

## ENGAGING THE MIND, HEART AND SOUL OF THE STUDENT IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: TEACHING FOR MEANING AND CONNECTION

### Abstract

As new findings from brain studies and research continue to have implications for teaching and learning, so also do the changes in societal and work place structures. Educators need to recognise that existing practices and school structures which worked in the past are no longer viable for the changed context of a world dominated by political, technological and global concerns. This is also relevant for religious education classrooms which are filled with so many unchurched students who have little knowledge and experience of their faith tradition. This paper draws on current research findings to suggest an approach to religious education where connections can be made so that content and learning experiences become more meaningful in the life journey of the student.

**Imagination is more important than knowledge – Albert Einstein (1879 –1955)**

### Introduction

Over the past few years I have been developing and refining a curriculum model that emerged from my doctoral research into Year 12 students' perceptions of their learning experiences in religious education programs (de Souza 1999, 2001, 2003, 2004). Certainly, the mostly negative responses that were reflected by students in my research (de Souza, 1999) only served to confirm my own perceptions that, for many students in middle and senior secondary Catholic schools, the subject, religious education was doing little to promote enthusiasm, passion and a depth of learning that would accompany students as they traversed the contours of their life journeys.

Indeed, it brought back memories of my early days of teaching music in the 1970s and 1980s where music appeared to be the least interesting or appreciated subject amongst most of my students and many of the staff, which presented me with a huge challenge to try and effect changes in this situation in the schools where I taught so that the classroom music program would attract attention as an exciting and viable subject where students became enthused, inspired, creative and productive, and more importantly, conveyed these elements to the school community through many and varied productions and performances. Through this process I explored ways to teach affectively to promote cognition which included, among other things, investigating different strategies for students to experience the content, attending to the aesthetics and physical environment of the classroom and helping them find connections between school music and their everyday lives. I had realised that if my students did not have the skills which allowed them to get *into* the music for

which I wanted them to develop some appreciation, it remained an impenetrable blanket or fog of sound. Looking back from where I am in my professional thinking and practice today, I realise that, by the end of my music teaching days in the late eighties, I had inadvertently also addressed what we now call the spiritual dimension in education so that frequently, most of my students arrived with an eager anticipation and left with their eyes lighted up and a quiet buzz that seemed to emanate from them. The learning process had integrated their perceiving, thinking, feeling, creating and intuiting abilities which could be described as engaging the mind, heart and soul.

It seemed to me that there were strong similarities between the two subjects, music from the 1970s and 1980s and religious education in the 90s as they were taught in many classrooms. To begin with, for both subjects many middle and senior secondary students had little interest in or knowledge and experience of the content that had to be taught. They were unfamiliar with the terms used, the Story which had inspired the Tradition, the history of the Tradition and its people, and for many, they remained unaware of and, possibly, unreceptive to the feelings and heart stirrings that both these subjects could bring.

Teaching and learning often remained at the cognitive level and the subject matter remained dry, sometimes repetitive, information conveyed in language with which many could not connect, particularly when, in the case of religious education in contemporary Catholic classrooms, many students and their parents are unchurched and, for a variety of reasons, their knowledge about the faith

tradition and practices is quite limited (de Souza 1999; Lynch, 2000; Rymarz 2000).

The outcomes based learning approach that was adopted across Australia in the 1990s continued to emphasise cognitive learning and this is clearly reflected in religious education guidelines in several dioceses which state that the approach is 'educational' with the 'enfaithing' aspects left to extra-curricular or non-classroom activities. The current textbook approach that has been adopted in some dioceses is based on a version of Bloom's Taxonomy which is very much a cognitive exercise<sup>1</sup> and while affective learning outcomes are articulated for each unit, they often appear to be 'tacked' on since the presentation of content and activities appears to have little connection to the affect or the inner self. Indeed, it would seem that any consideration or understanding about affective or spiritual learning remains secondary to cognitive learning in these texts. While such an approach gives credence to the understanding that the human person is an intellectual being who has the ability to think, it is not clear that recognition has been given to the feeling and intuiting elements that compose the whole person. In an age when there is so much more knowledge and understanding of the learning process (for instance, Csikszentmihalyi, 1992, 2002; Del Prete, 2002; Gardiner, 1983, 1993, 1999; Gardner, H.; Kornhaber, M. L., & Wake, W. K., 1996; Kessler, 2000; Miller, 2000; Pearce, 1977, 1985, 2003; Wilber, 2000, 2001), of how the brain works (for instance, Newberg, D'Aquili, & Rause, 2001; Pearce, 2002; Persinger, 1996; Ramachandran & Blakeslee, 1998;), and of the role of different intelligences (for instance, Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000; Sohar & Marshall, 2000), there is surely a need to move from a learning approach in which cognitive learning is emphasised to the recognition that effective learning requires cognitive, affective and spiritual elements to work in complementary roles.

