ADDRESSING AN APPARENT CRISIS FOR CATHOLIC SCHOOL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: THE IMPORTANCE OF ‘RELEVANCE’ AND OF THE THEME ‘SEARCH FOR MEANING’

Man’s [sic] search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a ‘secondary rationalisation’ of instinctual drives.

A human being is not one in pursuit of happiness, but rather in search of a reason to become happy.

The meaning of our existence is not invented by ourselves, but rather detected.

(Viktor Frankl)

Introduction: Troubles with Catholic School Religious Education

Earlier this year, Marcellin Flynn and Magdalena Mok published a book reporting their 1998 study of Year 12 students in Catholic Schools in NSW. (Catholic Schools 2000: A Longitudinal Study). The results, examples of which are given below, showed that these students had negative views of religious education. Many of them felt that religious education had little or no relevance to the conduct of their lives. The authors concluded that Catholic schools could well discontinue formal religion classes in Years 11 and 12, while retaining retreats and periodic liturgies to address the spiritual needs of students.

Some results from the study of 8,300 Year 12 students in NSW Catholic schools (Flynn and Mok, 2002, p. 314)

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<th>Questionnaire Items (3 of a total of 18 items)</th>
<th>% of students who agreed with the item</th>
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<td>18. Religious education classes are taken seriously by Year 12 students</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Religious education classes are related to real life and to my needs</td>
<td>35</td>
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<td>10. Religious education classes are taught at a level comparable with that of other subjects</td>
<td>38</td>
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The results were not unexpected. Negative student views of religious education have been evident for more than 30 years. Some educators thought the widespread introduction of state religion studies (studies of religion) courses in the early 1990s might improve student perceptions of religious education. This development did enhance the academic status of religious education, particularly in the senior secondary school, but it did not seem to have had much impact on the overall negative perceptions of the relevance of religious education to youth.

Few if any Australian Catholic Education authorities would be prepared to follow the recommendations of Flynn and Mok. If they did, this would be tantamount to saying that they were giving up on religious education in the senior secondary school because it has been a failure.

The situation of religious education, out of which these results emerged, is very complicated, influenced by many factors, a number of which are cultural from outside the school. The interpretation and recommendations of Flynn and Mok do not adequately reflect this complexity. While a more detailed consideration of the meaning of their results for Catholic school religious education is important, that task is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is suggested that such a task would need to take the following into account:

- the place and perception of religion in the wider community, for example, the poor image of religion; the degree of secularisation and privatisation of religion; the numbers who drop out of religious practice (cf., Hughes et al., 2000);
- the functional alternatives to religion;
- the spiritual/moral needs and interests of children and adolescents;
- unrealistic expectations of school religious education to bring about significant spiritual changes in students over and above helping them to become ‘well educated’ religiously;
- the academic status of religious education in schools (from Grade 1 upwards);
- the highly competitive pressure generated by year 12 certification exams (e.g., the Higher School Certificate in NSW) and the drive for good results that affect attitudes to subjects that do not seem to ‘count’;
- the religious education curriculum (particularly the balance between content that can be perceived as oriented towards ‘institutional
maintenance’ and that which is ‘personally focused’ or ‘issue oriented’.

• how religion is taught across the school years from Year 1 to Year 12.

It is unrealistic to expect religious education to be very popular with the majority of students, just as it is unrealistic to expect it to make the students religious as if there were an automatic relationship between ‘treatment’ and ‘results’.

I believe that it is a mistake to respond to the Flynn and Mok results by thinking that “everything seems to be wrong in religious education” – educators have available to them today a more appropriate interpretation of its nature and purposes than at any other time over the last 50 years. However, it is also not wise to think that “everything is OK in religious education.” A number of the significant lessons learnt over the years have yet to be widely implemented. There is always room for study, research and experimentation to enhance religious education theory and practice (as there is for all of education).

It remains important to diagnose what may be deficient in religious education and to try to remedy it in calm and well thought out ways. The results in Flynn and Mok’s study are significant; they warrant a ‘wake-up call’ for Catholic school religious education – but not panic.

From here, this article will address two issues – the quest for relevance, and how the theme search for meaning can be useful in this regard.

