*Maurice Ryan**

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: THREE HISTORICAL SNAPSHOTS

Introduction

This paper considers three pivotal moments in the history of religious education in Australian Catholic schools. I want to claim that each of these moments introduced some new or modified themes to the theory and practice of religious education for Catholic practitioners. I contend that the forms for religious education discovered in these pivotal moments persisted in the memory of religious educators who work in Catholic schools. Sometimes, these memories became submerged, not to see the light of day until a much later time. In most cases though, the reforms maintained an iron grip on the imagination of successive generations of religious educators. A retelling of these moments and an evaluation of their meaning can assist contemporary religious educators to understand their heritage and to respond in their contemporary context.

Starting Out: Parramatta Schooldays

Catholic schools in Australia have their foundation in the schools that were created in the settlements of Sydney Cove and Parramatta in the early 1800s. These schools were mostly poor, rough and ill equipped. In the years between 1803 and 1810, several attempts to establish Catholic schools were successful, but only for brief periods. Under the guidance of emancipist priest, Father James Dixon, the Catholic community attempted to provide schools that would offer basic instruction for Catholic children, and ensure that they were not subjected to the ministrations of Anglican schools. These Anglican schools had proved to be more durable since they were in receipt of a small amount of government assistance. In 1820, when Father John Joseph Therry arrived in Sydney, schools assumed a priority in the Catholic community's pastoral work. Mr. George Morley, a convict whose qualifications for the job included some rudimentary schooling, established a school in Hunter Street, Parramatta towards the end of 1820 or early in 1821. It was the first of a number of schools that were established under Therry's patronage. George Morley's school enrolled 31 students, seven of whom were identified as Protestants (Fogarty, 1959, p. 21).

From these modest beginnings, some important themes were introduced that would play out in Catholic schools over the next two centuries. The first is the belief in schools as an essential dimension of the health and survival of the Catholic community in Australia. Right from the beginning, there has always been an influential core of Catholics who cherished schools and the benefits they could bestow. It needs to be said also, that many among the Catholic community cared little for schools, Catholic or otherwise, and had to be cajoled into supporting them in difficult times. Schools provided at least two benefits for the Catholic community. They were a source of enlightened learning not easily otherwise available in a colony still coming to terms with its existence as a gaol. The school offered a better start in life for the children of the predominantly underclass Catholic population. To be sure, a basic schooling in the three "R's" was a necessary prerequisite for the learning the fourth "R" - religion. According to influential Catholic church leaders, students would need to be able to read and learn by heart their catechism in order for their faith to be enhanced. Schools were a necessary part of the task of religious instruction.

But, the first Catholic school was not only directed to the needs of the Catholic population. Almost one quarter of students enrolled in the first permanent Catholic school were from Protestant families. This fact needs to be understood as an early example of ecumenical cooperation and outreach. In the early years of colonial settlement, Catholics and Protestants in many areas were able to abandon the sectarian bitterness that had dogged their church communities back in Europe. Signs of cooperation, unlikely in a European context, were common enough in the new colonies where survival needs encouraged mutual assistance. Sectarian disputes, though real enough and nasty for the combatants, were not the keynote of the colonial religious communities. Distance from "home" muted much of the sectarian rivalries. Cooperation and ecumenical interchange were keynotes. This ecumenical refrain is represented in the first Catholic schools. Older Australian Catholics tell stories of undiluted sectarian conflict. Forgotten or ignored are the experiences of ecumenical cooperation and harmony.

Significantly, the first Catholic schoolteacher was a layperson. This established a pattern that was to be continued for the rest of the nineteenth century. Lay teachers were predominant in the staffing of colonial Catholic schools. Not until the turn of the

twentieth century did members of religious congregations outnumber them (Fogarty, 1959, pp. 279-286; Kehoe, 1983; Ryan 1997, pp. 50-53). Nevertheless, with accuracy, it can be claimed that lay Catholics founded the Catholic schools in Australia. This understanding is not part of the dominant mythology of Australian Catholic schools. While the members of religious congregations played an indispensable role in the period of rapid expansion of Catholic schools after 1880, Catholic schools need to be understood as a major lay movement within the church, perhaps the most significant lay movement within Australian Catholicism (Ryan, 2001).