Given the wide adoption of the term spirituality into several fields and disciplines, there is a need to clarify its interpretation as it is used in this paper. Spirituality, here, is recognised as an innate and essential element of every person which is reflected in expressions of differing layers of connectedness that spiral outwards to link with the social, communal and physical Other, inwards with the inner Self, and ultimately with a Transcendent Other. These connecting layers can transcend religious, social, cultural and political landscapes and boundaries although the expressions may, indeed, be influenced by such factors. It is the connectedness that individuals experience which leads them to a discovery of a sense of *self* and *place* within their communities and the wider

world, and ultimately, help them to find *meaning* and *purpose* in their lives. Consequently, human expression that reflects these layers of connectedness may be recognised as an expression of spirituality where, at the deepest and widest level, 'everything forms a single whole' (de Chardin, 1968, p. 61) and Self merges with Other. Certainly, spiritual expression as reflected through these layers of connectedness should become foundational to all meaningful learning.

I have discussed elsewhere various theories of and research into different aspects of intelligence and spirituality, and presented a curriculum model that draws on these new learnings to provide the basis for a holistic approach to learning (de Souza, 2001, 2003, 2004). The model concentrates on the connections between the perceiving, thinking, feeling and intuiting elements which is the process by which the individual experiences the world (see Fordham, 1953; O'Connor, 1985, 1988) thereby providing opportunities to address both the *inner* and the *outer* lives of the student. It recognises that the learning process moves from the surface of the conscious mind to the subconscious (perceiving, thinking and feeling) to a depth level within the unconscious mind (intuiting) before returning to the surface in transformed conscious thinking and action, and it raises the potential for classroom religious education to become a vital, meaningful and transformative subject for students regardless of their background.

Most educators will be able to recall inspired moments of effective learning during their professional experience. Student characteristics that could be described at such moments would include interest and enthusiasm, concentration, absorption and immersion in a particular activity resulting in insightful, creative, enterprising, exciting initiatives or outcomes. Csikszentmihalyi (1992, 2002) described such an experience as the optimal experience based on the concept of 'flow' which occurs when an individual's mind and body are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. Achievement of the outcome is dependent on their own ability and creativity.

The optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is *order in consciousness*. This happens when psychic energy – or attention – is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action (p. 6).

Csikszentmihalyi continues to explain that if a person seriously pursues a particular goal it requires deep concentration and absorption so that other thoughts, worries, anxieties and so on, are forgotten. Instead, the whole being is focused on

the achievement of the goal for its own sake whereby, consciousness becomes 'harmoniously ordered' (p. 6).

It is a contention of this paper that one way to encourage students to reach the state of 'flow' is for learning activities to involve the four elements identified earlier: perceiving, thinking, feeling and intuiting. Jung considered these four functions are what individuals use to orientate themselves in the world (Fordham, 1953, p. 35).

While educators have recognised, to varying degrees, the perceiving, thinking and feeling functions, with perhaps, the emphasis given to thinking (for instance, in the extensive use of the cognitive domain which incorporates different levels of thought), rather less attention has been given to the last function, intuiting. The rest of this paper will examine various theories and discussions of intuition to examine its possible role in the learning process where it may illuminate newly gained knowledge and understanding.

