

## **RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF SPIRITUALITY: THROUGH THE LENS OF CHANGE IN CULTURAL MEANINGS**

### **Abstract**

A number of constructs like secularisation, privatisation of religion etc. have been used to describe the significant change in spirituality of many of the young people in Australian Catholic schools over the last 50 years from a more traditional religious spirituality to something that is more secular, eclectic and individualistic. To some extent, this change has been acknowledged; but the religion curricula in Catholic schools still give the impression that all of the students are, or should be, regular church goers – as if Sunday mass attendance was to be the end point of their education in spirituality. An interpretation of change in spirituality in terms of change in cultural meanings has been developed for the purpose of understanding contemporary spiritualities in other than a deficit model. Such an interpretation may be more persuasive in promoting a view of religious education that will enhance and resource the basic human spirituality of young people – whether or not they ever become active members of a local community of faith. The argument, that provides a useful framework for interpreting how and why spirituality has changed, has relevance to education in spirituality in other contexts.

### **Introduction: Problematic expectations of Catholic schools to increase young people's religiosity**

This article is related specifically to education in spirituality in Australian Catholic schools. Nevertheless, much of the discussion implies generalisations that should be relevant to other contexts, while acknowledging that what counts as 'traditional' spirituality would vary according to context.

In the document *Catholic schools at a crossroads*, the Catholic bishops of NSW and ACT (2007) expressed concern that despite the high level of resources invested in Catholic schools, they were not successful in inclining young Catholics to become regular church goers. Among their recommendations, they called for a 'new' evangelisation (Pope John Paul II, 1990, *Redemptoris Missio*) that would help 'reignite' young people's spirituality and improve their engagement with the Church. Similar concerns were also evident in diocesan reviews of the Catholic identity of schools. From the perspective of maintaining the continuing health of the Catholic Church, this response is understandable. But the issue runs more deeply than religiosity (measure of religious behaviour) – it involves fundamental changes in the landscape of spirituality. This thinking underestimates the complexity of the spirituality of contemporary youth – and of adults as well. In addition, it seems to presume that the educational activity of a Catholic school can, by itself, change young people's spirituality significantly – proposing a simplistic solution to a complex problem.

What the *Crossroads* document seeks is some formula that will reverse the substantial drift away from participation in the Church. Both the problem as the document's authors understand it, and the proposed solution, make sense within a particular framework of cultural-religious meanings. For those who share this outlook, the problem is about how to stop the decline in religiosity and traditional spirituality. But many young people and adult Catholics have no identification with this framework – as if it no longer existed; or it has little influence on their thinking; or, because of their involvement in a Catholic school, they may acknowledge it respectfully, but it has low plausibility and little credibility. As one young teacher said "They're on a different *mental planet* from the one I live on" – suggesting a clerical naivety about how the links between religion and spirituality have changed significantly over the past 50 years.

If Catholic schools are to offer an education in spirituality that is relevant to the lives of pupils, then there is a need to understand and acknowledge their changed spiritual situation: for many, but not all, it is relatively secular, eclectic, subjective, individualistic and self-reliant; there is a strong interest in achieving a desirable lifestyle but little interest in connection with the church (Hughes, 2007; Crawford and Rossiter, 2006). Religious education needs to focus more on resourcing and enhancing the basic human spirituality of young people – helping them learn how to better negotiate the spiritual and moral complexities of modern life; this should be offered unconditionally – whether or not they will ever participate in church life; and this will be helpful both for those who are involved in a parish and those who are not. Giving attention to religious traditions will always remain an important part of the religious educational process. But to focus relatively exclusively on such teaching is both too narrow and counterproductive – even if institutional maintenance were a principal purpose. It is considered that helping young people learn how to identify, interpret and evaluate contemporary spiritual/moral issues needs to become a more prominent part of religious education, especially in the senior years; and this has implications for both content and pedagogy. To do this is not ‘secularising’ the process but it is trying to be faithful to the Catholic school’s religious mission to contemporary youth.