Unfortunately, modern Catholic school people have forgotten, or rarely call to mind, much of the "pre-history" of Catholic schools from 1820 until 1870. Or rather, it has been swamped by memories of a crisis that confronted Catholic schools in the 1870s. This crisis constitutes the main pivotal moment in the development of Australian Catholic schools.

Crisis and Response: 1870s and Beyond
By the 1870s, the relationship between the Catholic community and colonial governments had deteriorated. Two broad factors account for this. Catholic Church officials had generally accepted the conservative, even reactionary, polemics of Pope Pius IX who railed against the forces of the Enlightenment reconfiguring the cultural landscape of Europe (Molony, 1969). Pius IX's 1864, *Syllabus of Errors,* detailed the perceived sins of the modern age from the perspective of the Catholic hierarchy. Among the errors emerging in the middle of the nineteenth century were State-sponsored schools, which were gaining popularity and support, though without religious (or specifically Catholic) attachments or involvement. Catholics would need to shun such schools said the Pope. The Australian bishops loyally agreed. Especially the Irish-Australian bishops decreed that Catholics would offer a separate Catholic schooling for every Catholic child, wherever it was humanly possible to do so.

From the side of Australian colonial governments, a new breed of politicians began to take up seats in colonial parliaments. Vigorous in their concern to establish a new society in the colonies, many shunned the divisions caused by European denominational Christianity; the colonies would be simply better off if Church and State were disentangled. Church people could be left in peace to pursue their own pastoral goals, but they should not expect money or support from the government to do so. When the numbers of such members reached a majority in successive parliaments, Education Acts were passed that guaranteed free, compulsory and secular schooling for all colonial children. Since Catholic leaders refused to accept the legitimacy of government schools, the Catholic community undertook the task of rapidly expanding the number of Catholic schools in all parts of Australia (Ryan, 1997).

The retreat to an insular and isolated Catholic community was solidified during this period. Earlier colonial developments had offered prospects for ecumenical and cultural cooperation. But these would need to wait for another hundred years before a further swing in the politics of Church and State provided impetus to rediscover these earlier Australian values. Manning Clark once outlined the consequences for Australia of the Education Acts of the 1870s and 1880s. He thought that:

> It meant the neutrality of the teachers in the State schools on all questions touching personal faith: it meant the permanent division of the Australian education into three types of schools the Catholic, the Protestant, and the State: it meant the pauperisation of the Catholic Schools, and left them as an aggrieved minority. What was just as grievous was the decision of each colony to adopt a highly centralised system of administration for the conduct of education. Thus one part of the administrative machinery was created for a centralised democracy: to permit, in turn, the development of the tyranny of the majority (Clark, 1979, p. 662).

Catholic grievances affected the content and forms of religious instruction and hardened the resolve of Catholic leaders to maintain their church communities, whatever the cost. To this end, Catholic schools were elevated in importance.

Catholic leaders formally asserted their belief in the centrality of Catholic schools, over and against the broader pastoral needs of the Catholic community. Archbishop Vaughan spoke about Catholic schools as the "adamantine rock" upon which the future of the church in Australia would be based. At the First Plenary Council of Australian bishops in 1885, a principle was established: if the choice for a local Catholic community was between building a school or a parish church, they should opt for the school - the parish could make do until later. The Second Plenary Council of 1895 affirmed the "schools first" policy in this way:

> Hence we hold that the Catholic school to be so essential to the Catholic faith in these colonies, where hardly two neighbours agree in religion, that we repeat what was laid down by the First Plenary Council of Australia - If the pastor and his congregation find themselves for a

time unable for a time to build both a church and school, they ought by all means to begin with the school.