In a commentary on Aurobindo, a well-known Eastern philosopher, and his understanding of intuition, Maitra (1968) claims that he distinguished five levels of consciousness above the mental (or intellect) each of which could generate intuitions whose respective value coincided with the level of consciousness from whence it emanated. Maitra points to the fact that this Eastern perspective of consciousness was quite different from western concepts. However, as the world has become a global village so that different cultures continue to impact upon one another, western studies are now being conducted to explore the possibilities of a range of consciousness. Thus, Wilber (2000, 2001) refers to the 'Human Consciousness Project' (p. 27) where various stages, structures and states of consciousness have been studied to discover that a *spectrum of consciousness* exists which appears to range from 'instinctual to egoic to spiritual modes, from pre-personal to personal to transpersonal experiences, from subconscious to self-conscious to super-conscious states, from body to mind to spirit itself' (p. 28). This suggests that Eastern and Western thinking on consciousness may be becoming aligned and more in tune and, perhaps, raises the credibility of the existence of different types of consciousness other than the three that are usually referred to: conscious, sub-conscious and unconscious and has implications for learning.

Another aspect of Aurobindo's teaching is to recognise 'our psychic being as the representative within us of the Divine Principle which constantly sends light which penetrates our surface consciousness' (p. 56) and becomes another source of intuitive experience. Given this perspective that

Aurobindo subscribes to, it is not surprising to find that he gives intuition a higher status than reason:

The perceptual power of the inner sight is greater and more direct than the perceptual power of thought: it is a spiritual sense that seizes something of the substance of Truth and not only her figure; but it outlines the figure also and at the same time catches the significance of the figure, and it can embody her with a finer and ... a larger comprehension and power of totality than thought-conception can manage (cited in Maitra, 1968, p. 56).

An understanding of the Divine within also derives from the teachings of some Christian mystics, for instance, it is reflected in Merton's (1961, 1999) later writings when he describes the human person being made in the image and likeness of God, and suggests that the way to find out who we really are, is by finding the divine image within ourselves. Again, the same concept is reflected in the Indian greeting, *Namaste*, which in translation means, "The Divine Presence in me meets the Divine Presence in you. I bow to the Divine Presence in you."

Another perspective on intuition is offered by Bede Griffith (Barnhart, (Ed.). 2003) who claims that Western thinking has been dominated by the masculine rational mind, which has also influenced their religious traditions, and suggests that it is time to discover the feminine intuitive mind in order to restore balance. He describes intuition as 'a knowledge which derives not from observations and experiment or from concepts and reason but from the mind's reflection on itself ... the human mind is so structured that it is always present to itself' (p. 39). Griffith claims that this self reflection process is a distinguishing feature of the human mind but expresses difficulty in relegating it to the unconscious mind as Jung did or to the subconscious, since he believes it is part of the conscious mind. Citing Maritain's description of intuition in his *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* he asserts that intuition belongs not to the "sunlit surface of the mind" as described by Maritain but to "the night and the darkness, to the moonlit world of dreams and images, before they emerge into rational consciousness" (p. 39). In further trying to elucidate this understanding, Griffith uses the term "passive intellect" (p. 40) to explain the conscious mind which receives impressions of the experiences of the body, the senses, the feelings, and the imagination. Each of these affects the mind and modifies the being, thereby becoming the source of intuition.

Another reference to the darkness of the mind is something Groeschel (1983, 2000) alludes to when

he quotes St John of the Cross: "Faith, manifestly, is a dark night for man, but in this very way it gives him light" (p. 124). Groeschel believes that St John of the Cross was talking about intuition or an intuitive faith. He argues that 'intuition is a form of intelligence beyond rational analysis; it perceives a whole reality without analysing the parts. For instance, when one appreciates a work of art or a piece of music, the response may be intuitive, that is, an appreciation for the whole without necessarily understanding the parts or the technique that has put the parts together. Nonetheless, Groeschel argues that any analysis of intuition has to be limited because of its mysterious mode of operation (p. 124).

Hillman (1996) also comments on the mystery of how an intuition comes about. He refers to the psychological understanding "direct and unmediated knowledge" and "immediate and innate apprehension of a complex group of data." Nevertheless, he distinguishes between intuition as neither thought nor feeling, and asserts that a person can have an intuition "without any known process of cogitation or reflective thinking" (p. 98).

What becomes clearer from these descriptions is that intuitive responses are perceived as springing from deep within the individual's psyche which presents her/him with an instant and clear understanding of the phenomena or a solution to a problem, but it is not quite clear what the process is or what prompts such a response. Nonetheless, an intuitive response has been recognised as something that may shift an individual forward from one point to another in the learning process. Del Prete (2002) who would support this contention, argues that although we are intuitive people, intuition has been largely ignored in western society through the last century.

