

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STATE-BASED RELIGION STUDIES COURSES AND DENOMINATIONAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

This article explores relationships between state religion studies courses and denominational religious education in Australia, putting the relationships into historical perspective. In the United Kingdom, where these programs first evolved, the two diverged as an *educational identity* for religion studies developed. This separation flowed over into Australian developments, especially in the formative years during the 1970s. The division remains embedded in the theory underpinning Australian programs in the 2000s, even though, ironically, religion studies courses have been taken up almost exclusively by religious schools.

While religion studies met the need for a fully accredited religion subject in the senior school, there is still a gap in the thinking about relationships with denominational religious education. Addressing this gap is in the best interests of religious education in both state and denominational contexts. It involves articulating the assumptions and purposes that are usually unstated by church schools that have adopted religion studies. It should contribute to the background needed for evaluating these programs as well as being helpful in clarifying issues debated by denominational educators who consider that religion studies are inappropriate in church schools. In addition, it will help show what is involved in the transition that church schools make to state religion syllabuses in the final years of schooling; often there is no substantial or robust account of why the change is considered beneficial for students or consistent with the schools' purposes. Finally, it will contribute to debate about relationships between the two forms of religious education currently available in Australian public schools.

The emergence of an educational identity for state school religion studies in the UK and Australia

Problems resulting from a separate identity: That there was a need for an educational identity rather than a denominational one for the state courses is not in question. But the tendency to define this *over and against* the earlier Christian identity meant the creation of a division and a closing of communication between the two. As happened again later with similar developments in Australia, there seemed to be an overreaction to the possibility of being labelled 'confessional' or 'denominational' (Rossiter, 1981). The new religion studies certainly looked different. But its wholesale movement into phenomenology seemed to bypass the spiritual needs and interests of the students (this emphasis has now been toned down). This does not mean that denominational religious education was always 'more' relevant. Neither is it saying that religion studies should become more denominational, though its

role in the development of a religious identity needs further consideration.

Consequently, religious educators in the United Kingdom tended to separate into *denominational* and *state* groups. The language used by each sustained the difference, even though it remained somewhat unclear. For example, 'state' language gave the impression that educational concerns were secondary for denominational religious education, and 'denominational' language gave the impression that state programs were irrelevant to young people's religious development. While there were borrowings, particularly from religion studies by church school religion teachers, a separation of the two streams became well established and few if any substantial efforts were made to see where the two might be related.

The problem was evident in the search for a terminology of difference. In Australia, it was illustrated by the move from 'religious education' to 'religious studies', 'religion studies', 'studies of religion', 'religion education' and just 'religion', together with accompanying arguments justifying why one term rather than others was thought to be more appropriate (Moore, 1991). It is understandable, but it created problems when the use of such terms made faulty assumptions about underlying educational processes, when it inhibited communication between groups, and when it obscured the similarities that exist between different contexts and approaches. The contrasting terms represent different, legitimate points of view that need to be taken into account when theorising about religious education. But when inappropriate assumptions are made, these should be identified and questioned. For example, the following quotation in Table 1 from the South Australian state schools Religious Education Project in the 1970s illustrates the problem.

Statements like the above tried to articulate an appropriate approach for religion studies in a pluralist and secular setting. However, the definition seemed to imply that in the state school the process was *educational* while in the church school it tended towards *indoctrination* – as if a genuine education in religion was not possible in a committed context.

There seemed to be political reasons for maintaining the separation. Some educators on both sides were perhaps so invested in maintaining the divisions that they did not want to bridge the gap. Perhaps the differentiation and 'counter-definition' were needed initially to establish an educational basis for studying religion within Australian public education; it applied specifically to the teaching

of religion by departmental teachers. Once the educational legitimacy of religion studies was established in the government reports of the 1970s, and after courses were more widely introduced in the Australian states early 1990s, it was ironic that the only substantial and enduring implementation occurred when the church-related schools adopted them at Years 11–12 levels – a less controversial development than religion taught by state departmental teachers. In the formative

1970s, there was little interest in bridging the gap. But in the 1990s, when church-related schools (especially Catholic schools) implemented religion studies, one could readily get the impression from those who adopted religion studies that there never were any gaps between the two. While this is still the case, looking more carefully at relationships remains important, particularly as regards a critical evaluation of the appropriateness of content and method in religion studies.