Doubtless, this decision was based on sound pastoral wisdom: parishioners could gather in the school buildings for liturgical celebrations and other parish business during out of school hours. This preference for schools was burned into the consciousness of successive generations of Catholics. Historian Edmund Campion, without any hint of overstatement, has estimated the centrality of Catholic schools in this way: "by 1885, schools had become what they were to remain, a major focus of parish life, Episcopal concern and lay activity. Indeed, from this time on the parochial school may be considered the single most distinctive feature of Australian Catholicism" (Campion, 1987, p. 56).

For religious educators, the idea of putting the construction of a school before a church holds great significance. The weight of expectation was placed firmly on Catholic schools to produce faithful church members. The principle was established that - as Graham English noted over a century later - "priests, teachers and the Catholic people have measured the effectiveness of Catholic schools by how their graduates act" (English, 1990, p. 25). English thinks that Catholic school religious education has been predominantly conceptualised as fostering piety and religious practice in Catholic students.

The schools-first policy implies that the role of the religious education program is to produce faithful Catholics. Any tension that might exist between religious education and pastoral formation collapses. Catholic leaders were unequivocal about their confidence in the Catholic school to produce in the rising generations not only decent citizens for the young colonies, but more particularly, faithful members of a church who would ensure the survival and vitality of the Catholic church in this country.

After 1870, Catholic schools rapidly expanded, but they did so in a climate of fear and reaction. Martin Marty, author of a monumental study of religious fundamentalism, describes how religious reactionaries respond to change. Religious fundamentalism arose in reaction to the growth of the Western Enlightenment. Fundamentalists fight back against modernity. For fundamentalists, modernity is a code word for a storm "that has disrupted former understandings of identity, gender, family, and the education of children. Almost every fundamentalist movement starts its own elementary schools. Fundamentalists have the feeling their landmarks are disappearing, their

moorings are going" (Marty, 2001, p. 45). While late-colonial Australian Catholic leaders do not fit the mould of fundamentalists exactly, some family resemblances can be seen. Consider; for example, the following excerpt from a Pastoral letter of Melbourne's Bishop James Goold in 1872, during the election campaign that would decide the fate of Victorian colonial schools.

> They boldly and defiantly tell you it is their determination to do away with your schools, and substitute for them Godless schools, to which they will compel you, under penalty (or imprisonment) to send your children. In one word, they threaten the Catholics of this colony, a fourth part of the entire Christian population, with religious persecution in the shape of a Godless and compulsory system of education...The Catholics of Victoria, if I understand them, will not be slaves of their new rulers. Godless education you have always rejected as an impious outrage on God and Virtue. Now that it is about to be forced upon you under penal compulsion, which means a direct violation of parental and civil liberty. (Goold, 1872)

We can see in Goold's tirade a sense of Martin Marty's shifting landmarks and disappearing moorings. Group identity is threatened; Catholic primary schools would be the salvation. Of course, the weight of such expectations would be too great for any one agency, school or otherwise, to sustain. The idea that children needed to be formed early in Catholic ways as an antidote to later disruptive influences was ambitious, if not misguided. But, it set a pattern for expectations for the schooling of Catholic Australians for most of the next century.

The End of an Era: 1950s
The 1950s represented a closing of some dominant forms of Catholic life. This decade saw Australian Catholics embroiled in the virulent anti-Communist debates, a fear of the Cold War realities and a continuation of centuries of anti-Protestantism. Religious education in schools would reflect these themes, but their intensity would weaken as the social and religious world shifted in the 1960s.

Catholic schools in the 1950s buckled, staggered and almost collapsed under the collective load of a rapid economic expansion in the post-WWII era. A rapid increase in post-war immigration, particularly from countries with a high proportion of Catholics, encountered the enrollment of the baby boom generation. Increased demand for secondary school education added to the pressures on the system. Catholic schools did their best, but the strains

showed: poorly prepared teachers, inadequate facilities and ever increasing class sizes stretched the system to breaking point.