A different perspective of this unexplained, immediate kind of response is presented by Khrishnamurti (Martin, 1997) who rejects the term *intuition* and uses the term *insight* to describe the ability to respond to a situation as a result of seeing the whole without the parts. He says:

to see into things, into the whole movement of thought ... it is not analysis, not exercise of the intellectual capacity, nor is it the result of knowledge – knowledge being that which has been accumulated through the past as experience, stored in the brain. Knowledge always goes with ignorance; there is no complete knowledge, therefore there is always knowledge and ignorance, like two horses tethered... Insight is to perceive something instantly which must be true,

logical, sane, rational ... and that insight must act instantly (Martin, 1997, p. 175).

Khrishnamurti's *insight* appears to have similar characteristics to *intuition* as we have been discussing it. It invites immediate response as a result of seeing the whole rather than the parts. Nonetheless, when he argues that it is not a result of knowledge, it would appear that he is speaking of knowledge consciously learned and stored in the conscious or subconscious mind, therefore implying the incompleteness of such knowledge. An *insight*, for Khrishnamurti, comes from a higher consciousness where all is known.

While the above discussion has focused on different perceptions of what an intuition is, it is interesting to note that the role and process of intuitions have begun to receive attention in the world of business and finance. For instance, a consultant, Jane Mara (2002) cites different research studies to claim that:

Using intuitive thinking techniques enables us to acknowledge the messages sent from both sides of the brain hemispheres and develop strategies for our greatest potential. Intuitive thinking can enhance one's ability to see patterns in disparate fields ... today's managers (will) become more valuable to their organisations as the hidden intelligence of intuition produces more effective outcomes (accessed 25<sup>th</sup> February, 2005).

Another instance where a study was conducted into the role and process of intuition was reported by Breen (2000). He presented the findings of Klein, a cognitive psychologist, who, having studied decisions made by fire fighters at extreme moments of danger, proposed that intuitive decisions which resulted in effective action appeared to be linked to experience. He claimed that an experienced firefighter gained a wealth of knowledge from fighting other fires but such knowledge was attained quite unconsciously without the firefighter being able to explain how they might have known something or what had prompted them to make a life-saving decision. He argued that an experienced person, somehow, perceived the world differently to an inexperienced person. In other words, they picked up nuances, dynamics and other less obvious signs at an unconscious level and this unconsciously gained knowledge provoked an intuitive response to situations that generated similar or recognisable signals.

Both Klein's findings and Mara's assertions suggest that intuition is somehow linked to tacit knowledge which was first described by Polanyi

(1967) that is, knowledge that we have but we are unable to explain how we have it. It is knowledge that has been absorbed unconsciously or implicitly through our senses and stored in our unconscious minds. This is different to explicit knowledge that has been gained consciously which Krisnamurti referred to (see above). Polanyi believed that a person's strong interest and commitment led them to acts of discovery and creativity so that he took a stance against the dominant position of the day that science was somehow value-free. Instead he "sought to bring into creative tension a concern with reasoned and critical interrogation with other, more 'tacit' forms of knowing" (Smith, 2003). Thus, firefighters might get a *gut-feeling* that something is wrong even if they cannot articulate it. It may lie in the fact that the smoke rises in the wrong direction or that the sound of the fire is different from what it should be, or indeed, that the fire just doesn't behave in the way it is supposed to. All these factors have been absorbed at an unconscious level from fighting previous fires and remain as tacit knowledge which can emerge as an intuition or a hunch. Certainly, experienced teachers will be able to identify similar situations when tacit knowledge allows them to 'read' the mood of a class and make an intuitive response that could swing a lesson from being a boring session or a disaster, something they would not have done so well in their early days of teaching.

To further clarify this link between tacit knowledge and intuition, it is useful to view Jung's (O'Connor, 1985, 1988, 1990) description of intuition. Jung asserts that an intuition can be explained as unconscious perception which is different from sensation. While the latter is about perception through the senses by which we learn that something exists, intuition is the 'function that tells us of future possibilities. It is the proverbial hunch and the function that inform us about the atmosphere that surrounds an experience or event. (O'Connor, 1985, 1988, 1990, pp. 76-77). Further, as noted earlier, Jung assigns intuition a place in the process by which the individual engages with his/her environment. Arguably, such a process should lead to the gaining of new knowledge and experiences.

