

PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATORS IN AUSTRALIA

The first opportunity for religious educators to pursue specialist qualifications in Australia came in 1973 when the National Pastoral Institute was established in Melbourne. Later the Catholic Colleges of Education mounted graduate courses to support religious educators in their need for an intellectually rigorous preparation for a discipline that was challenged to respond to the outcomes of the Second Vatican Council. More recently Australian universities, particularly Australian Catholic University, have extended the work in religious education of former Catholic Colleges of Education and offer qualifications in religious education from undergraduate to doctoral level. Australia relies to some extent for specialist religious educators on teachers who pursue their graduate studies overseas at institutions such as Fordham University in New York, the East Asian Pastoral Institute in the Philippines, Lumen Vitae in Belgium, Corpus Christi in London and Boston College in USA. Below are the reflections of three religious educators whose overseas studies for professional qualifications have enriched religious education in Australia.

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY

In June 1981 I arrived at Fordham University in New York to commence postgraduate study in the School of Religion and Religious Education at the Rose Hill, Bronx campus. By the end of August 1982 I had successfully completed the requirements for the Master of Arts (Religion and Religious Education).

Prior to my studies at Fordham I had been working as an Advisor in Religious Education to Catholic secondary schools in the Diocese of Auckland, New Zealand, a job I had undertaken in 1978 on the strength of experience as a religion teacher and a Bachelor of Arts from a secular university. This latter degree contained no subjects with direct relevance for religious education. In taking up the Advisor position I had insisted that after several years practical experience and learning "on the job" I would want the opportunity to gain postgraduate qualifications relevant to my role. Thus my arrival at Fordham and subsequent studies.

In 1981 my studies were important for religious education in the diocese in a number of ways. In the first place my being funded to undertake such studies was an acknowledgement of the growing status of religious education in Catholic secondary schools as a serious academic endeavour. It was an acknowledgement that those who acted as "advisors" to schools should have better qualifications than those they were "advising". Secondly, the timing of my study was an acknowledgement that the diocese would be under increasing pressure in the future to develop guidelines and support materials for its own needs. It could not, in the future, be so reliant on material

from elsewhere, particularly from Australia and the United States. Those called upon to write such materials would require a suitable background at a tertiary level. In the third place there were increasing requirements for the inservicing of teachers and a postgraduate background was considered increasingly necessary to devise and present the necessary courses.

In 1985 I began a position as Religious Education Consultant to Catholic Secondary schools in the Archdiocese of Brisbane. My Fordham studies assisted me as I undertook the task as a major author of the *Archdiocesan Guidelines for Catholic Secondary Schools* (1987) and engaged in the inservicing and resourcing of these Guidelines. As a major reviewer of the 1987 Guidelines and an author of the combined primary and secondary guidelines for religious education (1997) my Fordham supplemented by a Bachelor of Theology (Brisbane College of Theology) were invaluable.

In general, studies at Fordham provided enhanced understanding of adult faith education, adolescent faith development, theological and scriptural depth and coherence as well as confidence in presenting to and working with fellow religious educators. My thesis for the Masters Degree studied the impact of being a religious educator on the knowledge and faith development of teachers enhanced my research skills and ability to develop written text.

Graeme Barry is Principal Education Officer – Religious Education in the Archdiocese of Brisbane.

SAN FRANCISCO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

In 1996, I enrolled in a professional doctoral program offered initially in Australia with a compulsory summer term in San Francisco. San Francisco Theological Seminary (SFTS) is part of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, whose nine member seminaries form the largest centre of interfaith theological studies in the world. About 35% of SFTS Doctor of Ministry students were Presbyterian. Over 50 denominations are generally represented and the program had formal partnerships allowing students access to doctoral degrees in Australia and Korea. After successfully completing three units in Australia, I travelled to the SFTS campus in San Anselmo to complete three more units and a research methods seminar before formal admission as a doctoral candidate.

A great strength of the SFTS experience was the international and cross cultural dimension. The student body consisted of men and women from USA, Korea, Australia, Egypt, Africa, and Eastern Europe with teaching staff from USA, Korea, India, Australia and Eastern Europe. This multi-denominational Presbyterian College included students and teachers/lecturers from the Presbyterian, Baptist, Uniting Church Methodist, Catholic, Anglican Pentecostal, Lutheran and Church of South India. This resulted in a mutually enriching exchange and sharing of differing perspectives on a range of issues in seminar discussion and conversation. An example was a course taught by a professor of Social Ethics from Charles University in Prague *Breaking the Chains of Injustice*. The study of perspectives and documents from the Reformed churches, helped me to extend and complement my own knowledge in this critical area of social justice. My sense was that

the multi-cultural environment was reflected in the methods of teaching that were informed by the international perspectives that students brought. All learning had an emphasis on social analysis and stressed the importance of culture and context.

