

THE NEW
and the OLD

SAMPLE



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THE NEW *and the OLD*

*Christian Communities
Recontextualise Faith in a
Change of Era*

Jim and Therese D'Orsa



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This book is dedicated to the memory of
Bishop Hilton Deakin (1932-2022) in appreciation for his
friendship and confidence in entrusting the authors of this
volume with the preparation of his memoir

Bonded through Tragedy: United in Hope.

We appreciate especially Hilton's capacity to bring together
the new as well as the old in living his faith in the context
of Australia and Timor L'Este. His life is a case study
in mission in practice and a storehouse of insights into
pursuing faith in the public square. We have been richly
blessed by a life very well lived for others.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Celebrating the sixteen hundredth anniversary of the death of Saint Jerome (30 September 420), Pope Francis wrote, ‘One of the problems we face today is illiteracy: the hermeneutic skills that make us credible interpreters and translators of our own cultural tradition, are in short supply’ (*Sacrae Scripturae Affectus*, 30 September 2020). Therese and Jim D’Orsa’s book shows a third millennium Christian audience how to face that problem. Text without context is pretext. The biblical and magisterial traditions that make God and God’s ways known to us (texts) have been written, read, and repeatedly read and rewritten for over 2000 years (differing contexts). Each moment of interpretation and translation is profoundly shaped by its many contexts. Vatican II was a significant recontextualisation of the Catholic tradition in a never-ending process. I heartily endorse this outstanding contribution. It places the shifting contexts of each articulation of the Word of God and the Magisterium at the very heart of the act of interpretation.

– Francis J Moloney, SDB, AM, FAHA

*Catholic Theological College, University of Divinity
Melbourne, Victoria, Australia*

The authors of this book have a passion for the mission of Jesus. Drawing upon many different sources they present quite significant ideas in very simple terms. From the Old Testament through to the writings of recent religious education experts, we are gifted with a grand overview of how human beings have struggled to understand and to communicate the revelation of God in the world that they live in. This book continues this work within the context of Australia today.

– Trevor Trotter SSC

Director of St Columbans Mission Society in Oceania

Jim and Therese D’Orsa never cease to open horizons for those engaged in the mission of the Church, and this new book is no exception. *The New and the Old: Christian communities Recontextualise Faith in a Change of Era*, studies the cultural landscape of our time. As the Church continues to receive the Constitutions and Decrees of the Second Vatican Council this latest contribution echoes profoundly *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*. At the heart of this work is the question: How are we to proclaim the Good News in the context and culture of our time? Profoundly this book engages with the observation of Pope Francis; ‘It can be said that today we are not living in an era of change as much as a change of era’ (Pope Francis, Florence, 2015).

In exploring the rich work being undertaken in the Enhancing Catholic School Identity project, the authors continue their legacy as dedicated Catholic educators and theologians. Through the lens of missiology, and placing their review through the prism of the Australian context, they lead us to bring into conversation the world of scripture and tradition with a contemporary vision of proclaiming the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the Church's compass is clearly set toward the way of synodality, this inspirational book is timely for followers of Christ and the ever-ancient, ever-new mission entrusted to the Church.

– Most Reverent Greg Bennet LST DD

Bishop of Sale

Jesus invited the disciples to 'cast their nets out into the deep for a catch'. In response to the call of Christ, nets are still being cast wide across the world. In parishes, hospitals, schools and a multiplicity of good works, people commit to share their Christian faith in a way that is meaningful for those they serve.

Faith-based organisations nail their colours to the mast through visible signs – logos, statements, custom and practice. Responsive to the realities of their particular place and time, they aspire to be 'leaven in the dough', a 'light on the hill', a 'blessing to the nations', making real God's mission of love to all, particularly those who are poor or oppressed in any way.

'Recontextualisation' is an enduring process of reinterpretation and renewal, whereby the 'Good News' can be received afresh, relevant and life-giving in each changing 'context'. There will always be the imperative to, 'Make all things new', by returning to the source and drinking again from the well of God's transformative wisdom.