The 1950s marked the beginning of the end of the time when school communities and the broader Catholic community could unite in their adversity to share the load of financing and keeping Catholic schools afloat. The years of grace that began with limited government funding in the 1960s and which became a flood of finance with Whitlam in the 1970s also meant the effective end of the combined struggle. Money came from Canberra, not predominantly from the pockets of working families. Teachers were better trained and once again, as in the beginning, were mostly lay. It meant the beginning of the end of an us-and-them mentality towards other Christians that is mostly unknown to modern students. It meant the opening up to the tides of questioning and revision that were beginning to take hold in the Catholic Church. One 1950s student remembered her school experience in Melbourne parochial schools in this way:

> The Australian parish school of the 1940s and 1950s was not a place to question the place of status of Catholic women. The school was part of the struggle of Irish Catholics themselves and to reach equality in temporal as well as spiritual ways. We were all aware of the stranglehold that the English invasion had placed on Irish national development. We knew of the tyranny that had brought starvation and death during the potato blight, even while Irish food was being exported from Ireland to England. We were also aware that in Australia, Catholics had a hard time of it. The State tried to take our faith away from us and the Masons tried to grind us down by denying us jobs. Theoretically, the Church schools were there both to maintain the faith and to promote the worldly advancement of Catholics (Arnold, 1985, p. 78).

The gentler forms of European sectarianism that had been muted by Australian conditions remained nonetheless real, though rapidly fading. Students who attended Catholic schools a decade later rarely mention the irritating sectarian snipes that were a staple of earlier generations. The 1950s marked the end of an era when a major task of religious education in schools was defensive: religious education would no longer be directed to teaching students how to live out and defend their faith in a hostile world. Accordingly, the content of classroom religious instruction would become less triumphal, less likely to rely upon a rhetoric of

Catholic interest that tended to denigrate all other religious traditions.

And it became less Irish. Until the 1950s, Australian Catholicism was a mirror of Irish Catholicism (Molony, 1969). The formative influence of Irish Catholicism was reflected in the schools in the same ways in which it was reflected in parishes: it was devotional and apologetic. Pious sodalities devoted to the Sacred Heart and the Blessed Virgin Mary were common in schools as were classroom curriculums that stressed the proofs of the sanctity and validity of the Catholic church. After 1960, Irish influence in the church and school decreased, under pressure from immigration and a new openness to a wider world. Patrick O'Farrell detected, by the 1970s, indifference among Australian Catholics towards things Irish. He argues that the post-WWII period saw a decline and even an active rejection of Irish concerns. He claims that "Catholics accepted the 'Britishism' that permeated the whole life of Australia, and regarded Irish affairs as irrelevant" (O'Farrell, 1992, p. 404).

Many who attended Catholic schools look back on their experiences during those post-WWII years with a fond nostalgia. They remember the sense of tribal loyalty that was real, though starting to erode. The task of religious education was a simpler one in a simpler time. Parish, school and family were broadly congruent – catechism classes were common for all, and each rising generation could parrot more or less accurately the same responses to the same questions. Family life was relatively stable even if not every family thrived. Seminaries, convents and monasteries were full and able to supply an enthusiastic workforce for the church's educational and pastoral mission.

The rapid changes in Australian society and the Catholic church after 1960 fuelled a process of decline in the personal and social influence of religion that was also in evidence in the Western liberal democracies (Carey, 1996, p. 171). This decline persists today. This was the last time that religious instruction involved a common foundation across the generations. Parents, children and siblings all experienced a uniform religious instruction based on the catechism, backed by a common community life. This was soon to change. The break in this congruence was the cause of serious dispute over the coming decades.

After 1960, lay Catholics once again became the major source of religious educators in Catholic schools. The traditions of the religious orders that were introduced in the first half of the twentieth century, mostly via the schools they staffed, would remain in evidence, but a new lay spirit began to

emerge. Lacking the specific formation offered by membership of a religious order, these lay teachers undertook study courses that prepared them for their teaching role.