Table 1 What is religious education? (South Australian Education Department, 1978)

The philosophy of religious education in state schools can be summed up in the following set of statements:	
The school may sponsor the <i>study</i> of religion,	but should not sponsor the <i>practice</i> of religion.
The school may <i>expose</i> students to all religious views,	but may <i>not impose any particular view</i> .
The school's approach to religion is one of <i>education</i>	not one of <i>indoctrination</i> .
The function of the school is to <i>educate about all religions</i> ,	not to <i>convert to any one religion</i> .
The school's approach to religion is <i>academic</i> ,	not <i>devotional</i> .
The school should study <i>what all people believe</i> ,	but should not teach a pupil <i>what he [sic] should believe</i> .
The school should strive for <i>student awareness of all religions</i> ,	but should not press for student <i>acceptance of any one religion</i> .
The school should seek to <i>inform the students</i> about various beliefs,	but should not seek to <i>make them conform to any one belief</i> .
The schools can provide opportunity for a <i>discussion of religious questions</i>	but should not <i>impose religious answers</i> .
The school's approach to religion must <i>open up the issue</i> ,	not <i>close down the discussion</i> .
In summary, teaching about religion in the State schools is educationally valuable when it is a part of the academic program, when it does not give preferential or derogatory treatment to religion in general or to any single religion.	

Where some religion studies courses were developed for the primary and/or junior secondary school, there was negligible uptake in both state and religious schools. For the church schools, religion studies at these lower levels were either presumed to be inappropriate or thought to have no structural advantage. Nothing was ever said publicly about why they were not implemented.

The terminology 'confessional' versus 'non-confessional': Inadequate concepts for analysing the teaching process

These terms need clarification because, initially, they were the commonly used – and misused – to differentiate religion studies from denominational religious education. Confessional is derived from the phrase 'confessing the faith'. It presumes that all present are, or should be, of one faith and that commitment to and expression of the faith is to be openly encouraged. The concept non-confessional is intended to have none of these connotations; no particular faith is promoted or commended.

The distinctions between confessional and non-confessional religious education are not always useful because they remain at the level of broad intentions and stereotypes. Because they are not defined precisely or

applied critically, they do little to help debate about the nature and purpose of religious education.

The terms are more useful for describing *contexts*: a church school is a confessional context where public prayer and liturgy are a normal part of the corporate spiritual life; this would not apply in the non-confessional context of a government school. But the terms are not sufficiently refined to address adequately the complexities of the teaching process.

What is described as 'non-confessional teaching' might be quite appropriate in a confessional context. And what is thought to be 'confessional teaching' – the presumption of faith in all present and the commending of personal faith responses – is not always accepted as appropriate in a church school because the classroom remains a public forum, where respect for the freedom and privacy of the students requires that the teaching be open, non-dogmatic and impartial. Particular church teachings can be presented clearly, but this does not include attempted imposition or a pressure to agree or signify belief. Applying the term confessional to religious education in church-related schools gives a false impression of what is happening, as if an attempt was being made to 'inject' faith into students; and a further wrong impression: that it is appropriate to try to do so.

