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## Historical Inquiry into the Construction of Religion as a School Subject for Catholic Schools in Australia

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## **Introduction**

One of the most distinctive features of Catholic schools, both past and present, is their religious character (O'Donoghue, 2001, p. 3). In Australia, as in many other parts of the world (Grace, 2002; McLaughlin, McLaughlin & O'Keefe, 1996, pp. 1-22), the Catholic community invested significant energy developing and preserving this character. Central to this has been the teaching of Religion. Yet, from a historical perspective, there has been little effort undertaken to understand how Religion as a subject in Catholic schools has been constructed.

While general patterns within the development of the subject for Catholic schools internationally have been discerned by educational researchers (Buchanan, 2005, 2007, 2009; Buchanan & Engebretson, 2009; Copley, 2008; Lacey, 2011; Ryan, 2007) detailed studies of nuances, variation and possibly even deviation from these patterns in the different Catholic education jurisdictions across Australia are seriously lacking. This paper takes its lead from the latter observation. It is in three parts. First, the general historical background is outlined. Second, the importance of producing historical analyses of the construction of Religion as a subject for Catholic schools in the various Church jurisdictions in Australia is considered through an exposition on the existing state of research within the broader corpus of knowledge to which studies of this type belong. The final part of the paper then indicates how one could go about providing a historical analysis of how Religion as a subject for Catholic schools in the various Church jurisdictions in Australia was constructed, particularly over the period 1929 to the present.

## **The Background**

Two interwoven themes have dominated the historiography on Australian Catholic education: the campaign for the provision of state aid to build and run Catholic schools, and the commitment from the Catholic bishops of Australia to their establishment and support. The literature on these themes has been well summarised by Wilkinson et al (2007). It takes as its starting point that the first schools in each colony were denominational schools which, initially, were self-funded and then obtained some form of State aid.

In the early colonial days in Australia the Christian churches of all denominations were motivated to provide schools on the grounds that all education should be religious in its orientation. While many in society took this view, which saw education as the natural prerogative of religion (Fogarty, 1959), they also held that it should be funded by the state. Despite friction and suspicion between the denominations, it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that this practice began to change, with State aid to denominational schools, including Catholic schools, being removed. The Catholic bishops of Australia, however, continued to insist on the right of Catholics to maintain a separate system of education and went about mobilising the Catholic community, both locally and internationally, to try to ensure that the resources that were needed were made available (Ryan & Grajczonek, 2010).

Ever since, the establishment and maintenance of Catholic schools for the education of Catholic children has been an enduring priority for the Australian Catholic bishops (Ryan, 2007). Up to the late 1950s, this priority was justified by a dogmatic insistence that Catholic families were required under pain of sin to have their children educated in Catholic schools wherever such provision was available (O'Donoghue, 2001, p. 71). It was only with the advent of the Second Vatican Council (1962 - 65) that this stance was relaxed, being replaced by a position taken by the Church that it desired of Catholics that they send their children to Catholic schools and that it committed to make available Catholic education to Catholic families wherever possible.

At the heart of the commitment to fund Catholic schooling from its own resources was the conviction by the Church that Catholic children should receive instruction in the basic precepts of the faith and that the denominational school was the most appropriate place within which this should occur. Such schooling, it was held, should encompass a range of activities and strategies that would also result in a pupil's commitment to associated beliefs and practices. Furthermore the teaching of 'secular' subjects should be infused with Catholic religious content and values. Along with this, emphasis was placed on the creation and sustaining of an ethos informed by Catholic content and values (O'Donoghue, 2001, p. 71).

The task of creating and sustaining a Catholic ethos fell largely to the teachers who worked in Catholic schools. For many decades, because the Church needed a supply of teachers not dependent on State aid, this labour force came in the form of priests, brothers and nuns, generally known as 'the religious'. These 'religious' teachers were initially recruited from other countries, and later were supplemented by Australian recruits. The Church argued that, as 'religious' teachers, these personnel contributed to the ethos of the school in two important ways: they not only made a contribution in their role as teachers of both the faith and of secular subjects, they also served as exemplars of higher levels of what could be achieved in being good Catholics.