But if this proposed agenda is to be advanced, it will require some level of educational consensus that transcends the particular spiritualities of the educators themselves – whether this be ‘conservative’ or ‘liberal’ etc. In other words, those whose principal concern is promoting church participation as well as those who do not accord this aim the same priority, need to see that the landscape of spirituality has changed so much that a traditional religious education, linked with a religious spirituality, is no longer adequate in Catholic schools. For this reason, this article will give special attention to charting change in spirituality. It seeks to develop an interpretation that will be more cogent in persuading Catholic education authorities and religion teachers to see the need for a different pattern of emphasis in religious education. It will propose that a relatively secular spirituality has become ‘normal’ for many Catholics, both young and old, and therefore it needs to be understood and addressed positively, and not negatively in terms of a deficit model that employs words like secular, un-churched, non-practising, non-traditional or non-religious. Rather than persist with a single unrealistic purpose of trying to re-establish a traditional Catholic religious spirituality for all, Catholic school religious education needs to offer a broader approach as suggested in the previous paragraph.

The new ‘mental planet’, or the cultural meanings that affect contemporary spiritualities, needs a more systematic exploration. Such investigation should not presume that either the traditional or the new is right and the other wrong. All sets of cultural meanings have both healthy and unhealthy elements that need to be identified and evaluated; this is one of the roles of an education in spirituality. While not comprehensive, the following will highlight prominent changes in cultural meanings that need to be taken into account in any relevant education in spirituality.

### **Change in cultural meanings: A scheme for interpreting how and why spirituality has changed**

The understanding of spirituality assumed here has been outlined in detail in Crawford and Rossiter (2006). What follows will extend that view of how spirituality has evolved.

A range of constructs can be used for interpreting change in spirituality. All of them have some explanatory power; but none by themselves seems to provide an adequate interpretation because change in spirituality is multidimensional. The change is mediated by a complex tapestry of influences that plays out differently for individuals. Table 1 lists a range of sociological constructs that have been used to interpret social change and which in turn can be applied to spirituality. The table signposts the different constructs without attempting to analyse them in any detail. Only a few references are noted as examples; and a number of them touch on the application of the construct to spirituality.

**Table 1** Range of sociological constructs that can be used for interpreting change in spirituality

<b>Sociological construct</b>	<b>Notes on the focus of the constructs</b>	<b>References</b>
<b>Constructs related to religion &amp; change</b>		
Religiosity	Measure of religious behaviour such as attendance at church/synagogue etc., frequency of prayer, engagement in a local community of faith.	Glock & Stark, (1965); Flynn (1985, 1993); Smith & Denton (2005).
Churched / unchurched	<i>Churched</i> – means familiarity with religious culture and engaged in a parish. <i>Unchurched</i> – means a lack of religious culture and no connection with a parish.	Fuller (2001); Tinsey (2002); Sullivan (2003).
Secularisation	Decline in the prominence of religion in personal, social and political life; less reference to the idea of god in spirituality.	Mascall (1965); Bonhoeffer (1966); Fenn (2001); Norman (2002); Wright (2004); Crawford & Rossiter (1996, 2006).
Privatisation of religion	Religious beliefs increasingly becoming a private matter, like opinions; decline in the social prominence of religion.	Baum (1970); Crawford & Rossiter (2006).
Social reality of religion	People construct a view of what they think religion is; religious knowledge is socially constructed.	Berger and Luckmann (1966), Berger, (1969, 1973)
World views	A scheme of meaning through which people make sense of the world and life. A collective world view may function like a religion.	Jackson (1997); Olthius (1985); Naugle (2002).
<b>Constructs related to social change</b>		
Social reality	Knowledge is constructed through social interaction; leads to particular , contextual perceptions of what constitutes reality.	Berger and Luckmann (1966), Berger (1973). Blumer (1969).
Cultural postmodernity	The cultural situation characterised by:- uncertainty about personal knowledge, which is socially constructed and contextual; disbelief in meta-narratives; extreme individualism; scepticism; existentialism,	Bauman (1997); Bridger (2001); Crawford & Rossiter (2006).
Individualism/individualisation	Emphasis on the individual, often at the expense of a community dimension; emphasis on individual freedom.	Halman and de Moor (1993); Crawford & Rossiter (2006). Schweitzer (2004, 2007).
Pluralism	Diversity of cultures and religions making a pluralistic society.	Jackson (2004); Baum (2007).
Relativism	Arises from the capacity to make multiple comparisons. Tendency to see religions and world views as much the same in principle; hence a decline in sense of religious uniqueness and in religious authority.	Baum (1987, 2007); Crawford & Rossiter (2006)
De-traditionalisation	Decline in the sense of family, religious and cultural traditions; life lived more independently of cultural traditions.	Hermans (2004);
Ideology	The value basis to a particular way of thinking, or of a cultural group. The set of values that motivates and drives particular political groups. Ideology may be somewhat covert.	Darder et al (2003); de Botton (2004)
Inter-cultural communication	The process of promoting mutual understanding and conversation between cultural groups. Learning from different cultures.	Gallagher (1992); English (1998).