When critics applied the term confessional to religious education, they have usually done so in a pejorative manner as part of the identity definition of the new religion studies. Greater clarification of what might be 'faith commending' teacher behaviours and 'impartial' methods would be a more helpful approach for differentiating the two. It is of interest to note that one of the state school departmental religious education projects from the 1970s challenged the confessional/non-confessional division, claiming that the nature of religious education was constant, irrespective of the context. The Queensland Departmental Religious Education Curriculum Project (RECP), set up in support of denominational teachers in public schools, called the confessional/non-confessional labelling of teaching into question (Mavor and others, 1977, 1982). It proposed that the approach to teaching religion in schools should be the same whether it was state-based or denominational. This theory, which had a significant affinity with the work of Grimmitt and the Westhill Project, suggested that the possibilities and limitations of the classroom as a public learning forum cut across the apparent boundaries, giving an approach that could be implemented appropriately in any school type (Grimmitt, 1983a, 1983b, 1987, 2000). While not all would agree with its claim, the RECP is important because of its challenge to the supposed major divisions in religious education.

Lovat proposed an approach that could be followed in both state and denominational contexts, but he did not match the RECP claim that the nature of religious education was independent of the context. Lovat's approach (a modified typological method with an evaluative dimension) was proposed as suitable in public education, hence also applicable to independent schools (Lovat, 2002).

Concepts such as indoctrination and evangelism or evangelisation have also been misused to describe the teaching of religion in a church-related school. Much greater precision is called for in the use of such terms; otherwise, so-called differences between religion studies and denominational religious education may be based on political interests and stereotypes, obfuscating rather than clarifying the nature of the activity.

Exploring the relationships between state Religion Studies and denominational religious education¹

The first step in exploring relationships is to revise the notion of difference between the two as regards context, nature, purposes and educational process. There are significant differences in context and purposes, but when nature and process are examined more carefully, key similarities emerge.

What happens in any religion teaching context can be analysed from various perspectives. One pertinent perspective is *educational*; that is, an analysis that looks specifically at educational purposes and practices, explaining how the study of religion contributes to young people's education and personal development. In religion studies, this is the perspective from which the

subject is justified as having an appropriate place in the school curriculum – for example reasons why such a study is valuable for all young citizens, irrespective of any or no religious affiliation. In the state school context, it is not the responsibility of departmental teachers to transmit a particular religious faith, or to commend personal faith to pupils.

In this context, however, indeed in any context, the study of religion may contribute to young people's understanding of their own particular tradition and it may affect their religious beliefs. Here, the change is a natural but unintended consequence of their education. From the perspective of young people's *spiritual-moral development*, personal change resulting from their study of religion is rarely evident then and there in the lesson; it is more likely to emerge in the longer term, in complex interaction with other formative factors. The purpose of promoting their religious development within a particular faith tradition is an 'over the horizon' goal or 'hope' (similarly, values outcomes would also be better interpreted as 'hopes' and not as outcomes that can be measured.)

The most prominent differences between the two formats are in terms of *long-term purposes* or *hopes*, and these differences are remote from the actual teaching/learning that is going on in the classroom. Hence the extent to which these hopes are achieved cannot be determined. Neither is there any need to try to measure spiritual-moral progress; indeed, it is not ethical to do so, even if it were possible.

In the denominational context, where a school is sponsored by a particular church or religion, it is to be expected that *institutional* and *religious development* perspectives will be emphasised. Here the school will be more explicit about its hopes. An excessive emphasis on hopes can obscure the more immediate, practical, educational purposes of the study; also, such a view can make unrealistic assumptions about how effective religious education is in changing young people's religious faith; the potential for personal change can be *overestimated*. On the other hand, the rationale for religion studies, in eschewing denominational purposes, has tended to *underestimate* the potential for catalysing personal change by claiming to be concerned only with knowledge or understanding of religion (the reason for coining the phrase '*learning about religion*', which was different from '*learning to be religious*', Grimmitt, 1973). But this is tantamount to compromising the basic purposes of education concerned with promoting holistic personal change. Such thinking reinforced the selection of descriptive content, especially in the early days of development both in the UK and Australia, because it was felt to be 'safe', and not life-changing. This apparent impasse was negotiated in the UK by explaining how religion studies could promote personal spirituality while not espousing denominational purposes (c/f. use of the phrase '*learning from religion*'; Grimmitt, 1983, 1987; School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 1994). But the notion of promoting spirituality still remains problematic – even

more evident in Australian than in British programs. It would be more realistic to acknowledge the possibility that religion studies, in enhancing young people's spiritual-moral development generally, may affect their religious faith. Certainly this is a basic assumption of those who teach religion studies in denominational schools.