In their latest book in the Mission and Education series, *The New and the Old: Christian Communities Recontextualise Faith in a Change of Era*, Jim and Therese D'Orsa offer an accessible resource, grounded in scripture, tradition and contemporary scholarly disciplines. They explore with authority the importance and relevance of 'recontextualisation' for those twenty-first century leaders who seek to take seriously the call to share in God's 'ever ancient, ever new' mission of love for an evolving world. This book is an excellent companion for schools and parishes participating in or sharing the aims of the Enhancing Catholic Identity Project.

– Most Reverent Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv STL DD

Bishop of Parramatta

Vatican II's recovery and endorsement of Christian Tradition as both historically mediated and organically dynamic calls for a method of theological enquiry and of religious learning that responds to this living, Spirit-impelled Tradition.

Debates around the time of the Council focused on the 'reformulation' of doctrine; the greater global and intercultural awareness of recent decades has highlighted the constitutive role that contexts, and transitions between contexts, play in the unfolding of Tradition.

How do we come to experience and know the God who 'interruptedly converses' (DV 8) with humanity through Word and Spirit?

Jim and Therese D'Orsa's work draws together scriptural, missiological, anthropological and educational insights to describe the necessary contextualisation and recontextualisation of Christian faith and theology in the interplay of contexts and worldviews throughout history.

Their book will enrich our quest for effective approaches and pedagogies in religious learning and faith formation in today's contexts.

– Very Rev Dr Kevin Lenehan
Master, Catholic Theological College
University of Divinity, Melbourne

Recontextualisation is a word that is used variously and widely but rarely with any rigour. Teachers in some systems know that recontextualisation is a preferred stance for their pedagogy and so it is not surprising that they claim that label for their own teaching practice. In other quarters, recontextualisation is seen as a recipe for relativism and is denigrated accordingly.

Therese and Jim D'Orsa make a valuable contribution as they unpack the term in a rigorous way and explore its implications for Catholic schools. Their scholarship is timely and much needed as they provide an antidote to the confusion and ideology that unfortunately surrounds the challenge of inviting students to appreciate the significance of Catholic faith for their lives.

– Dr Paul Sharkey
*Senior Catholic Educator and Educational Consultant
Coordinator Postgraduate Programs
Catholic Theological College Melbourne University of Divinity*

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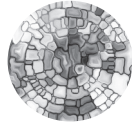
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INTRODUCTION

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1

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Every book has a starting point. Often it is the need to clarify some issue or practice. In this case both the issue and the practice are the recontextualisation of faith in a time of deep change.

The questions we pursue in the pages that follow are:

- What does the term ‘recontextualisation’ mean?
- Where did it come from?
- Why is it important?
- How do we recontextualise faith in a change of era?

In this introduction and the exploration that follows we seek to situate current work on recontextualisation within recent Catholic experience, both cross-cultural mission experience, and the experience of the entire Church worldwide in undertaking the immense project of implementing the Second Vatican Council, which took place between 1962 and 1965. There is much insight to be gained from this. However, it is important to note that the process known as the recontextualisation of faith is as old as the Judeo-Christian tradition itself, as we shall see.

GENESIS OF THE STUDY: ECSI

The genesis of our work lies in the introduction of the *Enhancing Catholic School Identity* (ECSI) project into Catholic schools across many Australian dioceses, and the use in parishes of an adapted form of the project known as *Engaging with the Hopes of Parishes* (EHP).¹ Both of these initiatives are responses to the challenge facing the whole Church to recontextualise our

¹ Brendan Reed, a Catholic priest of the Melbourne archdiocese, prepared a doctoral thesis with the Catholic University Leuven that involved the development of a parish engagement scale to ascertain a preferred orientation for parish life, and hence to provide guidance in pastoral leadership. Brendan Reed *Engaging with the Hope of Parishes*. Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 2019.

Catholic faith in a change of era, so that it is possible for people of our current age to understand and appreciate the great gift that we share.

