



Teaching Religious Education in Catholic Schools

*embracing
a new era*

RYMARZ • ENGBRETSON • HYDE



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*This book is dedicated to David Engebretson
(22/6/1950 to 28/10/2019)
for his unconditional support over 45 years
of his wife — Associate Professor Kath Engebretson —
and her work in religious education,
which surely makes him one of the hidden heroes
of Catholic Education in Australia.*

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EMBRACING A NEW ERA

My co-authors and I have worked for many years with teachers of Religious Education at all stages of their professional development. These collaborations have produced several books and other works. In this book we actively seek to engage with the new era that is upon us, creating a changing social context in which schools operate. The overarching framework in which we operate remains the same. This is sometimes referred to as the 3 S's, that religious education in Catholic schools be serious, systematic and scholarly. So what can we, briefly, say about this change of era?

Recently a deputy principal approached me with such a pertinent question, 'What is this change of era stuff I keep hearing about?' The term *change of era* has great currency, as it was used by Pope Francis in Florence in 2015 when he addressed the National Conference of the Italian Church. In his address the Pope said, 'We are not living an era of change but a change of era.' So, getting back to the question, what can we say about this change of era and what relevance does this have for religious educators?

Some brief comments here will direct the reader to some of the context from which this book arises. What Smith and his colleagues refer to as the 'old system of faith transmission' is long gone. In fact, it has been inoperative for several decades. Family, school, parish and, in many ways, the wider culture, do not act in unison to nurture religious belief and practice. In contrast, some new features are evident, and

I have described some of these features of the 'new era' in a recent publication (Rymarz, 2021). I would suggest at least three factors are worth considering as markers of the new era. First, a trend to greater individualisation or even atomisation in culture. The sense of the communal and the collective that is gained by being part of a range of different groups, as defined by beliefs, behaviour and social networks, is increasingly diminished. For many Catholics the sense of belonging to a Church is now far looser, but not always obliterated. Connections with the Church have greatly weakened, as evidenced by a steady, almost relentless decline in participation in parish Church rituals which would usually reinforce social and familial networks.

The second feature of the new era is the weakening of bonds between individuals and social groups. When faced with the question of religious affiliation in the 2016 census, 30.1% of Australians nominated 'no religious affiliation' as their answer. There has been a marked rise in recent times of Australians choosing irreligion – to the point that they are the largest single group in terms of expressed religious affiliation. This group, however, is diverse in its beliefs and cannot be fitted neatly into a single category or point of view.

The third feature of the new era is the emergence of spirituality as an independent category and the increasing prevalence of it as a descriptor of individual worldview. What has emerged in recent times is a strong cultural current which disassociates spirituality from formal religion. The longstanding sense of spirituality as a manifestation of religious association has been replaced by spirituality as a category which is not directly tied to any formal religious tradition. This, once again, aligns with a key societal realignment that privileges the individual over the community. To summarise; more Catholics have become distanced from a formal and formative association with the Church, large numbers of people now have no religious affiliation, and there has been a continuing rise in the disassociation between spirituality and religion. All of these factors point to a diversification

of those who are connected with Catholic schools, families and students. At the same time, beneath this diversification there is also a certain commonality. How then does religious education in Catholic schools respond to the changes evident in the new era? This book, hopefully, is a response to that question.

Religious education must take into account the human community that makes up Catholic schools, and consider how best to engage them with a religious education program that is educationally sound and which complements the wider goals of Catholic education. A vitally important aspect of religious education in this new era is the indispensable role of RE teachers. Today, and into the future, the demands on RE teachers will only increase. RE teachers must have a sound understanding of the scope and purpose of RE, be able to cultivate dialogue, and be engaged in the classroom. In Catholic schools the content of RE has always reflected a strong emphasis on presenting the fullness of the Christian message as a basis for encounter and discourse. The need for creative and innovative ways to present this content in changing cultural contexts is a major challenge of the new era. This book is aimed at supporting teachers in meeting these demands.

It is fitting to conclude this foreword with another reference to Pope Francis in which he alludes to religious education in a wider context. In an address in Rome in 2014 to the Plenary Session session of the Congregation for Catholic Education he noted:

Catholic educational institutions offer everyone an education aimed at the integral development of the person that responds to [the] right of all people to have access to knowledge and understanding. But they are equally called to offer to the entire Christian message respecting fully the freedom of all and the proper methods of each specific scholastic environment ... that Jesus Christ is the meaning of life, of the cosmos and of history.

Professor Richard Rymarz

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Chapter 1

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

CHAPTER FOCUS

This chapter provides an overview of the history of Religious Education (RE) in Australian Catholic schools beginning with summative narratives which give an account of how RE has been experienced by students in Catholic schools. The chapter offers four approaches to capturing the movements in the understanding and teaching of RE: the magisterial, the kerygmatic, the experiential and the educational. These approaches are influenced by changes in the wider society and this is especially so in regard to how religion is understood and appropriated in emerging cultural contexts, as referred to throughout. A range of characteristics for each approach is given along with instructive resources.

