

# Journal of Religious Education

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**JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

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# *Journal of Religious Education*

**JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION** is a refereed publication for the academic exploration of the task of religious education in modern society. The journal helps disseminate original writings and research in religious education and catechesis -- and in related areas such as spirituality, theology, moral and faith development, cultural contexts, ministry and schooling. It includes a variety of feature sections -- on contemporary educational issues, book reviews, conferences, resources and practical hints for teachers. Articles for publication on religious education in various contexts and on the related areas noted above, as well as on any of the feature sections are welcome. See the inside back cover for details.

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Articles on the following are welcomed:

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- various models of faith communities in which evangelisation and catechesis may take place besides the Catholic school;
- religious education of children and adolescents;
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## STUDY OF RELIGION: NOW ESSENTIAL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

### Introduction

In the last twenty years the teaching of religious education in secondary schools has changed and adapted in response to two major influences: the changing religious landscape of Australian society and the use of state-based religion studies syllabi as part of or instead of school and diocesan religious education programmes. Within this time the teaching of world religions has been firmly established in many senior secondary classrooms and even in middle schools and junior secondary schools. The number of students selecting *Study of Religion* rather than school based Religious Education has increased dramatically since the early 1980s. One of the attractive features of subjects like *Study of Religion* is that students can 'count' religion as contributing towards tertiary entrance scores. This paper endorses the introduction and acceptance of *Study of Religion* in Catholic schools, highlights some of the significant developments which have taken place in the teaching of *Study of Religion*, and raises points of scholarly disagreement with a number of the assertions McCarthy (in this issue) makes regarding the place and purpose of *Study of Religion* in Catholic schools.

To be well educated in terms of religion today, one needs to know something of other religious traditions while simultaneously developing a deeper understanding of the home tradition. *Study of Religion* provides a framework through which this can be achieved. Since the teaching of world religions began in schools over twenty years ago the approaches used for teaching have been expanded and reshaped in the light of developments in the discipline of religion studies and in response to the teaching and learning needs of adolescences.

McCarthy, who is speaking from a Queensland teaching experience, says that Catholic schools are "faced with the complexity of determining whether the purpose of religious education is to teach students to be religious in a particular way, or to educate students in religion". Gabriel Moran whose 1989 and 1991 work McCarthy is essentially quoting actually makes the opposite point, namely that religious education in a Catholic school is a dual process where academic instruction in religion happens in the classroom; and faith formation and enculturation belong to the whole school community, the parish and the family. Moran's separation helps to distinguish between a schooling/instruction paradigm and a community or faith/enculturation paradigm. The first is an intellectual study that leads to knowledge and understanding of religion. In fact, it is the dual task of religious education that all teachers in Catholic schools should be involved in. While religious education happens in the classroom the school as a whole is

engaged in teaching students to be religious in a particular way. This article will focus on religious education as it takes place in the classroom.

Whether schools choose to do *Study of Religion* or *Religious Education*, all should be taught with academic rigour. Good religious education, as an academic and school-based study of religion, encourages rigorous and critical study, is based on sound education theory, and takes account of educational research to inform its practice. McCarthy implies that school based Religious Education lacks rigour because it uses a catechetical approach. While a catechetical approach is not the preferred model in Queensland, it nevertheless does not and should not limit intellectual rigour. Even Thomas Groome whose *Shared Christian Praxis Approach* firmly stands within a catechetical framework states that the pedagogy "in Christian faith must enable people to reflect critically and in dialogue on their lives in place and time, and thus promote a dialectic between participants and their social/historical context" (Groome, 1991, p. 193). Groome speaks at great length about the need for critical reflection and intellectual rigour. He holds strongly the opinion that intellectual rigor and critical reflection do not threaten people's faith identity. In fact he states that "both indifference and antagonism to critical reflection in faith education can be an expression of elitism or knowledge control...(it) may also be mixed with the vested interest of maintaining power over people's lives and of seeing 'ordinary' Christians more as 'dependent objects' than 'agent-subjects' of their faith...to exclude critical reflection tends to arrest people at stage three of their faith journey" (pp. 193-194). Even if a catechetical approach were taken it should not limit intellectual rigour or critique of the home tradition. In fact good catechesis involves critique which ultimately enables praxis which is contextual and appropriate.

What McCarthy appears to have forgotten is that all religious education should be good education and that "good education has a humanising import in people's lives that informs and forms them in how to think critically, act responsibly and create imaginatively" (Groome, 1991, p. 195). Religious education, whether in school or community, must intentionally promote activities for critical reflection if it is to be good education. In fact documents such as the *Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* state that those who teach religion must be trained professionally and be competent for their task of communication a "systematic representation of religion" (RDECS #96-97).