While ECSI and the challenges it poses provided the immediate impetus for this study, ECSI is not the focus of the study. It remains a broader one – the recontextualisation of faith in a change of era. For an explanation of this phrase see below.

The ECSI project was initially developed in Belgium at the Catholic University Leuven (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven – KUL) as a means of affirming both the ‘Catholic’ identity of Catholic schools and the religious identity of their students.² The project was initially limited by a lack of funds, a problem that was alleviated somewhat when the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria agreed to co-sponsor its development.

In Australia, the ECSI project now involves Catholic schools, primary and secondary, in Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales, and Queensland. The project runs in other countries as well. It focuses on establishing a ‘preferred future’ for Catholic schools, and the ‘recontextualisation of Catholic faith’ is central to its conceptual framework. Recontextualisation holds a similar place in EHP.

While our topic has long been important within the Catholic theological tradition, it would be no exaggeration to say that most teachers in Catholic schools had not heard of recontextualisation prior to the introduction of ECSI. While recontextualisation has also been an important concept in mission theology, it has suffered from relative neglect in the wider Church. Its rediscovery is part of the story of theology since Vatican II. We wish to address aspects of this story, its background and significance, in order to help readers to situate recontextualisation within the faith journey of Catholics. We include reference to the extraordinary journeys made by Christian missionaries working to contextualise faith in cultures other than their own, and the hard lessons learned on those journeys.

We explore this topic because of our conviction that, whether schools or school systems engage in the ECSI project, or whether they attempt to meet the challenge of recontextualising faith through some other means, it is essential that, in this time of deep change, leaders come to grips in one way or another with the Biblical imperative to recontextualise faith.

Recontextualisation is not a specifically religious term, having provenance in several academic disciplines, each of which helps expand its meaning

2 As of 2021, ECSI incorporates over 500,000 subjects (students, parents, teachers, principals, priests, and members of schools’ offices and boards) in some 1500 educational institutions worldwide. Didier Pollefeyt ‘Teaching the Unteachable or Why Too Much Good is Bad Religious Education in Catholic Schools Today.’ <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100810,1>

and practice. The disciplines include missiology, anthropology, theology, education, hermeneutics, and biblical studies.

From a missiological perspective, to clarify the meaning of 'recontextualisation', it is first necessary to address 'contextualisation'. At a semantic level also, something must be 'contextualised' before it can be 'recontextualised'.

CONTEXTUALISATION IN CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY EXPERIENCE PRIOR TO THE 1970S

The term 'contextualisation' was initially formulated by Protestant and Catholic missiologists independently of one another and reflected the complex cross-cultural mission situation that was emerging in the 1970s.³ The concept developed in two stages. Initially, contextualisation was understood to mean the way in which missionaries, raised in European understandings and practices of the Christian faith, conveyed that faith to peoples living in totally different cultural settings.⁴ 'Contextualisation' understood in this sense was substantially a *one-way process*. It was also termed 'translation' or 'adaptation'. 'Contextualisation' described the meaningful transmission of Christian faith in the cross-cultural settings in which missionaries operated. To appreciate the significance of the developments in how contextualisation was understood in recent Christian history, it is necessary to briefly consider some of the assumptions underpinning cross-cultural mission prior to the 1970s.

As modern mission history unfolded during the first and second expansions of Europe into South America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania, it was generally assumed that the way in which Europeans understood and practised their faith was *normative* for all other peoples.⁵ There were of course well-known exceptions, but these were very much in the minority.