However, before discussing those issues, some attention will be given to what might be called the ‘study/research/intellectual challenge’ that I believe is essential for an effective religious education.

This question is related to one of the fundamental puzzles in the Flynn and Mok study. They demonstrate what all Catholic school educators have known for a long time: Catholic schooling is very successful and popular with its students and parents (the system cannot cope with the numbers wanting to enrol); and this is the case in spite of apparently unsuccessful religious education. Much hinges on how ‘successful religious education’ is understood.

This problem is not confined to the Catholic school system. It applies more or less to most church related schools in Australia. Take for example the Lutheran school system: The report of Middleton’s (2001) study is titled Lutheran Schools at Millennium’s turn: A snapshot 1996-2000 from slab hut to cyberspace. It begins with a subheading “Lutheran Education in Australia is in a healthy state.” But the results suggest that the relevance of Christian studies (religious education), central to the rationale of Lutheran schools, is poor and is a matter of concern.

In one part of the survey, Middleton asked a large sample of both primary and secondary students the following questions:

1. What are your favourite subjects?
2. What subjects do you consider most relevant to your future lives?
3. What subjects make you think the most?
4. What subjects do you think that adults value most?
5. What subjects make students feel the proudest?

For both primary and secondary students, Maths and English did not score well as favourite subjects; however, they were clearly regarded as the most relevant to students’ future lives and the subjects that adults thought were most important for them to learn. Art (and industrial arts) and physical education were the top favourite subjects for both groups of students; however, they were at the bottom (or near bottom) of the list of subjects felt to be relevant to their future lives, and similarly they were at the bottom of the list of subjects considered to make them think the most; but they were at or near the top again as subjects that made the students feel proudest (related to achievement?). Maths particularly, as well as Science, English and LOTE were the subjects that were regarded as the ones that required students to think the most.

What was difficult not to miss in the graphs of results was the obvious place of Christian studies – near the bottom on all five lists; also evident, was a decrease in scores for Christian studies from primary to secondary (with the changes for questions 1 and 5 being marginal.) (Middleton, 2001, pp. 4-6). It would be most instructive to conduct this study in Catholic schools.

What I consider the results that should cause most concern for religious educators are those for question 3. Religious education (Christian studies) was perceived as a subject that seems to require students to do little thinking. This is similar to anecdotal evidence from some primary school pupils in Catholic schools who said that in religion, their teacher taught them “two years below their age.” Or as a secondary student put it: “In religion, we do intellectual colouring in”.

A principal problem still faced by Catholic school religious education is its capacity to get students to think critically about religion and religious issues, and to become well informed about same. This is
why study, research projects, cultural interpretation and other thought-challenging processes are so important for religious education from the earliest years at school onwards. If religious education helps students to learn how to think, then the more personal and experiential aspects often stressed in aims for religious education will find a natural and appropriate place in the process.

However, religious educators know well that the majority of students do not come to religion class with the intention of thinking critically (for some students, it seems as if they ‘check in’ their brains at the door as they enter the religion classroom). To change this situation is difficult; it takes a lot of time, as well as consistent and sustained effort across the years of schooling.

Appropriate content selection (and to a lesser extent teaching method) is fundamentally important for making religious education a subject that can challenge students to think critically. Part of senior students’ perceptions of the irrelevance of religion classes, and part of the reason there is little incentive to think, have to do with too much ‘tame’ content; it is perceived to be too preoccupied with institutional maintenance, with not enough attention to real life or contemporary issues – the points where young people touch the spiritual and moral dimensions of life. This is discussed in more detail elsewhere (Rossiter, 1999); it is a view that merits more research attention. In the Flynn and Mok study (2002, pp. 284-285), the 8310 students made 7031 open ended comments about religious education. The authors classified 61% of these as negative. The highest frequency of ‘negative’ comments was grouped under “More current/relevant issues should be taught in religious education.” (317 responses). It is puzzling that this was interpreted as a negative comment – particularly when the 254 responses saying that “There should be more discussion in religious education classes” were interpreted as ‘positive’ comments.

The data is not fine enough to make an unambiguous interpretation. My intuition is that students are interested in contemporary issues and that such content merits serious study in religious education; however, for Year 12 students, I expect that many would prefer ‘more discussion’ to ‘rigorous study’ because the former is less demanding on their time and energy. The serious study of contemporary issues has, in my opinion, not been fully tried or tested in religious education.