<b>Constructs related to institutional change</b>		
De-institutionalisation	Decline in the prominence and power of social institutions – like religions. Decrease in the power of certain bureaucracies.	Hermans (2004)
<b>Social psychological constructs</b>		
Meaning and purpose	The thinking that helps individuals interpret their experience and the world. It helps justify and motivate behaviour. It can help give coherence to one's explanations of what is happening in the world. Inner resources that are developed through interaction with cultural meanings.	Baumeister (1993); Crawford & Rossiter (2006)
Identity	How individuals draw on both cultural and inner resources for their self-understanding and self-expression. May be multidimensional including moral, spiritual, religious, cultural, identity elements.	Taylor (1989); Crawford & Rossiter (2006)
Wellbeing	The general feeling of wholesomeness in the individual's self understanding and life. Includes physical, social, spiritual and economic dimensions.	Eckersley et al (2005, 2006); Fisher (2000, 2001)
Resilience	Capacity to function well as a person despite difficulties and problems. Capacity to cope with setbacks in life.	Brown (2001); Witham (2001).
Character	The moral 'fibre' of the individual. The set of virtues that gives the individual moral integrity. The values and commitments that help make a healthy, contributing citizen.	Bohlin (2005); Nucci & Narvaez (2008).
Virtues	The moral qualities that are embedded in the individual like 'habits' of mind and good behaviour. Has a long history within thinking about religious virtues.	Swanton (2003); Koertge (2005).

*Cultural meanings:* The construct or conceptual scheme that will be used here is change in cultural meanings (Crawford and Rossiter, 2006, pp. 46-59). Cultural meanings are understood as the sets of socially constructed ideas, values, assumptions and emotions that inform people's thinking and behaviour. Cultural meanings are distinctive of particular social and ethnic groups and religions; but they also operate across the social context from family to nation state, and increasingly at a global level. While there are many cultural meanings in a society, it is possible to identify the sets of meanings with which individuals or groups identify. They are like the background ideas about life (thinking and assumptions) that people draw on to explain or justify their behaviour. They condition the way people think about their lives. Trying to identify the active cultural meanings for individuals tries to interpret their 'self interpretations'.

Cultural meanings are often a blend of social, cultural, religious, spiritual and political ideas that are in turn meshed with feelings and values that reinforce the ideas. People draw on and interact with these cultural meanings when forming their own personal ideas about life. It is like the 'atmosphere of meaning' that people are continuously 'breathing in'; and it is like the immediate 'thinking/feeling environment' they inhabit which affects how they interpret reality and what they do. These meanings are associated with various sources – family, social and cultural groups, religion, nation state and the wider popular culture. Individuals may draw on particular sources or reference groups while shunning others, and they may also draw from a wide range of meanings in an eclectic fashion. There will be a diversity of responses to the same perceived cultural meanings; for example, what is 'liberal' to some will be regarded as 'harmful' and 'deviant' by others. Whatever the idiosyncratic personal meaning they construct, it cannot be fully understood apart from the particular landscape of meaning within which it developed. Some will be both conscious and articulate about the cultural meanings they have adopted; others may be relatively unaware of their social conditioning – as if it was just 'natural reality' which is not usually questioned.

Religion can be prominent and influential in people's accepted cultural meanings. Others can identify with religion nominally while their behaviour suggests that they are really operating more out of the common cultural meanings in their society. Still others would see their key meanings, and hence their spirituality, as unrelated to religion.

The notion of cultural meanings is a composite scheme that draws on a number of the constructs listed in table 1 – especially Berger and Luckmann's (1966) understanding of *social reality* where people's knowledge and behaviour are interpreted as closely related to what they construe to be reality, together with the recognition that social reality is constructed by individuals and groups; also there is some similarity with symbolic interactionist theory (Blumer, 1969). Investigating cultural meanings tries to identify and evaluate what appear to be the important, driving ideas and assumptions behind people's thinking and behaviour. It is essentially interpretive and hypothetical in process; it acknowledges that individuals may or may not advert to the cultural meanings that affect their behaviour, because these meanings can be taken for granted parts of their social world that do not need articulation, let alone evaluation. If cultural meanings are not brought into the open for appraisal, they can remain deviously influential because they are then regarded as a natural, but hidden part of the normal fabric of life (c/f the work of sociologist Raymond Williams as discussed in Warren (1992)). Williams proposed that by starting with the identification and appraisal of cultural meanings, individuals can take up *cultural agency*, where they can avoid being just passive 'consumers' of culture by actively contributing to the creation of cultural meanings within their own sphere of influence. This approach is consistent with much of the thinking in critical theory and critical pedagogy (Darder et al., 2003).