While there is a need for comprehensive studies that address all of the aspects of Catholic education considered so far in a synoptic manner, there is also a need for studies that investigate each aspect separately, while not ignoring their relationship to each other. What is being proposed here takes its lead from the later assumption. It focuses on what, for many was, as it still is, the most distinctive feature of Catholic education, namely, the subject Religion. The final part of this paper indicates how one could go about providing an historical analysis of how Religion as a subject for Catholic schools in the various Church jurisdictions in Australia was constructed, particularly over the period 1929 to the present. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to consider why engaging in such studies is important.

### **Why Do We Need Such Research?**

As a subject with a dedicated space allocated on the timetable, Religion has been known under different titles in different periods of time in the history of Catholic schooling in Australia. These titles include 'religious instruction', 'catechetics', 'religious education' and 'Christian doctrine' (O'Donoghue, 2001, p. 72). Accompanying them were various pedagogical approaches, again with variation in nomenclature, ranging from 'traditional catechesis', 'kerygmatic renewal', and a 'life centred' or 'experiential approach', to a 'shared Christian praxis' approach, and 'religious education' (Ryan, 2007). Again, the particular approach used varied across time. The general term,

Religion, serves to encompass all of these pedagogical approaches along with the different titles by which, as a subject, it was known.

Historical analyses of how this subject for Catholic schools in the various Church jurisdictions in Australia was constructed historically is important. For one thing, they would contribute to the history of school subjects internationally. In this regard, Goodson, back in 2000, made a claim for engagement in historical studies on all subjects in the school curriculum across all kinds of educational systems, including those that are faith-based. Having such studies, he contended, would allow an examination of complex changes over time rather “than snapshots of unique events” (Goodson, 2000, p. 94) and to discern explanatory frameworks.

For many decades, the history of education focused on three main themes: the history of educational thought and thinkers in education (Gardiner et. al., 2011, p. 6), the history of educational systems (Silver, 1977), and the history of educational policy (Lowe, 2000). This led to the development of a number of sub-disciplines, including the history of educational aims and policy, of pedagogy, of educational administration, of teacher education and of educational research. Within these sub-disciplines some attention was directed to the history of the process of education in schools and higher education institutions, including universities. Amongst the pioneering works produced specifically on the history of the school curriculum are those that were undertaken by Tanner and Tanner (1989) on the American situation, by Cunningham (1988) on England and Wales, by Musgrave (1988) on Australia, and by McCulloch (1987) on New Zealand. The work of Goodson (1987) on the history of school subjects brought a new sophistication to the field.

Goodson was motivated by a view that the consequence of not engaging in the study of the history of curriculum is ‘historical amnesia’. He and Marsh (Goodson & Marsh, 1998) also argued that this could lead to curriculum reinvention rather than development (Goodson & Marsh, 1998). He rejected the view of the written curriculum as a “neutral given”, proposing instead that a school subject is “a social artefact, conceived of and made for deliberate human purposes”

(Goodson, 1987, p. 260). Hargreaves (1989) supported this notion with his argument that school subjects are “more than groupings of intellectual thought. They are social systems too. They compete for power, prestige, recognition and reward” (p. 56). More recently, Popkewitz (2009) has revisited this argument, calling for a serious exploration of “historically-formed rules and standards that order, classify, and divide what is ‘seen’ and acted on in schooling” (p. 301).

