The perceived relevance of Catholic theology and religious education in these times remains in crisis as far as many youth and adults are concerned. They will quietly ignore the Catholic faith tradition – and its religious education – unless they sense that something serious is being said about issues in contemporary personal, social, and political life. This also applies to practising members of local faith communities; increasingly, Catholics will be less inclined to remain active members of a parish out of cultural inertia. If the presentation of theology and spirituality does not engage sufficiently in the real spiritual and moral issues that people experience, then they will get used to the expectation that their faith tradition remains only marginally relevant to their lives. While religious education cannot be expected to resolve the problem, it can endeavour to make the study of religion a more life-enhancing experience for pupils. And this requires an approach – in content, language and pedagogy – that is in tune with young people's spirituality; in short, a religious education that is concerned with *reasons for living*.

The next chapters deal with the place of religious faith which has long been central to Catholic thinking about religious education, but which has also been a source of problems both in expectations and practice.

Notes

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- 1 A discussion of pedagogical strategies that draw pupils' attention to meaning appears in D White et al. 2003, *Into the deep*; K O'Brien & D White 2004, *The thinking platform*; D White 2005, *Discerning religious meaning*; D White 2006, *DEEP thinking*.
 - 2 M West Dr Newman's Toast, Lecture at Australian Catholic University, Strathfield NSW, 15 November 1998.
 - 3 Comments by two Masters course students, Australian Catholic University, Strathfield, 1998.
 - 4 P Goldberg 2005, *Teaching world religions: Developing critical religious literacy*.
 - 5 The climate of cultural postmodernity is illustrated in the following: A Year 1 student answered her teacher's statement that 'Mary is the Mother of God' with the question 'But how do you know?' While perhaps not conscious of the epistemological and hermeneutical implications of her question, this young child was participating in the popular cultural meaning of these times, which calls most things into question. There is widespread suspicion of all institutions and groups, including the Church and politicians. With substantial secularisation, people know they can live satisfying lives without much contact with organised religion. Increasing numbers of Catholics maintain few formal links with the Church, becoming what has been described as: 'Four wheeler Catholics': pram for Christening, taxi for marriage, hearse for burial. Or the 'hatch, match and dispatch' role of the Church. As noted in some adolescents' comments: 'You get your values from your parents, and that gets you through life. You don't need organised religion.' 'I have my own religious beliefs that I don't think anyone else shares. I don't believe that any organisation speaks for God and I live my life in a totally free and unreligious way. I am extremely spiritual' (second quotation from a Religious Education symposium paper, by K Engebretson, Sydney, 19/04/01).
 - 6 The problem of meaning in cultural postmodernity is considered in more detail in section **4.2.1**.
 - 7 H Lombaerts & D Pollefeyt (eds) 2004, *Hermeneutics and religious education*.
 - 8 M Strommen & R Hardel 2000, *Passing on the faith: A radical new model for youth and family ministry*.
 - 9 Pope Paul VI 1976, *Evangelii nuntiandi*.
 - 10 BV Hill 1990, *A time to plant and a time to uproot: Values education in the secondary school*.
 - 11 M Warren 1983, *Source book for modern catechetics*.

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- 12 TH Groome 1980, *Christian religious education: Sharing our story and vision*; TH Groome 1991, *Sharing faith: A comprehensive approach to religious education and pastoral ministry*; TH Groome 1998, *Educating for life: A spiritual vision for every teacher and parent*.
 - 13 M Warren 1992, *Communications and cultural analysis: A religious view*.
 - 14 Pope John Paul II 1984, Homily, University of Laval Stadium Quebec City.
 - 15 Lombaerts & Pollefeyt 2004; H Lombaerts 1998, *The management and leadership of Christian schools: A Lasallian systemic viewpoint*; R Roebben 1997, Shaping a playground for transcendence: Postmodern youth ministry as a radical challenge.
 - 16 F Pajer 2003, *School-based education and religious culture: A European approach to the problem of teaching religion in school*.