Cultural meanings serve as communal frames of reference that are available to people in the working out of their own personal frame of reference or personal meaning. They usually act in ways that are more or less consistent with their personal meanings. Both personal frame of reference (difficult to characterise) and cultural meanings (more easily identified) are keys to interpreting behaviour. Hence, identifying cultural meanings and showing how they have changed is a useful way of interpreting change in spirituality.

It is difficult to estimate with accuracy the way in which cultural meanings affect individuals. It seems to be a natural part of the human condition to have difficulty in determining the extent to which various cultural meanings affect us. It often appears easier to see how they may have affected others – even though such interpretations may be incomplete. But by identifying the range of factors that influence people's cultural and personal frames of reference, we are in a better position to understand personal and social change as it is manifested in spirituality. And in turn, this interpretation can be useful educationally for helping people look more critically at the cultural meanings that have had a shaping influence on them. These factors can be life enhancing as well as life inhibiting. They can extend freedom just as they can limit it. The educational hope is that individuals become better educated with respect to the social forces that may have a conditioning influence on the way they live their lives. By interrogating the cultural meanings that affect society and individuals, people are in a better position to make informed choices and to address contemporary spiritual and moral issues (Hill, 1993). This provides a potentially valuable contribution to religious education (and education generally) both in content and pedagogy; students could be engaged in a research-oriented process of appraising cultural meanings; at a personal level, they would have the opportunity to reflect on where their personal frame of reference related, if at all, to the cultural meanings being evaluated.

*Change in cultural meanings:* There are two main aspects to change in cultural meanings:-

- Firstly, there is the emergence and dissemination of new cultural meanings;
- Secondly, individuals change the cultural meanings to which they are subscribing; they switch their allegiance to new meanings available in the culture; this change may be gradual and sometimes almost imperceptible.

Individuals and groups are forever inventing and disseminating cultural meanings – new ways of

interpreting life. The religious cultural meanings associated with any group will evolve and change over time in response to new circumstances. Sometimes the 'new' meanings are really 'recycled' 'old' meanings. It could be expected that very traditional, mono-cultural societies would have less variety in cultural meanings than pluralistic, multi-cultural societies. Being able to make multiple comparisons between diverse religions, world views and lifestyles could also be expected to be a catalyst for people to change their cultural meanings; dissatisfaction with old meanings and the allure of the new could prompt change. However, if individuals were secure in their reference group, and if they felt it had a strong identity and self-sufficient plausibility, then they could be unmoved by the variety of meaning systems on offer; they could feel relatively impervious to inroads from competing meanings, particularly those that might call their own system into question. Some who are anxious about the multiplicity of competitive meaning systems, retreat defensively into the security of their own reference group. For minority groups, particularly when oppressed, their meaning system is important in group identity and perhaps even for cultural survival; it provided inner strength.

A variety of life experiences could trigger change in the personal meanings of individuals – including education. The new personal meanings usually resulted from a shift in their favoured cultural meanings. It is not that they created new meanings as such, but they moved towards meanings that made more sense of their experience and with which they felt more comfortable. It may have been a response to perceived dissonance – where their experience was increasingly being felt to be inconsistent with the explanations offered by their old meaning system (Festinger, 1962).

If the old reference group appeared to be losing its plausibility (Berger, 1969, 1973) – where its value was no longer self-evident – individuals tended to look elsewhere for more meaningful ideas to motivate and explain their lives. This prompted a migration in reference groups. During this process, individuals may pay more attention to the critiques of their old reference group which were available in the wider community. The credibility of the old system declined; its meanings appeared to lose their relevance and explanatory power, and consequently their capacity to retain people's allegiance failed. Sometimes the change was led by action; individuals behaved in new ways; they may have changed the emphases in their lifestyle; then because they felt comfortable with this new behaviour, they eventually made adjustments to their personal meaning system – they changed their 'subscription' to new cultural meanings that better accommodated their behaviour and interests. It may have been a relatively imperceptible drift into new ways of thinking.