Comparison of purposes between state Religion Studies and denominational religious education

Table 2 that follows shows comparisons of purposes for state-based religion studies courses and denominational religious education.

The aims in the left-hand column are educationally based since it would be inappropriate in the state school context to presume denominational purposes. Because the purposes of religious education in the church-related school are also educational, there is in principle no contradiction in all of the educational aims in the left-hand column being applicable in the denominational

context. However, some denominational educators would have difficulty with aim 17 as regards the evaluation of religious truth claims. The applicability of the educational aims of religion studies in church-related school is at the basis of their implementation in that context.

It is not so straightforward when it comes to relationships between aims in the reverse direction. It would be inappropriate to commend religious faith and practice in religion studies taught by departmental teachers. Aim 10, concerned with religious practices, is justified by the religious sponsorship of religious schools but is inappropriate in government schools. However, while the notion of handing on the faith is foreign to the aims of religion studies, it is possible that the teaching of religion studies will make some contribution to a young person's knowledge of their own tradition (their spiritual heritage), and over time this learning may affect their personal identity and religious faith.

Table 2 Comparisons: State Religion Studies and denominational religious education
(compiled from the relevant literatures)

List of generalised aims for state-based Religion Studies	List of generalised aims for denominational religious education in religious (church-related) schools
<p><i>Religion in culture</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> To develop knowledge and understanding of the different religions represented in the multicultural community, and of the religions of Australia's Asian neighbours. To develop knowledge and understanding of the place of religions in culture; to understand how religions influence culture and how in turn religions are influenced by culture. To initiate students into religion as a mode of knowledge and awareness. (Derived from the philosophy of education of Paul Hirst). * To develop religious literacy (familiarity with religious concepts and language). Also 'critical' religious literacy involving evaluation. **To become more knowledgeable about one's own cultural, spiritual heritage. To develop knowledge and awareness of non-religious world views (like humanism, Marxism, existentialism) to show how people without formal religious affiliation construct some philosophical system of meaning and purpose. In this sense, non-religious worldviews perform a similar function to religions. <p><i>Personal development: Meaning, identity and spirituality</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> To explore the ways in which religions can help individuals find meaning and purpose in life (drawing on the philosophy of education of Philip Phenix and on Paul Tillich's notion of religion as 'ultimate concern'; dealing with the ultimate dilemmas in human life). To understand how religious beliefs can have a shaping influence on the life and values of individuals. * To foster personal development through exploration of the ways in which religions model what it means to be human, and by exploring links between the study of religions and individuals' personal experience. * To help young people construct their own personal meaning. * To understand how religions help give individuals a sense 	<p><i>Faith tradition</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> To hand on the religious faith tradition of the sponsoring church or religion. To develop knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the history, teachings and practices of the Church. (Aim 1 in greater detail). To develop religious/theological literacy (familiarity with basic religious doctrines and ideas). <p><i>Personal faith development</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> To develop personal faith in the context of the Church's faith tradition; often referred to as promoting faith development. <p><i>Personal development: Meaning, identity and spirituality; and relevance</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> To develop a loving, prayerful, personal relationship with God. To develop a sense of religious identity (e.g. Catholic identity) by acquiring access to the Church's tradition and cultural/spiritual heritage. To develop personal meaning that draws on the religious traditions of the sponsoring church. To develop a religious spirituality. To be relevant to the needs and interests of pupils; links with their experience and personal development processes. <p><i>Religious experience and practice</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> To experience and to learn how to participate in religious practices like liturgy and communal prayer. To participate in a religious retreat – a special opportunity for personal reflection/prayer, liturgy, discussion and community activities. <p><i>Religious ethos</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The school's religious ethos through demonstrating gospel values (in structures and

of religious identity and to promote the development of personal identity.