There is no easy panacea recipe for a religious education that students will readily acknowledge as relevant to their lives. A study of issues will help, but it is unlikely to solve the problem completely and reverse the trend of student opinion noted at the beginning of the article. Nevertheless, whatever can be done to increase the relevance of religious education to the lives of students merits attention. It is suggested that meaning and search for meaning are themes that are valuable in this regard.

The Quest for Relevance in Religious Education

It is not uncommon, nor is it inappropriate for religious educators to be interested in making their work relevant to young people’s lives and their search for meaning. In the contemporary cultural situation, this is perhaps more important than it has been over the past 50 years. However, an analysis of what is understood by the words relevance and search for meaning is needed to help make the strategies intended to link the two more effective. Such an analysis needs to influence the language and content of religious education (and the language of youth ministry and theology).

While people use the word relevance by itself when talking about religious education, it is more appropriate to give it a reference point like: - relevance to knowledge, relevance to experience, relevance to life in general, or relevance to meaning.

Personal relevance: Something that is perceived as having a useful or an important bearing on an individual’s life; it may be the quality of an experience, belief, theory or values. Relevant here means pertinent and useful; it has perceived links or connections with one’s life; it gives or enhances personal meaning; it provides new or potentially interesting insights.

Sometimes it is not so much a judgement that something is relevant, but that it is ‘not relevant’ – that means, it has little perceived useful connection with, or pertinence for, the individual’s life.

Perceptions of what is relevant is an individual process; however, this may change over time; individuals may be influenced by others and by the culture as to what they perceive as relevant.

The criteria for determining what qualifies as relevant vary from individual to individual and in one individual over time; some criteria may be trivial (what is different, what is new, what is bizarre, what is ‘cool’); criteria for relevance are open to individual and community evaluation.

Meaning and the Search for Meaning

If educators are to understand the theme ‘search for meaning’ and use it effectively in religious education, they need to develop concepts and language of meaning. The following can help build up this background. It includes part of a
scheme for meaning being developed to shape the Search for Meaning and Identity Research Program in the ACU National School of Religious Education; this preliminary scheme looks at the nature, psychological function and modes of communication of meaning, as well as a concept of education in meaning. It will serve as a 'lens' for searching various literatures that have something to say about meaning – in turn, this literature study can further develop the scheme for conceptualising meaning. The scheme will also inform empirical studies of the search for meaning. This is described in more detail elsewhere (Rossiter, 2001a, 2002. A similar analysis for the concept ‘identity’ is also being developed, (cf., Rossiter, 2001b).

Questions about ‘Meaning’?
To understand what meaning is and how this is important in life and for religious education, some answers to the following questions are needed:

What constitutes ‘meaning’? What counts for meaning for different people?
Who generates meaning?
How is meaning communicated?
How do you ‘search’ for meaning and how do you know when you have found it?
If you have to search for meaning, does this imply that meaning is not readily available or is difficult to find; or that the meaning readily at hand is inadequate or unsatisfying?
Do you only search for meaning when something goes wrong? Or when the implied meaning in what you were comfortable in doing is called into question?
Is the search for meaning a result of a significant change in life satisfaction, calling for more thought about the fundamental values that are implied in the way one lives?
Is a search for meaning a symptom of a deeper reality; dissatisfaction with life or unhappiness that stimulates individuals to think about what is wrong with their lives and what needs to be done to change it?
Is search for meaning a cognitive searching or an experiential testing of different value systems that are already available for adoption?
Does meaning need to include values for day-to-day living? Or is it just concerned with ultimate beliefs and values like God, death and afterlife?
How well does one’s religion provide satisfactory meaning?
How much time does a healthy person need to spend on the search for meaning?
Can the search for meaning be a health hazard?
Can you spend too much time and energy searching instead of getting on with life?
Is meaning manufactured and sold?

How do you judge when meaning is good or bad for the individual?
What are the criteria for good and healthy meaning?

Western society is awash with proposed meaning; does the search for meaning involve evaluating and choosing what is appropriate, valuable and useful from the pool of available meaning?
Given that the search for meaning has a significant cognitive which component (that emotional, attitudinal and volitional components), do the processes of interpretation, critical thinking and evaluation therefore become important for education and religious education?