3 The term was first coined, in reference to theology, in 1972 by a Taiwan-born Presbyterian minister, Shoki Coe, working for the World Council of Churches' Theological Education Fund. He thus named and highlighted one of the major and most fruitful areas of Christian theology historically. While far from new – contextualisation having been at the heart of theology from the beginning of the Christian story – its nature and importance became recognised once again. It began again to flourish within many societies including Australia. For an introduction to Shoki Coe see Daniel H. Beeby, 'Coe, Shoki (C.H. Hwang)' In *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Mission*. Editor Gerald H. Andersen. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

4 Catholic missiologists are divided on the use of this term. The equivalent in Catholic theology is 'inculturation' which first appeared in theological texts in the 1970s and in official Catholic teaching in 1979 in Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* (#53). For the purpose of clarity, and because it is important to our discussion to note that context is more wide-ranging than culture, we follow respected Catholic theologian and missiologist Stephen Bevans in using the term 'contextualisation' rather than 'inculturation' in this book.

5 The notion that one culture can be taken as normative for all other cultures is known as classicism. The classicist mindset equates 'culture' with the notion of 'civilisation', in this case civilisation as it had emerged in Europe.

Missionaries invited local peoples into Christian faith *as they themselves understood and practised it* without realising the influence that European or North American cultures and history (context) had on their own understanding and expression of faith. A prevailing assumption was that Church unity was best preserved by *uniformity of belief and practice*. Prior to the 1970s leaders of the Catholic Church operated largely according to the ‘one size fits all’ principle.

Against this background, it is unsurprising that the concept of mission up until the post-Vatican II period (post 1965) – a period which coincided with what we are terming the ‘postmodern’ period in contemporary Western cultures – was a simple one, namely helping people living in non-European cultures to ‘translate’ or ‘adapt’ a European understanding of Christian faith and practice. To become Catholic was to become a pseudo-European. Missing in this experience was any understanding that *meaning-making is a culturally determined process and that not all peoples make meaning in the same way, because a person’s culture provides that person with a primary frame of reference in meaning-making*. Furthermore, this culture is the product of a local history. We will explore each of these key ideas in the chapters that follow.

RECONTEXTUALISATION

Recontextualisation, like contextualisation, is a hermeneutical process; it is concerned with how we make sense of things, understand them, interpret them, and give them meaning.

As we have noted, we construct meaning within the frame of reference offered us by our culture which provides us with a language, symbols, concepts, images, beliefs, values, and other points of reference such as stories and a worldview. Since we generally take our culture for granted, much of our meaning-making goes on outside of our immediate awareness. If our cultural frame of reference undergoes a major change, then meanings that we once took for granted must be re-negotiated to remain intelligible. The process by which this occurs is called ‘recontextualisation’. Put another way, *recontextualisation is the process by which meaning is sustained when the framework and context in which meaning was initially created undergo major changes*.

For instance, the Christian faith began with Jesus in a cultural world that had, due to the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, ceased to exist by the time the gospels were written. The gospels were written in Greek for audiences often unfamiliar with Jesus’ cultural world and its points of reference.

The gospels, each in a different way, post the fall of Jerusalem, represent a recontextualisation of understandings about the significance of Jesus’ life,

teaching, death, and resurrection in what was for both Christians and Jews at the time, a change of era. As Christianity spread, Christian leaders also provided a contextualisation of these traditions for people living in various parts of the Greco-Roman cultural world. So, in the life of early Christianity, recontextualisation and contextualisation were processes that were both features of the life of the Church. This remains the situation today.

When, in the 6th and 7th centuries CE, Christianity was taken to what would become the Europe we know today by missionaries such as St Columban, these had to contend with new cultures and the meaning systems that existed within those cultures. They had to *contextualise* the gospel for it to be meaningful. They were very successful, and Christianity subsequently became deeply embedded in most European cultures. As the Medieval period gave way to the modern period, the situation changed; European cultures became more secular, and science, rather than faith, eventually became the generally accepted criteria of what constituted both knowledge and truth. The emerging modern worldview became the dominant frame of reference within which people in Europe made sense of their lives. This was a dramatic change of era, and many Church leaders of the time rejected the development outright.