12* To develop the **individual's own personal spirituality.**

Tolerance and interreligious dialogue

13 To promote **religious tolerance** within the limits of the law

14* To promote **interreligious dialogue.**

Morality

15 To understand **how religions can serve as a source of and reinforcement for moral values.**

16 To become aware of and to develop **skills in the processes of making moral decisions** – becoming better able to identify moral issues, more widely informed about the issues, aware of religious influences on thinking about moral issues, aware of alternative views; rehearsing the implications of possible moral decisions that might be taken.

Critical evaluation

17 To develop **skills in the evaluation of religious claims** – identification of truth claims and of conflicting claims.

18 To become **aware of religious conflict** and of ways in which religions may be judged to have a negative effect on people's lives.

19* To **evaluate religion in personal terms** – that is, as regards its relevance to pupils' life experience and needs.

organisational life) tries to enhance the spiritual-moral development of pupils.

Moral development

13 To develop a **code of religious moral values** that inform a moral life.

Social justice and critical evaluation of culture

14 To develop an informed **awareness of social justice issues** and a capacity to judge issues in terms of gospel values and a propensity to **undertake social action.** Includes 'critical consciousness'.

15 To become **critical evaluators of the culture.**

Tolerance; ecumenical and interreligious dialogue

16 To promote **awareness of, respect for and communication with Christian denominations.**

17 To promote **awareness of and respect for other religions.**

Note: *Items marked with an asterisk, while evident in the UK, are not yet prominent in Australian courses. Items with a double asterisk do not yet feature in current course documentation in both countries.*

As regards particular denominational aims such as 4 and 5 (as well as others to a lesser extent), they cannot be directly compared with educational aims because they are really long-term hopes. By nature, they cannot be used as measurable objectives for lessons – just as would be the case for educational hopes like responsible citizenship and altruistic virtues. Hence, when comparing religion studies and denominational aims, it is helpful to differentiate the latter into hopes and more immediate teaching and learning goals. Then, the teaching and learning goals in each become more comparable and the apparent differences diminish.

Another argument that draws the two formats closer together has to do with the freedom of enquiry that is part and parcel of the classroom learning environment in any Australian school, government or non-government (Crawford and Rossiter, 2006, pp. 283-291). An open inquiring atmosphere is now taken for granted in all subjects. In the past, but less frequently now, some denominational religion teachers appeared to forget this principle and made assumptions about pupils' personal religious responsiveness that were inappropriate and counterproductive.

The discussion above points towards commonality between state religion studies and denominational religious education. The sections below signpost other areas of overlap.

Non-evaluative and evaluative dimensions to studying religion

The new religion studies needed to avoid being seen as favouring religion. For this reason a *non-evaluative* method like phenomenology was attractive initially. It stressed description, objectivity, and temporary suspension of beliefs or commitments as one tried to understand the subjective experience of others. With content selection favouring safe, descriptive topics, it

was easy to omit what might be considered relevant or even controversial.

However, an *evaluative* dimension is essential in both denominational and religion studies formats – in both content and method – which justifies the inclusion of issues. It complements an empathetic, non-evaluative study, and it fosters the development of critical, evaluative skills for informed decision-making. Both aspects are needed at different phases in the study of religion. If not present, then studying religion will be out of sync with the rest of the curriculum, which is increasingly geared towards a questioning, values-related and relevant education. If studying religion does not follow suit, then students can justifiably feel that something is missing, that perhaps religion cannot sustain critical enquiry; and it can even reinforce the view that religion is not worth studying.