Change in cultural meanings is inevitably connected with how they are constructed and communicated. Human history shows that story-telling and its preservation in writing have been important in the handing on of cultural meanings from generation to generation; stories are meaning-embedded narratives. New media for communication have helped maintain and conserve cultural meanings, as well promote the spread of new meanings. Print, telephony, radio, film and television have contributed, and now there are emails, texting and the internet – together with its social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, MySpace and Twitter, and individual blogging. More will be said about the influence of electronic communication later.

Change in spirituality is not only affected by theological development within religion but also by changes in the background cultural meanings about life. In a text on modern European thought, Boumer (1977, p. 439) wrote about the process of secularisation in a chapter entitled 'The Eclipse of God'. He began with the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from prison in 1944.

The secular movement which I think had begun in the 13th century has in our time reached a certain completion. People have learnt to cope with all the questions of importance without recourse to God as a working hypothesis. In questions concerning science, art and even ethics this has become an understood thing which one scarcely dares to tilt at anymore (Bonhoeffer, 1967, p. 194).

Amongst other things this suggests two key points for understanding change in spirituality. Firstly, the

centrality of ideas about god; and secondly, that the origins of change need to be traced back to medieval times.

### **Cultural meanings in a traditional Christian religious spirituality**

Consider the situation of people in 12<sup>th</sup> century Christian Europe. For an illiterate peasant leaving his small wooden or mud house, with no windows, and entering a massive cathedral – for example, in Ely, Salisbury or Chartres – the contrast would have been awe inspiring; the physical ‘house of God’ reflected a sense of the divine on earth. The size and height of the vaulting, the stained glass windows and the frescoes and paintings would have helped communicate a sense of the transcendence and power of god who presided over the world. Apart from the castles and houses of the nobles, the cathedrals would have dominated the city skyline, symbolic of the dominance of god and religion. In the small villages, this was replicated in miniature with the local church spire often the most prominent landmark. The dominance of Christian cultural meanings in 12<sup>th</sup> century France was evident in one estimate that there was one ecclesiastical structure of some kind for about every 200 people. A comparable situation exists today in some places – for example, across the hundreds of square kilometres of villages along the Nile near Luxor in Egypt; the spires of the local mosques are particularly prominent at night because they are lit with blue fluorescent lights; they dot the landscape about every kilometre or two from horizon to horizon. This religious domination of the landscape was symbolic of the overwhelming dominance of cultural religious meanings that regulated the lives of people in such contexts.

The authority of god, the spiritual/moral power of the church (religion) and the political power were usually amalgamated into a single network of cultural religious meanings. It covered all aspects of life and was relatively inescapable. It gave people a sense of their own ‘station in life’ within a system that was usually accepted without question; it gave them meaning and purpose and a sense of personal dignity; and it regulated their activity in minute detail. Within this system, it would be difficult to find meanings and practices that did not have a religious overlay. And all of this helped ensure (and enforce?) social stability. It would have been difficult to contemplate cultural meanings outside the prevailing system – there appeared to be few if any alternatives; if there were other religious groups present, they would have been in a minority and not likely to challenge the status quo. Born into this system, individuals simply absorbed its meanings as *reality* – there was no sense that it was socially constructed; any questioning of the system was likely to be judged as a deficiency in faith.

Six key meanings permeated the common spirituality in this context:-

- The *centrality of god* who was perceived as the creator and end of the human race as well as its judge.
- Life and religion were focused on *heaven as the ‘true’ life* for which life on earth was a preparation; this tended to make religious meanings the compelling spiritual and moral reference points for thinking and behaviour.
- The *power of the church (religion)* over individuals, usually in concert with political power, was absolute; authorities were supreme; deviants or heretics could be put to death; many religious cultural rituals set the pattern for daily life in an annual cycle.
- *Obedience* was a prominent aspect of most human interactions. Obedience to god was aligned with obedience to the church (religion). Authorities, both religious and political, were respected without much question.
- *Fear* was a strong motivating factor; fear of god merged into fear of religious and political authorities; the idea of reward for the good and punishment of evil was a prominent moral motivation; the ultimate fear was of eternal punishment in hell.
- *Evil* in the world was personalised in the form of the devil; the devil – the ‘tempter’ – was held responsible for much of what went wrong in personal and social life.