From the above discussion, there would appear to be some common characteristics that can be applied to an intuition or to Krishnamurti's *insight*. Intuitions are an immediate response to a particular issue or situation which presents a 'whole' picture or solution and which appears to be generated by the unconscious perceptions that the individual has previously gained. When confronted with a situation that may have echoes of these stored unconscious perceptions, an intuitive response emerges which can be described as "holistic interpretations of situations based on analogies

drawn from a largely unconscious experiential database" (Claxton, 2000, p. 50).

Wilber (2000, 2001) provides another way of understanding perceptions, intuitions and he links them to the learning process. He proposes an Integral Vision or Approach which is a "judicial blend of ancient wisdom and modern knowledge" (p. 34) and recognises a *spectrum of human consciousness* (p. 76) which discloses to each individual, a different type of world. That is, each person's perceptions will reveal a different perspective of the same object or situation depending on their circumstances, background, cultural and religious influences and so on. In Wilber's words:

Put in its simplest form, there is, at the very least, the eye of flesh, the eye of mind, and the eye of spirit (or the eye of contemplation). An exclusive or predominant reliance on one of these modes produces, for example, empiricism, rationalism, and mysticism... each of these modes of knowing has its own specific and quite valid set of referents: *sensibilia, intelligibilia, and transcendelia* (p. 76).

He argues that all valid knowledge has the following components or strands: *Instrumental injunction; Intuitive apprehension, and Communal confirmation*. The first implies that if you want to know something you have to do it – the action and/or experience. The second refers to the "immediate experience of the domain disclosed by the injunction." This is the direct grasping of the information that has been produced by the experience whether it is sensory experience, mental experience or spiritual experience. The third component relates to checking or validating the findings or results with others who have already successfully completed the first two components. Wilber's second strand appears to be a link to intuitive learning as it is being discussed here, however, a detailed discussion of Wilber's integral approach is beyond the scope of this paper.

Given these understandings and interpretations of intuition and intuitive responses, it would certainly appear that there are implications for classroom practice. If students display ignorance or indifference to the topics being taught, it is essential that appropriate resources are selected which may connect to the tacit knowledge they have. Such resources should be aimed at triggering responses through the different senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell so that students are able to access the stimuli at different points to produce a variation of perceptions. This, potentially, may prompt an intuitive response from some of the

students which may promote further discussion thereby enhancing learning for the whole group. However, such an approach is restricted in a text book based curriculum. If the presentation of content is confined to the text, it becomes inflexible, monotonous and, for some students, inaccessible, thereby resulting in disinterested and unchallenged students. This is a real concern in text book dependent learning programs if teachers are not motivated to search for additional resources to complement the text.

In general, then, if we return to the learning process described earlier, intuitive learning would appear to operate at an unconscious level. Thus, the process begins when the student is presented with new knowledge or experience. Conscious and unconscious perceptions are absorbed simultaneously. At the conscious and subconscious levels, thoughts and feeling engage which lead to a deeper level where new perceptions and knowledge become absorbed into the unconscious learning that an individual has accumulated and stored. This is the 'rumination' process of which Claxton speaks (2000, p. 50). Consequently, conscious and unconscious learning mix to emerge in the 'aha' moment of new realisations and ideas. Overall, the basis of this learning process is connectedness, and it recognises and addresses learning that may be going on at both inner and outer levels. Thereby, it promotes a balance between the inner and outer lives of the students and incorporates a spiritual dimension into the learning process.

In order to apply this approach in the religious education classroom, teachers must rethink their own understanding of spirituality, and the role of spirituality in education. Too often, in religious education, an explicit nurturing of spirituality is confined to liturgies, retreats and other similar events, thereby bracketing the spiritual dimension and treating it as something isolated from the day-to-day classroom process. It is a contention, here, that such an approach is flawed since it fails to recognise the spiritual dimension of the individual as an essential aspect of being. Equally, the feelings that may affect the learning process are often neglected.