In reading and project work (including interviews) young people can learn to become more tolerant of, and open to, views and experiences different from their own. By asking questions about the internal consistency of the beliefs and values, and through questions about possible personal and social implications, they can learn how to critique religion in a responsible way. They can become more aware of their own prejudices, stereotypes and ignorance as they become more informed. Reason is not being opposed to belief, as if the latter were irrational; but it can help young people identify and judge irrational aspects in the beliefs and practices of religion. Students should be able to see that in some circumstances religions do not foster human development: they can inhibit it and distort it; they can support neurosis, prejudice and fanaticism.

Teachers need to be explicit about content and approach because not all educators and parents will be happy about what is involved in a critical evaluative study.

Genuine accountability is required as for any controversial content in the curriculum, for example in sex education. The other key factor in accountability is the code of ethics that should guide teachers' presentations and conduct of discussion (Crawford and Rossiter, 2006, pp. 293-298). Presentations require a range of viewpoints, impartiality and objectivity in teaching, and responsible, diplomatic reference to teachers' own personal views when judged to make a valuable educational contribution to lessons.

Relationships with the academic disciplines: Phenomenological method and academic bias

As noted earlier, there was a political correctness in the new religion studies' seeking an affinity with phenomenology as a university 'parent' discipline – eschewing a relationship with Christian theology and scripture. No parent discipline was really needed. School religion studies is multidisciplinary and should be open to the academic study of theology and scripture, both of which have a long academic history (evident in the Victorian state course *Texts and traditions*). Links with various disciplines, including psychology and sociology, enhance both religion studies and denominational religious education – another commonality. If they are to be attuned to contemporary youth spirituality, however, both need to avoid having content justified too exclusively on the grounds of disciplinary purity. A strong issue-oriented component is justified in terms of its relevance to youth, even if it creates problems for 'traditional' ideas about what constitutes appropriate religious content.

The contribution of Religion Studies to the development of personal identity

Education in meaning, identity and spirituality have been proposed as a major area of commonality between religions studies and denominational religious education (Crawford and Rossiter, 2006, pp. 228-239). Here, attention will be limited to the construct identity.

The aim of promoting the development of pupils' personal identity is prominent in European religious education (in both forms), and to a lesser extent in the United Kingdom, but is generally absent in their Australian counterparts. The absence is probably because the idea of developing identity by studying religion sounds like promoting a particular religious identity, and in turn, this sounds too 'confessional' in the pejorative sense. However, there is another way of looking at the issue. Giving young people some access to their cultural religious heritage should have a valid place in religion studies whether or not they ever become members of a local community of faith, because one of the key purposes of education is to communicate the intellectual tradition of the culture, and religion is an important part of that heritage. Providing for educational access to that heritage is not about recruiting young people to the Church.

In the past, a contribution to personal and cultural identity was acknowledged as acceptable for the education of Aboriginal children, but there was a reluctance to apply the same principle to other spiritual or religious cultures. Indigenous education in various

countries stressed the importance of encouraging the people to embrace their own cultural and spiritual traditions. To help heal the social and psychological damage that resulted from the clash between their cultures and the dominant Western culture and lifestyle, they have been urged to deepen familiarity with their spiritual heritage and to repair the links between the land and personal and social identity. The eroded sense of identity and cultural dignity of indigenous peoples needs to be restored by nurturing cultural and spiritual self-esteem. In Australia, the study of Aboriginal culture is now presumed to be important not only for the Aborigines but also for other Australians. A study of Aboriginal spiritual beliefs is understandably prominent in Australian religion studies courses.

The value in affirming the identity and culture of indigenous people should also apply to the religions of other ethnic groups. But such an affirmation has not been forthcoming because there was concern that it could be interpreted as the state fostering religion. However, it is in the interests of the national community, and in accord with accepted principles of multicultural education, to educate children in the culture and spiritual traditions of their group. Religion studies can contribute to such purposes. As well as informing cultural identity development in pupils, religion studies has scope for a critical exploration of the process of identity development itself. Pupils can learn about the ways in which religion affects identity – both positively and negatively.