Meaning has different psychological functions in individuals. It can also be differentiated as to whether it is ‘internal’ to the individual or ‘external’ in culture – the two are usually related.

Meaning – Its Psychological and Social Functions

Meaning as personal explanatory theory or interpretation: Meaning can be thought of as a satisfying theory or interpretation of one’s life or of particular activities – it gives a plausible explanation, a good understanding. Meaning is the theory that makes sense of one’s experience. Meaning also helps explain one’s behaviour; it shows the implied patterns that lie beneath behaviour which make behaviour understandable; it describes the pattern of motivation underlying behaviour, while recognising that not even the individuals themselves always have good or convincing reasons for what they do. The influential motives or behavioural influences may at times be unconscious, and hence the meaning is not always fully evident to the individual (even though astute observers may understand why he/she is behaving in that way).

The explanation may not be perfect, but it can give a reasonably satisfying, even if partial answer to questions about life. This aspect of meaning is like self-understanding, a component of identity. It also includes a view of the world and culture outside, the context in which the individual lives. It carries explanations of how and why individuals behave as they do.

Meaning as interpretation of the culture outside: Complementing, or an integral part of, the personal explanation/theory of life is the individual’s interpretation of the culture that impinges on him/her. Culture influences the formation of personal meaning. The nature and extent of the influence varies from individual to individual and across the different periods of the individual’s life cycle; also the size of the individual’s ‘life world’
will vary. Individuals make different levels of use of cultural elements in their construction of meaning; some will accept the meaning given by a group or authority without much question; others will evaluate carefully what is offered before they adopt it.

Cultural influences on the development of personal meaning are of importance for the community and also for education. This will be considered again later under the heading of cultural meaning.

**Meaning as set of values:** Meaning can be a set of values, beliefs and principles to which the individual is committed as a purpose or general direction for living; it is the wisest answer individuals can give at the time about what motivates them.

**Meaning as religious beliefs:** Religious beliefs can be the core of meaning for individuals. They can motivate a spiritual life including prayer and worship as well as sustain a moral life. Also, religion provides answers to ultimate questions about the existence of god, joy and suffering, life after death and creation (also noted below).

**Ultimate meaning:** Ultimate meaning has to do with theories about how the individual interprets principal purposes in life (even if the conclusion for some is that there is none); it also has to do with transcendent questions about death, afterlife, the existence of god, reward for the just and so forth.

Some of the other aspects considered in the scheme are: **Meaning as: justification; life goals; master story; the point of intersection between understanding and emotion.**

It is useful to distinguish between **articulated personal meaning** where individuals define their personal meaning in words and principles. People vary considerably in the extent to which they try to articulate meaning or personal master story. Some may describe a meaning that gives a good and accurate account of themselves. Others may not have such insight into the self. Some may not give much thought to working out what their meaning is; they may live without much articulated meaning. But in this instance there is still an **Implied personal meaning.** Behaviour, how people spend their time, and what interests and motivates them spell out an implied meaning - whether or not this is ever articulated. Personal meaning may be embedded in action (consciously to varying extents); individuals find behaviours/actions that are satisfying, and by adopting these they define personal meaning de facto. Implied meaning is intrinsic motivation that directs behaviour. Others can interpret what seems to be central explanatory principles in the behaviour of individuals. But the individuals may not know, or may not want to know, the implied meaning in their behaviour as interpreted by these others. Interpretations of the implied meaning in people’s behaviour are theories which vary in their accuracy.

There may not be congruence between what individuals propose to themselves as personal meaning and the implied meaning in their behaviour. The idea of ‘knowing yourself’ proposes that congruence between the meaning/theory and the actual living is an important human quality -- like spiritual health.

The scheme takes a preliminary look at ‘outside’ meaning under the categories of: **- Normative cultural meanings; Popular cultural meaning; Implied cultural meaning; Meaning embedded in role models; Change in cultural meanings.**

It then considers some of the ways in which meaning is generated and communicated under these headings: Personal **meaning through reflection; Personal meaning derived from interaction with culture; Ready made meaning as cultural inheritance; Judging what meaning to adopt; Change in meaning.**

**The study of meaning.** Philosophy (especially metaphysics) is primarily concerned with the study of meaning. Also, the social sciences, through interpretation of human behaviour, focus on meaning. Cultural meaning is studied as a non-biological inheritance that is handed on from generation to generation; it is socially constructed and is maintained by social interaction. Theology and religion studies are also primarily concerned with meaning as it is embedded in religions.