There was a strong feeling of tight control over people’s lives and spirituality. The meanings underpinning their spirituality were a mix of belief, theology, opinion, fears and superstition. One could speculate that

the extent to which this profile varied for individuals was limited, even though it may have been likely to be different for the ruling class, clergy and the educated.

The unquestioning acceptance of religious meanings as reality reinforced a literal interpretation of sacred writings. For example, the Genesis and Gospel stories were historicised.

### **Changes away from a traditional Christian religious spirituality understood in terms of change in cultural meanings**

This section will consider only some of the changes in cultural meanings that have contributed to a move away from traditional spirituality, while not referring in any detail to the processes outlined in table 1. The pattern of change since the middle ages needs to be identified even in broad outline because it not only describes historical, cultural change in spirituality, but also because a similar pattern is often evident at a psychological level in individuals when their traditional spirituality morphs into something that is more secular and individualistic.

A change from traditional religious spirituality was particularly evident in three areas of cultural meanings:-

1. Understanding of god and of the creator's role of the universe.
2. The power that religious authorities had over the lives and thinking of individuals; less fear of religious authorities.
3. Decline in the prominence of religious ritual and religious references in social life.

The following, among many factors, contributed to the secularisation of spirituality in Europe (and later in the Americas) since the middle ages. (There is not space to elaborate on each)

- Movement of people into the developing cities
- Separation of church (religion) and state
- Change away from the predominantly religious subject matter of art
- The rise of science, scientific thought and the enlightenment
- Interpretation of human behaviour through the human sciences
- Education
- Technologies for the communication of cultural meanings.

All these examples of change factors worked in favour of the emergence of two new cultural meanings that would drive the development of secular individualistic spiritualities.

Firstly, there was the sense of an *alternative set of popular cultural meanings about life* that was more or less independent of the traditional religious view; individuals could now compare what was expected formerly with what was encouraged, allowed or tolerated within the popular culture. There were options for thinking about life that were not there before. Whereas there had been one pervasive, monocultural, religious system that dominated cultural meanings, people were now becoming accustomed to multiple frames of reference for life's meaning.

Secondly, more attention and power were being given to the *individual's own autonomous, personal frame of reference* for providing the ultimate criteria for judging spiritual/moral matters. The traditional cultural reference point in religion and religious authorities declined in plausibility and power; it was becoming perceived as having more of an 'advisory' role than a 'normative' one. While many would be inclined towards this more individualistic approach, others remained attached to the external authority as their prime frame of reference.

### **Cultural meanings associated with a relatively secular, eclectic, individualistic spirituality**

This section extends the interpretation of the development of contemporary spiritualities by contrasting the cultural meanings that informed spirituality in traditional and modern settings. Table 2 summarises the



changes in cultural meanings that appear to be associated with the development of contemporary, relatively secular spiritualities in Westernised societies; while not all individuals will fit perfectly with these descriptions, the contrasting indicators provide a useful picture of the polarities that developed in the cultural change process. This summary has drawn significantly on the ideas of Eckersley (2005, pp. 2-15) and to a lesser extent on Crawford & Rossiter (2006) and Schweitzer (2004, 2007).