The modern worldview lost its position of dominance but remained very influential into the late 20th century when the emergence of postmodern thought confronted it. The new and complex cultural situation that resulted has presented *major challenges* to a faith that had been successfully contextualised within pre-modern societies. To remain relevant and meaningful, the Christian message needed to be *recontextualised*. This did not happen until late in the modern period when Catholic bishops at Vatican II (1962-65) began this long-overdue task, one that has continued ever since, gaining renewed momentum under the leadership of Pope Francis, just as the impact of postmodern thought was undermining assumptions on which the culture of modernity was constructed.

While Boeve following Schillebeeckx uses 'recontextualisation' (see Chapter 11), missiologists tend to use the term 're-contextualisation' (hyphenated). Both groups are referring to the fact that recontextualisation is the dynamic by which faith remains meaningful within a culture when the dominant framework used in meaning-making undergoes significant change. Apart from missiological discussion, as in Chapter 4, we will simplify matters by using 'recontextualisation' throughout this study.

CONTEXTUALISATION AND RECONTEXTUALISATION: A NEVER-ENDING STORY

In this introduction, and in Chapter 4, we have endeavoured to identify important elements in the backstory to ‘recontextualisation’. The bigger story is that of God’s divine purpose (mission) within history. It includes the churches’ efforts to respond by making God’s offer of faith and salvation meaningful to people as their cultures undergo deep change. As already noted, it is a labour for which there are significant insights accessible through the medium of the Biblical witness. At the same time, it is a story that continues to unfold; we do not know where history is taking us, and cannot know the form of mission challenges that lie ahead.

In the decades since Vatican II and as the insights of this major turning-point in Catholicism have played out in the Church’s life globally, the Church’s life and mission are being reshaped by an understanding of mission as God’s mission made accessible to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

There are major efforts under way to delve into the roots of our mission tradition, and to re-appropriate this foundation of Christian life for our times, allowing it to shape theologies and practical projects. Mission is slowly being re-understood in a Church-constituting way. Put in simple terms, the Church exists because of God’s mission incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth, and now mandated to the Church. This means that mission is more than a list of activities to be done; it is now understood as a *dynamic life-giving force creating community and identity*, and with a very practical edge demanding that the global community put the marginalised at the centre of its consideration. The many writings of Pope Francis on the subject remind us of this central Biblical imperative.

Faith communities are called to discern how the various forms of mission find their place on communities’ agendas, be they agendas about social justice, reconciliation, care for the earth, inter-religious dialogue, or recontextualisation of faith. Theologians inevitably struggle with the questions these newer forms of mission draw to the surface of Church life in the new environment that is both postmodern and now postsecular. It is becoming increasingly clear that the implementation of the post-Vatican II mission project requires the efforts of every baptised Christian, and so to some extent, formation and education are the responsibility of every leader.

Finally, the post-Vatican II story of mission is a story with implications for the encounter that teachers and leaders have with young people who are native to the current era characterised by deep globalisation and consequent pluralisation of societies, an era that is now well advanced. For them, any ambiguities inherent in religious belief are amplified by living

in an unstable Western culture. The situation demands a re-orientation of the teaching-learning processes in Catholic schools. Additionally, this re-orientation also needs to be repeated in parish settings so that parishioners are enabled, rather than disabled, in their understanding and practice of faith. If this can be achieved, then parishes and schools can move together for the good of all God's people.

There have been relatively few times in human history when both culture and faith have undergone simultaneous transformation as rapidly as they have in our time. In other words, the challenges facing the present generation of teachers and parish leaders *seem unique in human history*. We hope that our contribution to achieving some clarity about the historical and cultural processes presently underway may lead to insight, and provide teachers with encouragement in the grand project of Catholic education. These are our goals in the chapters that follow.