Various other studies have also emphasised the importance of engaging in the study of curriculum history. Franklin (1999) “explored what contemporary curriculum historians, particularly in the USA, had to say about the curriculum as a social construct and as a regulative mechanism” (p. 459). Glatthorn, Floyd and Whitehead (2005), in a major book chapter devoted to curriculum history, underline the importance the study of curriculum history has for educational leaders. In similar vein, Wright (2005) states that the study of curriculum history must be an important focus “for the entire field of curriculum and for both the history and present state of play of how we conceptualize and theorize curriculum” (p. 116). Others have adopted Goodson’s position in order to study a range of school subjects. These include Tan (1993), Braine (2005), Burton (2007), Green and Cormack (2008), McAllister et al. (2010) and Popkewitz (2011).

While the body of literature outlined so far indicates that some attention has been paid to the history of the school curriculum in general, the more specific body of work focused on individual school subjects is not extensive. This is particularly so in the case of the history of Religion as a school subject. On this, Freathy and Parker (2010) have also pointed out that surveys of the content of the British Journal of Religious Education and the North American journal Religious Education carried out by English, D’Souza and Chartrand (2003, 2005a, 2005b) reveal a neglect of the utilisation of historical methods and a lack of historical consciousness among RE researchers. This neglect of historical research in RE, they pointed out, was demonstrated almost twenty years ago by Francis, Kay and Campbell’s (1996) book *Research in Religious Education* and was repeated in 2004 in Jackson’s *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy*. Furthermore, they concluded that what research has been conducted on the

history of Religion as a school subject has been largely descriptive and has often not been based on primary sources. Amongst the works conducted specifically on the UK context which brought them to this conclusion are those by Bell (1985), Mitchell (1991), Priestly (1991, 2006), Parsons (1994), Bates (1994, 1996), Chadwick (1997), Kay (1997), Thompson (2003), Hand (2004), and Copley (2008).

Within the Australian context there is a corpus of literature that, while useful, draws uncritically on particular historical interpretations (Buchanan, 2005; Goldberg, 2008; Lacey, 2011) and, in doing so, perpetuates what Freathy and Parker (2010) characterise as “a familiar and largely unchallenged narrative” (p. 235). On the other hand, a small, but significant body of work that does adopt a more objective historical approach has started to emerge. This work falls into two types. The first addresses the history of Religion by way of background to contemporary overviews on religious education (Rossiter, 1999; Lovat, 2000; Rymarz, 2003; McGrath, 2005a, 2005b; Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Buchanan, 2007, 2008; Buchanan & Engebretson, 2009). The second body of work consists of historical biographies of religious education practitioners, leaders, and theorists (Lawlor, 1999; English, 2005a, 2005b; Rossiter, 2005). Notwithstanding the existence of this small body of work, however, there is, as Freathy and Parker (2010) put it, albeit in relation to the English context, a paucity of rigorous historical inquiry in the field, and not just in relation to the Catholic Church, but across all religions. The deficiency, they argue, is serious because it can lead researchers to adopt narrow perspectives and ahistorical epistemologies that take present-day understanding of the past for granted. At worst, they conclude, this can lead to a form of ideological fundamentalism.

### **A Research Approach**

For each Catholic educational jurisdiction in Australia a particular research approach proposed here could be taken to investigating how Religion as a school subject for Catholic schools was constructed. While one could commence such projects from the time of colonisation, it would be valuable in the first instance, in order to make them manageable and to impress the importance

of the research agenda to restrict them to the period 1929 to the present. Furthermore, the focus could be on five sub-periods, namely, 1929-62, 1962-71, 1971-81, 1981-97 and 1997 to the present.

The proposal to commence at 1929 is based on a number of considerations. First, the traditional approach to the teaching of Religion known as 'Catechetics', had already been the established approach for a number of centuries. While it endured up until the early 1960s (Rummery, 1977), Pope Pius XI issued an encyclical on Catholic education, *Divini Illius Magistri* (That Divine Teacher) in 1929, which signalled a willingness by the Church to open up the possibility of Catholic educators learning from innovations in pedagogy within the emerging science of education (Kelty, 2000). Furthermore, from the middle of the 1950s, other significant developments were taking place that laid the groundwork for the changes that occurred with the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), including those that were to have an impact upon Religion as a school subject.