**Education for meaning:** What is of interest to educators is the possibility that meaning can be developed and enhanced to some extent by education. This raises questions about what an educated meaning might entail. Education in meaning (like education in identity) will include studies designed to help communicate the cultural community meaning. But in addition, a contemporary critical notion of education would want to include the evaluation of meaning. This could include curriculum, which includes cultural meaning, ideas about how meaning is communicated and developed, and ideas about the evaluation of meaning.

The issue of different and conflicting meanings, which can lead to violence, is a matter of importance for communities of meaning and for education. In a sense, the world is awash with
meaning being offered to people. What is needed is not so much new meaning but the capacities to identify meaning, to see where it is coming from (who is generating or communicating it) and to evaluate it carefully. Important here will be the criteria that are used for evaluating meaning.

**What Is the Search for Meaning?**
The phrase search for meaning suggests a number of things: that individuals consciously look for theories that give satisfying insight into life; individual involvement is required in appropriating or developing meaning; that there may be a felt deficit of meaning that motivates looking for something more meaningful than currently held theories; that usually the individual is the one who ultimately decides for himself/herself what is meaningful.

It may be that search for meaning is a symptom of more fundamental things happening in the person. When something goes wrong in life, whether this be a traumatic event or a gradual change, it may call the implied and articulated personal meanings into question. They may no longer provide a satisfactory explanation of life, or adequate motivation. If this is the case, then a better description of what is happening than ‘search for meaning’ is ‘problems or difficulties in life which prompt a review of personal meaning’.

If there is to be a search, the impression given is that the search is catalysed or driven by some sensed lack of meaning. A dissonance between current experience and the operative explanatory meaning may stimulate the individual to think about the issues and find a more satisfying theory for life (or explanation of the new situation). In some cases, as Frankl suggested above, individuals may learn to live in a different way and only then detect the new meaning in what is being done. In other words, it is not always a purely cognitive task of looking for new meaning and adopting it. It may be experimenting with a different way of living/behaving and then putting this into a theory.

It will be valuable to study what young people perceive to be the experiences that have shaped or changed their meaning. Is it always triggered by difficulty or trauma? Do many people seek to develop their personal meaning calmly and peacefully through study?

Educators would like to think that an education related to meaning will make some valued contribution to the meaning making process in the long term. Studying issues, getting relevant information and reading, reflecting, getting advice, listening to something inspiring might contribute to an education in meaning. For people who are depressed and without hope, the search for meaning may be the last crucial process. If they have some principles they feel are worth living for, this can make a difference. On the other hand, if they do not have a robust inner meaning, this can add to the depression and make the search for meaning a further health hazard. Sometimes, the thoughts of those who are very depressed are negative and further depressing. In these circumstances, thinking about meaning in life may be better postponed. Being helped to get on with living and doing things, putting aside negative thoughts, may provide a more useful therapy, with the development of meaning from this experience coming into the picture at a later stage.

**Community Frame of Reference for Meaning**
There appears to be a problem where individuals have too much responsibility for the construction of a complete system of meaning. There is a need for a community frame of reference for meaning, and for community support – especially for the early stages of meaning development in children and adolescents.

One of the major cultural problems with individualism is that it may appear to young people to be one of the few things left for them to believe in. In his paper, *Portraits of Youth*, Richard Eckersley quoted American psychologist Martin Seligman:

...one necessary condition for meaning is the attachment to something larger than the self; and the larger that entity, the more meaning you can derive.

To the extent that it is now difficult for young people to take seriously their relationship to God, to care about their relationship to the country, or to be part of a large and abiding family, meaning in life will be very difficult to find. The self, to put it another way, is a very poor site for meaning. (Eckersley, 1997, p. 246)

Young people can feel caught in a bind. The culture glorifies individualism; the commercial world does everything it can to make individualism a marketable commodity. However, excessive individualism can be the agent of a pathological aloeness, a cause of erosion of sense of community, and a heavy pressure on young people to have to work out their meaning and purpose by themselves.