IMPORTANT TERMINOLOGY

Living in a 'Change of Era'

The global dynamics – globalisation, pluralisation, and secularisation – with their attendant consequences such as detraditionalisation, are the defining features of the current age,⁶ one that demands of us what Pope Francis identifies as 'a new humanism' in response to deepening divisions. In his writings, such as *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), *Laudato si'* (2015), and *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), Pope Francis has spelled out at some length the features of our context that need to be addressed. These features define what Pope Francis, in a landmark address delivered at Florence cathedral early in his pontificate, referred to as constituting a 'change of era' in contradistinction to 'an era of change'.⁷ It is an era in which the increasingly perilous state of the earth, and its inhabitants, is becoming more centre-stage in human consciousness spurred on by climate change and global rivalries fought out in proxy wars. The current age is one characterised by the deep changes noted above and, in the view of Pope Francis, has reached, the gone beyond, the tipping point that is moving the human family and its 'common home'⁸ into a new era – a change of era has occurred.

6 Jim and Therese D'Orsa. *Explorers, Guides and Meaning-makers: Mission Theology for Catholic Educators*. Mulgrave: Garratt Publishing, 2010, chapters 7-9, 95-133. The situation presented in these chapters not only persists but has only deepened in the last decade.

7 Pope Francis' address to the Members of the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church gathered at Santa Maria Della Fiori Cathedral, Florence, 10 November, 2015. [s\https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151110_firenze-convegno-chiesa-italiana.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151110_firenze-convegno-chiesa-italiana.html)

8 Note full title of *Laudato si'* https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

In this ‘change of era’, our view of what constitutes ‘the world’ is no longer shaped by geography as in Roman, Medieval, and early Modern times, but by a realisation of our interconnectedness to others who are ‘different’ and to the earth itself in ways that previously would have been considered inconceivable. The framework within which people now make sense of their lives has to be re-negotiated in the context of cultural and religious pluralism and threats to life on this planet. For most people, matters that they once took for granted as ‘how the world is’ must be re-examined and assessed.

In a ‘change of era’ it is no longer possible for members of the older generation to pass on either faith or culture in the same way that they themselves received it, since members of the younger generation are native to the new context and its worldview which they take for granted as ‘how things are’. There are now forces at work that challenge traditional understandings of family, school, and parish. In a change of era the taken-for-granted assumptions that underpinned these three basic forms of social existence, whether drawn from faith or culture, are open to critique and challenge. With this comes both confusion and opportunity.

Pope Francis made it clear in his address in Florence cathedral that this new era cannot be dealt with by ‘putting our hope in structures, organizations, in perfect plans...’ Of course, he was not discouraging prudent planning or good organisation, but publicly warning against ‘*putting hope in*’ such arrangements (a practical heresy that he calls modern-day Pelagianism).⁹ Speaking of the self-emptying Jesus in the presence of the giant fresco of the Last Judgement on the ceiling of Florence’s famous Duomo, Francis spoke of Jesus’ face on the cross becoming like that of our ‘humiliated brothers and sisters, slaves, emptied...’. He made it very clear that a ‘new humanism’ that places Christians alongside and among the victims of past and present dehumanising forces, must shape our Christian response. Indeed, in a change of era the self-emptying of Jesus Christ’s humanism is to be the hallmark of a new Christian humanism.

Modern and Modernity

The term ‘modern’ has multiple meanings. As used in ordinary speech it means ‘contemporary’ or ‘current’. As used in history, ‘modern’ refers to a specific era in which a new worldview, the modern worldview, emerged in Europe. Other historical eras are named with respect to ‘modernity’, another name for the modern period. Thus, the era immediately prior to modernity it called the ‘pre-modern’ or ‘pre-critical’ era. Distinctions

⁹ A heresy which denies original sin, and which promotes the conviction that we humans can manage our affairs without the help of God.

are made within modernity such as early modernity, high modernity, and late modernity. While there is some disagreement about exactly when the modern era started, there seems consensus that it ended around the 1970s with the advent of postmodern thought.¹⁰

Modernity has its roots in what is known as the ‘Age of Enlightenment’ and extends from the 17th through to the early 19th century, when it reached its peak. It was a period of vigorous philosophical and political debate with new directions and rationales proposed for public life. Modernity inherited ideas generated during the ‘Scientific Revolution’ that created optimism about the future of humanity and gave rise in the modern period to public debate about political policies. These ideas about human life and the meaning of history led to assumptions about the inevitability of human progress, and the right way to conduct public life, including the necessity to separate church and state. Unbounded faith was placed in human reason and scientific method, to the detriment of affectivity and other ways of constructing and validating knowledge. Modernity has affected us in the West profoundly, and through the colonial activities of Western nations and corporations, has impacted much of the world.