The second sub-period, 1962-71, is one in which there was a wholesale move towards adopting insights and innovations that had been conceptualised prior to the Second Vatican Council as well as building upon further ideas generated from the Council. The third sub-period, 1971-1981, was a time of further innovation and experimentation in the teaching of Religion as a subject that endeavoured to build on new educational insights as well as address perceived shortcomings and concerns about developments in the previous period (Buchanan & Engebretson, 2009). This coincided with the establishment of Catholic education 'systems' across Australia. Prior to this, Catholic schools had operated largely as independent entities, albeit affiliated with individual religious orders. Now, however, in order to maximise access to newly-available government funding, they were brought together for administrative purposes, eventually operating under Catholic Education Offices (CEO) which functioned across large areas, sometimes coinciding with dioceses.

The fourth sub-period, 1981-97, is a time when individual CEOs sought to put in place their own visions and plans for the teaching of Religion as opposed to the ad hoc arrangements that had operated up until then. From this initiative a systemic structure within which responsibility for



the teaching of Religion as a subject was recognised, began to evolve under each CEO. The final sub-period commences with the issuing by the Vatican of the General Directory for Catechesis in 1997, which was to inform development in the teaching of Religion internationally. This Vatican publication articulated clearly the nature and role of the teaching of Religion as a subject within the perceived role of the Church in the contemporary era. Along with the two editions of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994, 1997), it became a core reference document for the rationale, content and processes of the teaching of Religion as a subject in Catholic schools.

A useful theoretical framework to underpin studies of how Religion as a school subject for Catholic schools was constructed is that of Goodson (1987, 2000, 2005, 2007, and 2010). As indicated already, this framework rejects the view of the written curriculum “as a neutral given embedded in an otherwise meaningful complex situation” (Goodson, 1987, 260). Rather, what is proposed is a view of the curriculum “as a social artefact, conceived of and made for deliberate human purposes” (Goodson, 1987, p. 270). Within this context, cognisance needs to be taken of Goodson’s argument that curriculum history should be studied at both the preactive and interactive curriculum levels. To study curriculum history at the preactive level is to focus on the plans or syllabi that outline what is intended in a course or program. It involves studying not only the structures and patterns within such documents, but also identifying the various individuals and interest groups who were involved in their production, and the nature and extent of their influence. On the other hand, to study curriculum history at the interactive level is to focus on how the preactive curriculum was mediated in the classrooms, how the subjects or disciplines were taught, what strategies and activities were used, what experiences students had and what learning processes took place.

It would be well to follow Goodson’s advice in projects of the sort being proposed here on how, historically, Religion was constructed as a subject for Catholic schools in Australia, to focus initially on the preactive level in order to increase understanding of the influences and interests active at this level. Goodson (1990) also contends that this would:

...further our knowledge of the values and purposes represented... and how preactive definition, notwithstanding individual and local variations, may set parameters for interactive realisation and negotiation in the classroom and the school. (p. 263)

Indeed, one can plausibly argue that to focus on the preactive curriculum is synonymous with studying how Religion as a school subject was constructed. On the other hand, a study of the interactive curriculum would demand a focus on the interactions which took place in classrooms, thus examining how Religion as a subject in Catholic schools was mediated. While this is recognised as important work, it is also deemed that it would not be appropriate, or even feasible, to pursue until a significant corpus of work on the preactive curriculum is completed

In the initial stages of research on the preactive curriculum in Religion, it would be helpful to be guided by the following hypotheses adapted from Goodson's (1983) work:

- Catholic schools and Catholic education in the different educational jurisdictions of the Church in Australia for the period under investigation were not monolithic entities, but shifting amalgamations of sub-groups and traditions;
- In the process of establishing Religion as a subject in Australian Catholic schools there was a progression from promoting pedagogic and utilitarian traditions to an academic tradition; and,
- Much of the debate which occurred about Religion as a subject in the curriculum in Australian Catholic schools can be interpreted in terms of wider conflict both within and between subjects over status, resources and territory.