The 1950s also meant the end of a long period where classroom religious instruction meant simply explaining to children the truths of the religious tradition. The under bubbling of discontent over the adequacy of explanation and rational assent that the catechism approach required would finally erupt in the 1960s. Narrative and other modes of coming to know the tradition would reemerge from hibernation. The demands on teachers to comprehend the scope and nature of the Catholic tradition would increase exponentially. This would be the last time that classroom teachers would be able to pass on the forms and content of their religious instruction. Subsequently, classroom teachers would need to be aware of all the advances in the pedagogical arts and sciences as well as the multiplicity of the church's heritage, starting with scripture and liturgy, but eventually including moral and personal development. School teachers would move from a position as a relatively compliant workforce carrying out the church's pastoral plan, to be among the first recipients of the church's renewal in faith and life that occurred with Vatican II. It is not surprising then, that so many classroom religion teachers would go on to lead the intellectual and pastoral renewal in the church.

Gough Whitlam once observed that "the most intense political debate in Australia during the 1960s was not about Vietnam; it was about education" (Whitlam, 1985, p. 291). The 1950s marked the end of a relatively quiet period of educational interest within Catholicism and the wider community. Soon enough, the Goulburn school "strike" and other forms of political agitation would see the Catholic community push hard for their version of justice in relation to school funding. The ructions caused to church life by the Vatican Council would be keenly felt in Catholic schools. The 1950s saw the close of an era in religious education that would be mourned by some whose life's work would be devoted to restoring it. Others looked forward to a time of bold experiment and eager confrontation between Catholicism and modernity.

Conclusion
Contemporary religious education in Catholic schools carries the marks of its history. To be sure, contemporary religious educators work in a context characterised by greater plurality and diversity than any previous era. But, the expectations and hopes for religious education laid down in earlier, pivotal moments in the development of the Catholic schools continue to hold sway.

References
Arnold, J. (1985). *Mother superior, woman inferior*. Blackburn: Dove.

Campion, E. (1987). *Australian Catholics*. Melbourne: Viking.

Carey, H. (1996). *Believing in Australia: A cultural history of religions*. St.Leonards: Allen & Unwin.

Clark, C. M. H. (1979). *Select documents in Australian history, 1851-1900*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

English, G. (1990). *What do we want religious education to achieve: A survey and a personal view*. Leichhardt: Catholic Education Office.

Fogarty, R. (1959). *Catholic education in Australia 1806-1950*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press.

Goold, J. A. (1872, 24 June). Pastoral admonition, James Alipius. *The Age*.

Kehoe, M. (1983). Staffing parish primary schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne: The first hundred years. *Journal of the Institute of Catholic Education, 4*, pp. 1-19.

Marty, M. (2001). The logic of fundamentalism. *Boston College Magazine, 61*(4), 44-46.

Molony, J. (1969). *The Roman mould of the Australian Catholic church*. Melbourne:

O'Farrell, P. (1992). *The Catholic church and community: An Australian history*. Kensington: UNSW Press.

Ryan, M. (1997). *Respectable citizens and better Catholics: Maintaining Catholic schools in Victoria 1872-1885*. Wentworth Falls: Social Science Press.

Ryan, M. (2001). Mythic foundations of Australian Catholic schools: Assessing the heritage for religious educators. In Maurice Ryan, (Ed.), *Echo and silence: Contemporary issues for Australian religious educators* (pp. 217-230). Katoomba: Social Science Press.

Whitlam, E. G. (1985). *The Whitlam government 1972-1975*. Melbourne: Penguin.

Dr Maurice Ryan is a Senior Lecturer in Religious Education at McAuley Campus of Australian Catholic University. He is the author of *Foundations of Religious Education in Catholic Schools: An Australian Perspective* and *Respectable Citizens and Better Catholics: Maintaining Catholic Schools in Victoria, 1882-1885* and other titles.