Modernity’s optimism legitimated practices that have led to the current disastrous state of the earth. Whereas in the pre-modern period scientists like Newton saw themselves as using their talents in the service of God, with their inventions and works done in God’s service, in the modern age such affirmations were rejected as religion was relegated to the realm of affectivity and private life.

Because religion was relegated to the private sphere, new academic disciplines developed in this period did not require the legitimation of religious authority as had been the case previously. Theology became separated from the mainstream academy and found its life in seminaries and universities that maintained departments of theology. In our time this situation is changing slowly, and a fruitful dialogue is beginning to take place between theology and other disciplines. It is not easy to generate spaces for this to occur. Dialogue of this kind is one of the mission imperatives of our time. At the Catholic school level, it occurs as teachers and leaders seek the integration of faith and culture within the curriculum.¹¹ In parish life it occurs as communities seek dialogue partners from beyond the

¹⁰ *Encyclopedia Britannica* ‘Modernity’ accessed at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/modernity>

¹¹ See the exploratory study by Jim and Therese D’Orsa. *Catholic Curriculum: a Mission to the Heart of Young People*. Mulgrave: Garratt Publishing, 2011. An Educator’s Guide to the subject has been prepared by Patricia Hindmarsh entitled *Catholic Curriculum: Learning for ‘Fulness of Life’*. Mulgrave: Garratt Publishing, 2017.

communities in order to enable projects such as social justice or care for the earth initiatives to occur.

Life in the modern period was envisaged as human life minus religion.¹² Charles Taylor refers to this as a ‘subtraction story’, and points to the tendency of people today to interpret modernity in terms of what has been lost. He proposes that the secularity that is a legacy of modernity can also be interpreted as a positive thing, and that we should be thinking about our current age as providing the opportunity to create an ‘addition story’ that acknowledges our debt to modernity. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let it be said up front, however, that initiatives such as the ECSI project find their place among those that seek to respond strongly to the opportunities and challenges of our postmodern–postsecular age.

Secularity was a feature of modernity. It recognised that there are areas of human life in which faith legitimately plays little or no part.¹³ This is different from *secularism* which interprets secularity as excluding faith from the public square. ‘Secularisation’ has multiple interpretations along a soft-hard continuum.

In the 1970s a group of French philosophers known as the Postmoderns, faced with the profound failures of the modern worldview during the 20th century, mounted a powerful critique to its philosophic underpinnings, challenging its narrative of endless human progress. Modernity was forced to give ground in the face of the postmodern critique, especially regarding its assumptions about the nature of history’s unfolding. What we are experiencing today bears resemblance to what has occurred in human history whenever there has been a change of era. Powerful new ideas emerge that impact on the process of human meaning-making, but the old ideas persist for a time alongside them. Thus, modernity continues to shape our culture even as some of its key ideas are being reshaped – ideas about human progress, and what secularity means as contexts change.

Postmodern–postsecular

In this study, we describe the current era as postmodern–postsecular. Let us focus on the ‘postmodern’ element first. By this we mean that our era remains very much influenced by postmodern thought, particularly its

12 Charles Taylor *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA: 2007, 26–29.

13 Secularity understood in this way is recognised in Catholic teaching. Science for instance has its own method of validating its own insights as true. This holds for other disciplines such as anthropology and psychology. What the Church does is enter into dialogue with academic disciplines to understand the conclusions reached and their implications for humankind. Similarly while the Church sets out moral principles by which government should act, but it does not propose specific solutions to complex political issues since the latter can be interpreted in different ways within different political systems.

critique of totalising narratives that seek to embrace all aspects of life and interpret it from a single perspective, especially in economic matters. The postmodern critique was aimed particularly at the shortcomings of Nazism and Soviet-era Communism and the horrific human tragedy these caused in Europe. These we agree are closed stories.