An initial step towards testing these hypotheses could be taken by addressing the following guiding questions:

- What were the background developments which influenced the process of constructing what came to be the dominant approach to the subject, including those associated with major issues, conflicts and compromises that arose?
- What was the actual construction of the subject, in the sense of 'construction as product', especially in terms of the stated aims, content, pedagogy and assessment approaches?
- What were the issues, conflicts and compromises that arose following the introduction of the subject in schools?

As guiding questions these are not specific questions to be answered. Rather, they are questions which suggested themselves as being the most productive guides to generate data in the first instance pertinent to the overall question.

Regarding analysis, while traditional historical approaches to the interrogation of sources should be adopted, various theoretical positions could also be drawn upon. The first theoretical position, based on Goodson's work, would involve undertaking an analysis at two levels. First, there should be an 'internal' analysis of various relevant curriculum documents. This should then be followed by an 'external' analysis to ensure that consideration is given to the broader environmental, social, economic and political context. In other words, patterns uncovered during the internal analysis should be considered in their relationship to such aspects of the wider context as the nature of the Catholic Church and Catholic schooling, the structure of society, technological changes, the economy, and political and philosophical viewpoints.

A second theoretical position that could inform the analysis is based on the work of Flynn in collaboration with Mok (2002) and Ryan (2007). Flynn proposed a three-stage linear model, namely, 'traditional catechesis', 'kerygmatic catechesis' and 'experiential catechesis'. His model could be useful for developing an account of the changes that historically took place in the teaching of Religion in Australian Catholic schools. His work was adapted and updated by Ryan, who has identified the following five stages: 'traditional catechesis', 'kerygmatic renewal', 'life centred' or 'experiential', 'shared Christian praxis' and 'religious education'. However, one might well find that this model might need to be refined for different jurisdictions as one engages more with the primary source material.

The third theoretical position that could inform the analysis is that of Beeby's (1966) stages of development in educational systems. This theory is as relevant today as when it was explicated nearly half a century ago. It focuses on the role of the teacher in facilitating progress through four key stages: the 'Dame School Stage', the 'Stage of Formalism', the 'Stage of Transition' and the 'Stage of Meaning'. The 'Dame School Stage' is characterised by ill-educated and untrained

teachers who are only able to teach narrow subject content through rigid techniques of memorisation using simple prescribed texts. At the 'Stage of Formalism' teachers have received a basic training, but are still ill-educated. The 'Stage of Transition' is characterised by teachers who have received a basic training, but who are better educated than teachers at the 'Stage of Formalism'. At the 'Stage of Meaning' teachers are well educated and well trained. A variety of content and methods, including problem solving, are used within a wider curriculum, to cater creatively for individual differences of learners. While this theory has direct relevance to teaching practice, it can also be useful for considering how curriculum subjects, including Religion, have developed.

### **Conclusion**

The stimulus for this paper was the observation that, from a historical perspective, there has been little effort undertaken to understand how Religion as a subject for Catholic schools in Australia has been constructed. The authors have sketched the general historical background in this regard and provided an argument for the importance of producing historical analyses in the field. We then went on to indicate how one could go about providing a historical analysis of how Religion as a subject for Catholic schools in the various Church jurisdictions in Australia was constructed, particularly over the period 1929 to the present. We wish to conclude that there are plenty of opportunities for researchers to engage with the agenda we are foregrounding. To paraphrase Freathy and Parker (2010), RE professionals, at whatever career stage and in whatever sector, should seek to avail of these opportunities because historical inquiry allows them to gain an understanding of current RE theories, policies and practices, and "to extend [their] gaze in a beneficial way beyond the limited horizons of present professional standards, teaching practices and curriculum policies (Freathy & Parker, 2010, p. 239). This, in turn, should help position them well as potential shapers of the future.

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