While a sense of meaning and purpose ultimately needs to be appropriated and developed by the individual, it may be expecting too much of the human condition to have individuals construct this meaning entirely by themselves, without the support of some community.
How religious educators talked about relevance and meaning in the 1950s, 1970s and later was nuanced differently. An understanding of this history can inform current attempts to address the emerging needs of youth over the next decade.

**Religious Education and the Search for Meaning**

Today we may hear educators talking about the need for a ‘relevant’ religious education which assists young people in their search for meaning. These ideas are not new; but they have become increasingly important over the years.

**The 1950s:** Take for example, religious education in Catholic schools in the 1950s (not all of the Catholic experience was mirrored in the other Christian denominations; but what happened in this context still has pertinence to other denominational settings). The idea of a search for meaning was not prominent in religious education. Teachers might have thought “Why would you search for meaning if you already have ‘absolute truth’”? That was the cultural flavour of Catholicism in those times. For many in that educational context, meaning would have been thought to reside primarily outside the individual; the idea was to believe what the church proposed, whether or not it seemed plausible or reasonable. The focus was on saving one’s soul; this life was just 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. To have a vocation in the family was regarded as a divine blessing.

**The Late 1960s and 1970s:** There is no need to document here the extensive change in the cultural religious meaning for Australian Catholics over the period 1960 to 1980. It suffices to note that religious truth came to be perceived by many Catholics as less absolute (particularly in matters of church discipline) and there was a much more existential, ‘this world’, focus. Social justice (including feminism) and the quality of human relationships became more prominent issues. There was more emphasis on religious meaning inside the individual and on religion as relevant to experience. There was no longer the widespread cultural support for celibate religious or priestly life.

This change in Catholic meaning affected school religious education. Two key words for religious education were ‘experience’ and ‘relevance’; the search for an experience-related, personally relevant religious education catalysed significant change from both the catechism-doctrinal and bible oriented approaches. The focus on experience and relevance was appropriate, and perhaps even more important today, but the content and method of the late 1960s and 1970s did not achieve the promise expected (Rossiter, 1999). The approach was too ‘low key’, with an over reliance on uninformed discussion. The relative absence of strong elements of study, student research, up-to-date information and academic credibility all contributed to poor student perceptions of religious education. Despite this, the retreat movement was regarded as successful, making an acknowledged contribution to young people’s personal religious outlook. Also, the experiential emphasis in both classroom and retreat paralleled a growing movement in Catholic and other Christian circles where a ‘psychological spirituality’ developed. This was a style of Christian belief where the social sciences, scripture scholarship and adult religious education helped foster a spirituality where the focus was on relating Christian belief to life experience.

**The 1990s:** The language and concepts of so-called postmodernism are relevant to the situation in Australian culture in this decade. Changes which began in the 1960s and 1970s have carried through to a more pronounced stage (e.g., in secularisation and privatisation of beliefs).

For example: A year one 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 implications of her question, this child was participating in the popular cultural meaning of these times, which calls most things into question. There is suspicion of all institutions and groups, including the church and politicians. Secularisation is more extensive than it was in 1970s. Young people know that people can live satisfying lives without much contact with organised religion. Increasing numbers of Catholics maintain few 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 do not 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.

(Quoted in Engebretson, 2001)

Commercial spirituality and psychology have progressed since the 1970s with new ideas and perspectives. They have become competitors with
religion in the spiritual meaning department. While not dismissing them, and while acknowledging their useful educational contributions, all of the following have a significant commercial components through proposed relevance to neo-corporatism and the personal enhancement industry—Emotional intelligence (EQ), Spiritual intelligence (EQ) Multiple intelligences, Right and left brain theory, reality experiences (skirmish, "treasure island" "Big brother" type programs, even Jerry Springer), life coaches, the possible human, and so forth. There is a need for a critique of commercial spirituality which is often individualistic and narcissistic, while noting its useful contribution to people’s meaning.