To initiate and encapsulate some of the key points about the history of RE in Catholic schools, three narratives or vignettes will be provided and referred to throughout the chapter.

NARRATIVE

1

Connie: RE in a new land!

Connie's experience of Catholic schools took place in the 1950s. Her parents came to Australia as immigrants from the Netherlands. She can recall a little of her life in the 'old country' and the anxiety of the move – it was a big step for her parents and her three siblings. She also remembered the excitement of journeying to a new life in a far-off land. Connie's parents were from the southern part of the Netherlands, an area with strong Catholic roots. Her family were active members of their local parish and were part of what others described as the 'Catholic pillar'. Simply put, this referred to the close interaction that Catholics had with each other and how being a member of a religious community had a large influence on how a person lived. This sense of strong religious identity transferred to their life in Australia, where two of her sisters were born. Connie learned English very quickly and her school reinforced the values and practices that she experienced at home. The nuns taught a set curriculum and in religious education they focused on the teachings of the Church and how these could best be understood. There was also a great emphasis on prayers and other devotions. Connie noticed, though, that her world and the world of her family was changing. No longer were they part of a large, tightly knit enclave; they were becoming more integrated into the wider society.

• • •

ACTIVITY

- The three narratives articulate different experiences of RE in Catholic schools. What implications can be drawn from these for teachers of RE today?

Approaches to Religious Education

In discussing the recent history of religious education in Australian Catholic schools, two general points can be made. First, four characteristic approaches will be discussed but these are not definitive categories. There is overlap between each approach and there is no clear, distinctive historical marker of when one approach was replaced by another. In the narratives above we can see illustrations of this where those recounting their experiences have some difficulty in categorising the religious education that they received. Second, it is important not to consider the changes in approach to religious education in isolation. If we widened our analytical lens, we would observe major changes in education more broadly, and importantly, we would see major cultural shifts in the wider society that have had a profound impact on all forms of education.

The Magisterial Approach

A seminal event in the history of the Catholic Church was the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). This was the twentieth ecumenical Council of the Church and, as such, was a very significant event. It is often used as a marker to delineate different eras in the Church. The term *pre-conciliar* refers to the period before 1962. Using this terminology, we can describe some of the characteristics of RE as occurring in the pre-conciliar era. A strongly magisterial approach reflected the place of religion in both the wider culture and in people's lives. Connie's narrative above gives some pointers to this. There was a closer connection for many families between school and parish and the teaching approach across all disciplines tended to be quite

Baptism: Taking the Plunge!

The word Baptism comes from the Greek verb *baptizein*, which means to plunge or immerse in water. In its earliest form Baptism was performed by people being fully plunged into water. Emerging from the water was symbolic of the new life that Baptism brought about. In most Baptisms today a small amount of water is poured by the priest over the head as a sign of washing.

ACTIVITY

- How would you design a resource in an educational approach to RE?

T THEOLOGICAL WINDOW: Evangelisation & Catechesis

In recent times the relation between catechesis and evangelisation has been reconsidered in the light of a changing social context. While distinct, there is also a complementarity between the concepts which reflects the rise of large numbers of people who have no active association with the Christian community. This dynamism of the relationship between catechesis and evangelisation is captured well in the most recent Directory of Catechesis, (DC):

... there are many local contexts in which the Church lives in an ecumenical or multi-religious environment, but often precisely among Christians there develop forms of religious indifference or insensitivity, relativism or syncretism against the background of a secularist vision that denies any openness to the transcendent. In the face of the challenges posed by a specific culture, the first reaction could be that of feeling confused and disoriented, incapable of gauging and evaluating the underlying phenomena. This cannot lead to indifference

on the part of the Christian community, which in addition to proclaiming the Gospel to those who do not know it, is also called to support her children in their awareness of their faith. The value that present-day culture attributes to freedom with respect to the selection of one's own faith can be understood as a valuable opportunity to make adherence to the Lord an act that is profoundly personal and gratuitous, mature and deliberate. For this reason, it becomes evident that catechesis must have a profound connection with evangelisation. This forms within Christians an identity that is clear and secure and serenely capable, in dialogue with the world, of giving the reason for Christian hope with gentleness, respect and an upright conscience (DC, 322).

ACTIVITY

- How does the educational approach to RE take into account the relationship between evangelisation and catechesis?

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In

an era characterised by diversity, uncertainty, and numerous education reforms, Catholic school educators are faced with many challenges and also new opportunities. *Teaching Religious Education in Catholic Schools* has been written to address many of these challenges, as well as offering a fresh perspective and helpful guide which is informed by scholarly research and practical insights. This book models solutions for religious education teachers — and pre-service teachers — and will assist in planning and implementing a contemporary religious education program for students.



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