When first introduced, the state-based *Study of Religion* syllabus was strongly influenced by British religious

educators and was based around Ninian Smart's dimensions. Consequently Australian approaches focused too narrowly on Smart's dimensions without taking cognizance of the theoretical discussion out of which phenomenology emerged. For many students, the approach taken was overly descriptive and at times repetitive and largely focused on description and identification of type. While on the one hand Smart's dimensions have proved to be a useful tool in the development of pedagogies for studying religion, they nevertheless limit the educational process and in many cases teaching and learning became monotonous repetition.

In more recent revisions of the Queensland *Study of Religion* syllabus, multi-dimensional approaches are recommended. The use of a variety of approaches stems from the concern that all accounts of religion are given by people who begin their study from a particular starting-point bringing with them assumptions about the nature of the subject matter and a method or set of methods for obtaining information and making sense of it. While the academic study of religion has largely moved away from essentialist understandings that all religions have some common transcendent essence, it is only more recently that the school based programs have taken seriously the claim that religion cannot be abstracted from its cultural matrices. School syllabi now encourage teachers to take into account their political, cultural and social contexts and to question the assumptions and categories which have formed and informed their study of religion.

An educational approach to the teaching of religion is essential if the aims of the syllabus are to be achieved. The Rationale states that:

An educational approach to the study of religion enables students to learn about religion, to look at religion as part of a complex social, political and cultural dialogue, to examine the 'voices' in the conversation, to acknowledge biases of teachers, learners and texts, to acknowledge who is included and excluded, and to examine religion from a critical standpoint" (QSA Study of Religion Syllabus, 2001, p.3).

McCarthy is concerned that *Study of Religion* is not consistent with the nature and aims of classroom religious education. However, a careful reading of the *Study of Religion* syllabus indicates that the syllabus not only fulfils the nature and aims of religious education but that it also provides a "high level of flexibility in interpretation and application when devising courses of study that are best suited to the (schools') expertise, knowledge and the needs and interests of their students" (p. 3). What this means is that schools, regardless of their religious denomination, can shape their school work program to reflect their particular religious stance and charisma. Catholic schools are able to design a work program which keeps Catholic Christianity at the centre of their teaching while still fulfilling the requirements of the syllabus. Where McCarthy is mistaken, is in

thinking that a classroom program on its own could fulfil the dual task of religious education (teaching about religion; and teaching students to be religious within their home tradition). The task of enfaithing, evangelisation and missioning is broader than the classroom and essentially belongs to the whole school community in conjunction with parishes and families.

To say, as McCarthy does, that teachers of *Study of Religion* are pressured to "push a particular denominational agenda" is naïve and ignores the educational responsibility that religious educators must teach as Mary Boys says "both components of particularism and pluralism". When speaking of particularism she describes it as 'textured particularism' a commitment to one's home religious tradition acknowledging the complex matrix of images, sacred texts, practices which make the whole. For Boys, it means defining oneself in the context of other religious traditions not over against them (Boys, 2002, p.13). When she speaks of religious pluralism, she says effective education plays particular attention to differences "recognising, appreciating and valuing difference – not simply regarding the other as a curiosity or phenomenon" (p. 13). It is, she says, more than tolerance because tolerance does require deepening knowledge or probing differences. Boys' notion of particularism and religious pluralism challenges religious educators to explore the home tradition in all its complexity and ambiguity and not to accept it at face value.

Terry Lovat, one of the leading scholars and religious educators in this area states:

there need be no conflict whatsoever between the integrity of the public syllabus...and the work of the religious educator working within a broadly enfaithing context. This assertion is based on the assumption that the religious educator is a trained specialist and an essentially autonomous professional teacher. As such, like any true specialist, the religious educator will understand the nature of human development, the intricacies of teaching and learning and, above all, will know of the indispensable connection between learning and freedom...the religious education specialist will know what to instil interest in and even passion for a subject without surrendering to those forms of coercion, however subtle, that compromise and undermine the business of learning, including the business of religion learning (Lovat 2001, p.10).

One of the challenges facing teachers of *Study of Religion* is to be completely familiar with the syllabus itself and to avoid over reliance on interpretations of the school work program or a single text book.

### Conclusion

What the Queensland Studies Authority *Study of Religion* syllabus does is recommend good educational practice grounded in sound education theory built on substantial knowledge of the home religious tradition

and the world's religions. Good religious education is educational in its foundation. Good educational practice should be part of all school based religious education programs be they *Religious Education* or *Study of Religion* because then and only then will the aims of the Catholic school be achieved.

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\*Peta Goldberg is Professor of Religious Education and Head of the School of Religious Education at Australian Catholic University. She was chair of the QSA syllabus development committee for *Study of Religion* (2001) and had been invited to chair the five year period revision of the syllabus.

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### LEADERSHIP RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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#### Contributors:

Michael T. Buchanan, Brendan Hyde, Helen Healy, Paul Sharkey, Richard Rymarz, Jan Grajczonek, Kath Engebretson, Marian de Souza, Leonie T. Crotty rsm.