**Table 2 Contrasts between the cultural meanings underpinning traditional and contemporary spiritualities**

Trends in cultural meanings in a relatively traditional society, and to some extent in individuals with a traditional religious spirituality	Trends in cultural meanings in contemporary Westernised societies, and in individuals with a secular, individualistic spirituality
<p><u>Personal meaning</u> was usually a <u>social given</u>. A religious meaning system was received like a set package; it was 'taken-for granted' and internalised.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was security in having a relatively 'black and white' meaning system and moral code.</li> <li>• Individuals did not have to 'search' for meaning; they had a ready made package.</li> <li>• The religious meaning system may have been experienced as somewhat harsh and oppressive, but it helped people make sense of their lives at several levels, answering the fundamental questions: Who am I? Where have I come from? Why am I here?</li> </ul>	<p><u>Meaning in life</u> was now less a social given and more a <u>matter of personal choice</u>; personal meaning was 'constructed' by individuals for themselves, or chosen from a proliferation of options.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was a challenge to individuals in constructing their own DIY (Do It Yourself) spirituality.</li> <li>• 'Searching' for meaning and taking responsibility for developing one's own personal meaning system could be stressful.</li> <li>• The speed, scope and scale of economic, social and cultural change have made the past seemingly irrelevant and the future uncertain for many. This seems to have created more 'cultural agnosticism' about meaning, purpose and certainty in life.</li> <li>• Even if life's meaning was less clear, life itself became more comfortable, more varied, safer, healthier and longer.</li> </ul>
<p><u>Religious belief</u>: Beyond the mortal realm, people had a religious faith that not only provided them with a road map for life, but it gave them a sense of place in the cosmic scheme of things.</p>	<p>While many retained some form of religious belief, this was not nearly as absolute and binding as it once was. The individual's own experience tended to become the touchstone for authenticity, and even for what was regarded as the 'truth'. While nominally linked with religion, some see a clear distinction between their own personal faith and the faith taught by traditional religious institutions (Schweitzer, 2004).</p>
<p><u>Religious authority</u>: Religious spirituality (in the West) was sustained and validated by church authority. Its plausibility depended on high regard for the church; the notion of the authority of god underpinned church authority.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An emphasis on obedience to religious authorities and to god.</li> </ul>	<p><u>Authority of the individual</u>: The plausibility of religious authorities tended to be low. Increasingly, individuals became their own spiritual authority, deciding for themselves on the basis of their own judgment about particular aspects of spirituality. "People assumed that their lives are not predetermined by birth and social origin, and that every one has the right and also the responsibility to shape his or her life according to their own wishes and life plans."(Schweitzer, 2009, p.90) It is taken for granted that everyone has the right to choose their own faith and that no-one should interfere with their choices.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little if any regard for religious authorities.</li> <li>• What suited the individual became the ultimate criteria for the utility of spirituality.</li> </ul>
<p><u>The existence and image of God</u>: There was a strong belief in the existence of god. The image of god included the notions of:- creator, all-powerful, benevolent, loving and caring for each individual, judge of good and bad, rewarder of the good and punisher of the evil, listens to people's prayers and requests for help.</p>	<p>A natural uncertainty about the existence of god became more prevalent. Belief in a benevolent god was attractive and comforting, but not something that many individuals counted on or thought much about.</p>

<u>Family and community ties:</u> Children usually grew up in a close network of family and community relationships that largely defined their world – their values, beliefs, identity and station in life.	Family and community ties were loosened. Consequently individuals appeared more open to various life options available in the wider culture, together with more individualism in their choices.
<u>The world outside:</u> Most people knew relatively little of what lay outside their world, and of other ways of living (in pre-television times).	People know much more of the rest of the world and how differently others lived and thought. Information about what was happening around the world was available instantaneously.
<u>Social change and the predictability of life:</u> Much of life was predictable and what was not was explained in terms of the supernatural and religious belief.	Rapid social change resulted in much more uncertainty about life and the future. Many accommodated to the uncertainty as ‘natural’. (Others could not cope with the uncertainty so well, and identified with communities where meanings were more definite and authoritarian – a move back towards a more traditional setting).

### Conclusion: A foot in both camps?

Many religion teachers in Catholic schools have more personal affinity with thinking in the right column than the left in table 2. But in religious education, they feel their normative curriculum context sits mainly within the thinking in the left column, while most of their students are at home with that of the right column (even if the description of a traditional spirituality today does not fit perfectly within the left column). And if their prescribed purpose in religious education is understood primarily as persuading young people that they need to engage with the church, this can be perceived by their students as wanting to shift their thinking and spirituality towards that of the left column; and students (and hopefully their teachers) know that there is no educational (or any other) formula that will make this happen. The change, at least in Westernised countries in the long term, is not reversible.

Hence, it is proposed that the starting point for a more relevant religious education is to accept that the situation depicted in the right hand column is the normal one for most young people. If this was accepted in normative Catholic curriculum documents, it would help change the focus from trying to eliminate the right hand column as a problem towards trying to diagnose and address its needs constructively – responding to the opportunity to enhance young people’s spirituality whether it is religious or not (this purpose has currency in non-denominational and state based religion studies courses). And while access to the traditional religious heritage remains a valuable part of education in spirituality for secular youth, more specific attention needs to be given to content and pedagogy that take into account the healthy possibilities as well as the problems within the thinking described in the right hand column. While the introduction suggested the critical interpretation and evaluation of culture as one valuable strategy, limits of space require that spelling out what such an education in spirituality would entail is taken up elsewhere (c/f Crawford & Rossiter, 2006). In any case, the framework developed in this article provides a useful starting point for interpreting change in spirituality which would have a prominent place in such an education.

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