A further contention offered here is that perceiving, thinking, feeling and intuiting are essential elements that compose the human person and, as Jung claimed, allow them to engage with their external world. Consequently, in their lesson planning, teachers need to incorporate not just cognitive and affective learning outcomes which deal with knowledge, skills and feelings respectively, but also, spiritual learning outcomes which acknowledge the integrating role of inner reflection and intuition.

When attention is given to the complementarity of each of these elements, the learning process should become a transformative experience. While I have discussed this elsewhere (de Souza, 2004), a brief revisiting of these learning outcomes is pertinent here.

What is suggested is that, for each learning activity, the cognitive (perceiving and thinking), affective (feeling) and spiritual (inner reflecting and intuiting) aspects are identified and articulated. For instance, for a topic on reconciliation, the cognitive aspects relate to knowing and understanding what the word means, its history and purpose in the faith tradition and so on. The affective aspects of learning may relate to recalling any experiences the child may have had in relation to the topic and attempting to help him/her appreciate the feelings and understandings that result when differences are reconciled. It encourages children to be respectful and sensitive to the hurt others may feel, and perhaps to develop new perspectives of their own hurts. The knowledge and understanding thus gained may prompt an interest in discovering the role of reconciliation in the faith tradition and lead to the spiritual aspect related to the child's deeper understanding of reconciliation. At this point there may be a movement towards offering and/or asking for forgiveness, feeling some empathy with those who they may have hurt, or who have hurt them, or indeed, being touched to the extent that they feel compassion for the 'other' both in and out of their personal world which may prompt them to action.

If cognitive learning continues to dominate classroom practice and affective learning outcomes remain 'tokenistic', it is possible that children may achieve the complex cognitive skills desired so that they produce the 'right' answers, but this does not guarantee that the learning has reached a depth level which has the potential to be transformative. By articulating learning outcomes to address cognitive, affective and spiritual aspects, and then planning appropriate learning activities, there is a greater probability that the learning becomes a transformative experience which helps the child connect to previous learning, to their inner thoughts and to the 'other' in their school community. Learning, then, has the potential to have a more lasting impact, something that the children may be able to revisit throughout their lives and the learning experiences should provide those moments that both teachers and students remember as enjoyable and meaningful.

While this approach may be confronting to teachers, since there is pressure to find innovative and stimulating resources and activities to present and communicate the lesson's content which will seriously engage and challenge their students, the

enrichment of learning that follows should provide the motivation to continue. More activities that draw on the inner self and involve creativity, imagination, story-telling, reflection and contemplation, stillness and silence should be explored and trialled to evaluate their effectiveness in addressing the three dimensions, cognitive, affective and spiritual. Daily timetables and classroom structures should be investigated and rearranged to promote communication, connectedness and an integration of learning across different subject areas. Finally, teachers should be challenged to take a sideways step to view their classroom practice through new eyes and to become aware of themselves and their students as intuitive beings, thereby giving space and time to developing skills to access their inner learning which may be expressed as peace, joy, wisdom, empathy and compassion through connectedness to the 'other'. In the words of Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955):

The intellect has little to do on the road to discovery. There comes a leap in consciousness, call it Intuition or what you will, the solution comes to you and you don't know how or why. The truly valuable thing is the Intuition.

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*\*Dr Marian de Souza* is a member of the School of Religious Education, Australian Catholic University.

<sup>i</sup> Refer to curriculum framework for the *To Know, worship, Love* (2001) texts as described in the Teaching Companion texts. For instance, *To Know Worship Love, Teaching Companion, Year 9*. p. 20).

## HERMENEUTICS AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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In the context of secularisation, globalisation and pluralisation, 'hermeneutics' emerged over the last decades as a relevant discipline to address the ever widening gap and the lack of understanding between religious traditions and contemporary society and culture. 'Hermeneutics' is a challenging and complex concept. Traditionally it is understood as the theory/art of interpreting texts in reference to their original and present contexts. But what does it stand for in recent religious education theories? What are the questions hermeneutics is expected to address in the area of religious education today? Taking into account recent developments in philosophical, theological, linguistic, and anthropological disciplines, religious educationalists show in this volume the need to broaden the meaning of hermeneutics and to highlight its importance in the educational realm. In more than 20 contributions, internationally recognised scholars carefully diagnose the present situation and contribute to a new understanding of religious education based on hermeneutics as a new paradigm.