Some educators claim that studying one's own tradition is necessarily partial – and therefore not educationally justified in religion studies. However, there are grounds for proposing that students can examine their own tradition with the same objectivity they bring to their study of other religions. It is impossible to be completely objective; people always have some bias, but in endeavouring to be intersubjective, personal background and bias can at least be acknowledged. Identifying the bias they may have towards other traditions can be a helpful part of the learning process. Also, they can often look at their own tradition more critically than for other religions because, as insiders, they are more aware of the problems. People bring more experience, background knowledge, particular beliefs, commitments, biases, stereotypes and criticisms to the study of their own religious tradition. The challenge for the educator is to help students to become more informed and to help them learn how to think logically, critically and respectfully about religions. This issue is the more important where religion studies courses allow flexibility for students to study particular religions in detail – presumably the religions with which they most readily identify, even if only nominally. In most of the Australian courses, the requirement that two or more religions be studied prevents pupils from studying just their own tradition.

How many religions should be studied will remain contentious, because the majority of students come from church-related schools, and it would seem inappropriate for the syllabuses not to take this clientele into account. It would be educationally more sound to allow students

to include options that are more relevant to their cultural religious backgrounds, satisfying the concern of religious schools to cover their tradition in a substantial way, while not precluding the need for the state to provide for a balanced study of religions and contemporary religious issues. In some courses, it appears that requiring students to study additional religions rather than religious issues or topics within their own tradition runs the risk of appearing irrelevant. Religion studies should be more than just gaining descriptive knowledge about *more* religions – as if such content were the only educationally appropriate type, or a strategy to prevent them from spending too much time on their own tradition.

For many of today's secularised youth who forge meaning and identity in different ways from those of older generations, and who see little role for organised religion, the opportunity to study the construct identity and how it is influenced by culture is an important educational opportunity within both formats for religious education.

The implementation of religion studies in denominational schools

The option of denominational schools to go with academically accredited religion studies in Years 11–12 is affirmed by the previous analysis because religion studies is consistent with denominational purposes for religious education. But it appears that many have followed this path without a thorough appraisal of their adequacy both as general educational courses and as regards their contribution to the denominational schools' overall purposes for religious education. Catholic educators, among others, have been prominent in writing the new Australian religion studies courses, and in resourcing and promoting their implementation. But more work needs to be done in two areas:

1. showing how religion studies courses are an appropriate expression of denominational purposes at senior school level;
2. working towards content revision of religion studies in a more relevant direction for students.

A religion studies that is issue-oriented and evaluative is more appropriate in the current educational context than those that remain dominated by phenomenological and typological content. Units that are almost exclusively about beliefs and practices of world religions need to be replaced by more issue-related topics (as has happened to some extent in the Tasmanian courses). However, increasing the scope for evaluative study may not in itself be enough to sway the decision of a Catholic school to choose state religion studies rather than an accredited Catholic studies option, even though the former would have more academic status. While the aim of having a relevant religious education has long been claimed, there may be such a strong tendency to want to reinforce Catholic identity with 'more recognisably Catholic content' that Catholic studies seems preferable.² Or, religion studies would be more acceptable if it allowed for a larger proportion of Catholic content. Catholic diocesan religion syllabuses

tend to be traditionally oriented – issue-oriented content is not their strong suit.

Hence the relationships between religion studies and Catholic religious education remain uncertain, depending on the direction that each takes over the next decade.

The understanding of Religion Studies from the point of view of different religions

The most prominent and widely accepted views of what religion studies should entail are not acceptable to some groups in the community. This applies more to what might be taught by departmental teachers in public schools than it would to the relatively non-controversial question of religion studies taught in religious schools. For example, the Muslim community does not always accept the values presumed to underpin a modern critical, evaluative education – particularly when applied to religion. Similarly, members of the Jewish community may consider that a study of religion should concentrate on their own tradition, without any need to give detailed attention to other religions; however, they may agree that a general study of religions in public education is desirable. Some Christians also consider that the religion studies is too broadly based and too liberal, operating out of an ideology of relativism; they prefer a religious education that is authoritative and that keeps strictly to the teachings of their church.