Some interpretations of the Christian story have also been critiqued as a closed story. However, as we have argued in our previous book (*Pedagogy for the Catholic Educator* 2021),¹⁴ the theology of the kingdom or reign of God, as reclaimed by the Biblical renewal of recent years, has shown us that the Christian story is *intrinsically an open story*. This central image in Jesus' teaching about the mission God had entrusted to him, provides an approach to the future that is wonderfully open and challenges the Christian imagination.

Postsecular

Modernity saw an expansion in the notion of secularity in its various facets – separation of Church and state, democratic government, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, creation of a market economy, and the secularisation of knowledge. With these lasting achievements also came other elements such as relegation of religion to the private sphere. In Australia, we know that this thinking was applied to public education in which there was to be no religion taught; such education was supposed to occur in the home or in the church acting as a Sunday school, but outside school hours.

Among those who rejected this view and wanting all areas of learning to form an integrated whole with faith strongly held and taught, was Australia's first canonised saint, Mary MacKillop, who founded her sisterhood to help make such an education possible and available, initially in primary schools and later in secondary. Other pioneering Catholic educators with a similar vision followed both here and in other countries.

An important consequence of postmodern thinking was appreciation of 'difference', and equally important, *a recognition of the right of people to be different*. This raised the question of how best to address religious difference while maintaining the secularity of public life? This is a defining issue for a postsecular society. The answer has been to open the public square to all.

We have begun to see the public space of our society as the domain wherein all, no matter their religion or ideology, may participate subject to goodwill and fairness. This is the postsecular environment. It certainly does not abandon the positive understanding of modern secularity, such as the separation of church and state, and the secularisation of knowledge,

14 Jim and Therese D'Orsa *Pedagogy and the Catholic Educator*. Mulgrave: Garratt Publishing, 2021.

but leaves the path open to new developments in our understanding of secularity and their implications for people of faith.

STRUCTURE OF THE TEXT

This exploratory study is set out in five main parts.

Following this introduction, **Part A** explores aspects of contextualisation and recontextualisation within the Old and New Testament traditions. (Chapters 2 and 3).

In **Part B** we examine the Catholic experience of contextualisation in recent cross-cultural mission history (Chapter 4) and discuss key understandings about how people make meaning in the context of a changing culture, (Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8). In addressing meaning-making, we aim to secure two key terms – ‘culture’ and ‘worldview’.

In **Part C** (Chapters 9 and 10) we address the process of recontextualisation by considering:

- the processes by which people construct meaning from the perspective of *hermeneutics*
- the *worldview of faith* and the part it plays in meaning-making.

In **Part D** (Chapter 11) we focus on recontextualisation from a theological perspective.

In **Part E** (Chapters 12, 13, and 14) we provide some reflections on recontextualisation from within the recent Australian educational experience, focusing particularly on the *Enhancing Catholic Identity* (ECSI) project.

In the **Concluding Section** (Chapter 15) we draw together a selection of themes explored in the book, and examine the kind of community that might encourage and strengthen current attempts to recontextualise faith seen as a pressing pastoral and missional imperative in today’s schools and parishes.

The writer of Matthew’s gospel provides us with a template for community leadership. In meeting the needs of his predominantly Jewish community for a recontextualised Christian faith in an utterly changed world, he brings out of his storeroom profoundly new understandings and perspectives, as well as the more familiar ones – ‘the old’ (Matt 13:52). In a creative synthesis, Matthew’s gospel moved the early Christian experience forward, authentically recontextualising traditions of meaning originating in the Jewish faith, in the light of the life, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and of the destruction of Jerusalem and all that this meant in the Jewish religious world. In doing so, Matthew produced a gospel that has played a central role in Christian education in faith from the first century CE to the present day.