The contemporary questioning seems to know no limits; so it can call everything to question and end up with agnosticism or cynicism about the chance of there being any worthwhile meaning in life. The questioning could be described as a move from ‘false certainties’ to the ‘true uncertainties’. The questions about life seem to have moved more from relevance (How can we improve life and make it more enjoyable?) towards fundamental meaning (Is there any meaning and purpose to life? What are some good reasons for living?)

This means a move from absolute truth to interpretations that increasingly approximate to the truth: For example, we can only know interpretations of Jesus and never the real person (at least in this life!). This implies a change from an emphasis on religious knowledge (1950s), to experience and relevance (1970s) to theories and interpretations (1990s and beyond). If this is the case, then a pedagogy that does not address the new situation of popular cultural meaning could simply reinforce for many young people a sense that they already have that religion is not relevant to meaning in life today.

Conclusion: Some Implications for Religious Education
Just as the teaching of history has changed from an older emphasis on facts and dates to interpretation of primary and secondary sources, so both the search for meaning and religious education need to be concerned with critical appraisal of theories and interpretations of the meaning of life.

This underlines the importance of hermeneutics and of religious education as a hermeneutic (interpretative) process. The classroom is a natural place for rational study, inquiry and evaluation. As noted before, the need to increase this emphasis is not intended to eliminate the experiential and the aesthetic.

Further, this argument supports proposals that school religious education needs to include the study of contemporary spiritual and moral issues, in an open-ended, research-oriented way, including the critical interpretation of culture as a prominent source of implied and articulated meaning. This emphasis can help focus the religious education curriculum more on the search for meaning, and this can enhance its perceived relevance to students. This does not mean that issues should dominate scripture and theology could then 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 teaching religion in schools, especially with senior secondary students.

Elsewhere (Rossiter, 2001a), it was argued that the religion curriculum both in Catholic schools and in the state Religion Studies (Studies of Religion) courses in Australia were too tame for different reasons. I consider that both fail to engage students sufficiently at the level of contemporary spiritual and moral issues, particularly as they relate to the search for meaning and identity. They do not adequately mesh with the spirituality of contemporary young people – the areas of life where they are affected by its spiritual and moral dimension. The Catholic school religion curricula can be perceived by students to be too institutional; while the religion studies courses are too descriptive, in line with content selection according to phenomenological principles. The result: the study of religion is boring. These issues warrant further systematic research.

There is some concern that religious education/religion studies may lag behind other subjects such as English, history, social science and science which are increasingly becoming more values and issues focused, with the students being challenged to engage in cultural interpretation and evaluation. This is a valuable development in general education; but it will be disappointing if religious education, the subject which par excellence should be about the search for meaning and values, does not address this area more comprehensively.

In the light of this discussion, the scope for the teaching religious traditions in Catholic school religious education becomes a matter of debate. One cannot presume that all religion teachers will present an unquestioned view of the church and its teachings. 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. This sort of interpretation also applies to the teaching of theological concepts. Such teaching requires theologically well-educated teachers; a capacity to
identify and explore questions at an appropriate level for the students is also crucial. This may not be the content or approach suitable for junior classes where they are getting basic knowledge of the religious tradition, but it cannot be ignored with older students. Nevertheless, some linkage with issues is still needed at junior levels; also, teacher knowledge of the complexity of doctrinal development will affect the way theological concepts are taught to younger students — avoiding the need to ‘unteach’ some naïve interpretations at a later stage.

This article has explored the theme of search for meaning in a way that might inform the work of religious educators. In addition, it proposes implications for religious education. It suggests that the search for meaning is a theme that could well be more prominent in both the language of school religious education and in the content of the curriculum. This would entail a study that is more clearly linked with the questions young people ask about meaning, purpose and identity; search for meaning and identity and an exploration of reasons for living could be taken up specifically in different parts of the curriculum, as well as being master themes that give direction and focus to teaching.

Such an agenda for religious education is more likely to make the process helpful to the spiritual life of young people, whether or not they take up the option of active membership in a community of faith; it also seems to be a favourable framework within which to present a contemporary case for the Catholic church. It is not anticipated that this agenda is a panacea for addressing the problem of young people’s negative perceptions of religious education as noted at the beginning of the article. However, it may be a help in getting students to think more critically. If something is done to raise the profile of religious education as a subject that at least tries to engage students in looking carefully at spiritual and moral issues, this will be progress.

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