Given such debates, the origins of religion studies within public education, the educational assumptions on which they are based, and their purpose to educate all young citizens irrespective of religious affiliation are fundamentally important. These define the underlying values base for the study and prevent it from becoming an operation that serves the exclusive interests of particular groups. But, as noted earlier, balance is needed because public education should contribute to pupils' knowledge of their cultural heritage.

It is not likely that complete community consensus will ever be achieved about the form and content for school religion studies courses. Some people will approve of a critical evaluative study, others will not; both groups will have educational and theological justifications for their views. Hence aims, content and methods need to be articulated clearly so that there is accountability to the community. If there is disagreement and a clash of values, then there is an advantage in having the issues clear and not ambiguous.

Conclusion

It is probably inevitable, and not undesirable, that achievement of the proposed educational aims for religion studies will contribute positively to the spiritual development of some students, and it may affect their religious practice. Any potential personal influence does not compromise the impartial, objective nature of the course itself. Hence there is no need to be concerned about the possibility that religion studies may enhance young people's spirituality and may contribute to their familiarity with their own religion. This concern, which had its roots in the debates in the 1970s, is more an issue in state schools. For religious schools, the possibility of promoting pupils' spiritual and moral

development is essential to the justification of their decision to implement religion studies – they endorse the educational aims with the additional *hopes* that they will contribute to young people’s religious development and to their response to the option of being part of a community of faith.

Endnotes

1. Attention is drawn to two earlier attempts to explore relationships between state religion studies and denominational religious education (Rossiter 1981 and 1983). Rossiter devised a scheme that made use of two related constructs ‘Education in faith’ and ‘Education in religion’ to highlight commonalities. However, a popular misreading of the scheme resulted in its being used more frequently for differentiating the two.

This classification was unsuccessful and has caused problems with the interpretation of the aims for religious education. The following describes what happened. In 1981, in *Religious Education in Australian Schools* (developed further in a doctoral research study in 1984), Rossiter sought to promote more harmony and mutual exchange between church school religious education and the new religion studies courses. He proposed that school religious education needed to be interpreted from a combination of two different perspectives, a *faith-oriented* one and an *educational* one, to show that both dimensions were important. However, the terms used (‘Education in Faith’ and ‘Education in Religion’) were widely misinterpreted as ‘actual approaches’ for classifying different sorts of religious education, rather than as perspectives that were closely related. Unfortunately, this reinforced divisions rather than prompting greater understanding of how the two dimensions were interwoven. It would have been better to use less ambiguous terms such as ‘faith oriented perspective’ and ‘educational perspective’ and avoid the problems created when educators described some approaches as ‘education in faith’, and presumably others that did not educate faith. Such usage showed a misunderstanding of the complex nature of faith that cannot be added or subtracted from religious education by efforts of the teacher. Later, some educators used the problematic term ‘faith-forming approaches’ as if by intention and method they could change gear from ‘non-faith-forming’ methods to ‘faith-forming’ ones. Rossiter only used this construct of two perspectives when looking at relationships between religious education in church and state school contexts, and not when looking at Religious Education in Catholic schools.

Despite the problems with the scheme, Rossiter proposed how religion studies and denominational religious education might be more closely related. This task was extended in a doctoral research project that analysed similarities and differences between the two in theory and in normative curriculum documents (c/f. Rossiter 1984).

2 Two examples of student texts produced in support of Catholic Studies in the senior secondary school are: Elliott, P. J. and others, (2006). *Catholic Studies for senior secondary students (To Know, Worship and Love*

series), and Engebretson, K. (2004). *Catholic ethical thinking for senior secondary students*.

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