The physical setting of the San Anselmo campus was beautiful. The residential accommodation included appropriate family facilities. The ecumenical nature of the setting and the presence of other families on campus (rather than a celibate dominated learning environment) added greatly to the value of the time. The hospitality of both staff and students is an abiding memory. Upon reflection there were definite advantages of studying with a cohort of other Australians. Our meetings and get togethers, both formal and informal, allowed significant opportunities for debriefing and consolidation of many experiences.

While the material covered in courses was enriching, it strengthened my confidence in the value of our own Australian religious education. A colleague at Australian Catholic University used to say jokingly about Americans "they should be coming here to learn about RE" and I sensed he was right. The content and standard of units was comparable to that offered here. I returned with a greater confidence in the richness and relevance of Australian religious education. Finally, the experience of studying in a multicultural and multi-denominational environment has heightened my own sensitivities in teaching my students.

Sandra Carroll is a lecturer in the School of Religious Education at Australian Catholic University.

BOSTON COLLEGE USA

The Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry (IREPM) is located at Boston College which is a Jesuit University in Massachusetts. The IREPM is a member of the Boston Theological Institute, the BTI, a coalition of theological schools representing a cross section of Christian denominations. Many Australian graduates of Boston College will have taken one or two courses in their program from member institutions in the BTI while in Boston. The following is a very brief reflection on the significance for me as a religious educator of my graduate study at the IREPM at Boston College. It includes a number of personal elements.

I do not have access to any official records as to the exact number of Australian graduates of Boston College. My guess would be that there might be

upwards of eighty to a hundred. A number of Australians have also visited Boston College for shorter periods of time or study, to attend summer sessions for example. Each of us would express our own version of the significance of the experience.

For readers who would prefer a more sustained and somewhat less personal reflection than the one that follows, Maurice Ryan and I published an article together in *Word in Life: Journal of Religious Education*, which we titled, *People and Places: Meanings for Religious Education* (1990, November). We wrote the article because we wanted to reflect on the role of our graduate study in religious education in the mid to late 1980s at Boston College. At the time the article was published we were colleagues in religious education at McAuley College (now McAuley

campus of Australian Catholic University). We described the genesis of that article as "a shared experience of people and places which we would name as religious".

In the later stages of the article we expressed a number of convictions that we had become aware of as guiding our practice as religious educators. These convictions included: religious education occurs in contexts other than schools; religious education is not another term for the word theology; the relationship between theory and practice in religious education is integrally connected; the relationship between teaching and religious education deserves attentiveness; the future of religious education requires partnership; feminism provided a lens for our work; to call our field religious education was an important break from naming it as catechesis, or religious instruction or evangelisation. I do not wish to elaborate on these convictions here but I personally remain persuaded of their continued significance both for my own work and for the field of religious education.

It is nearly twenty years since I studied at Boston College and over this time the context of my work has undergone a number of shifts. One of these shifts, for example, has involved the move from an academic setting to freelance and community settings for my work. Some of what I learnt at Boston College has enabled me to manage these shifts with theoretical insight and with creativity. At times, just as with the experience in Boston itself there have been periods of disorientation and reorientation in my work. Again, some of what I learnt at Boston College provided me with a compass for these experiences. It goes on doing so and nearly twenty years after my sojourn in Boston I continue to plumb the riches of my study while there.

Ideally I would include more extensive reference here to the personal/educational contexts in which my journey to Boston College was born, and some acknowledgement of the Australian educators and institutions that inspired and supported my aspirations to study and in whose footsteps I followed. The Catholic Education Office in Brisbane in particular supported me to undertake further studies. The fact that I had this support and that others had gone before me in the venture of overseas study in the field of religious education was not insignificant.

My own journey to Boston College (1986/87) began in Brisbane in the early 1980s. I had been teaching in Catholic secondary schools in Brisbane for a number of years and was among the first graduates of the Graduate Diploma in Religious Education program at McAuley Teachers College.

As a result of my studies at McAuley College I had come across the work of the North American religious educator, Maria Harris. I distinctly recall the impression that one of Maria's books, *The Aesthetic Dimensions of Religious Education* (co-authored with her colleague Gloria Durka), made upon me during this time. Certainly the possibility of taking a course with Maria Harris while I was in Boston was one among a number of persuasive factors in my deciding to study there. Over time, the experience of meeting Maria Harris and of taking courses with her at Andover Newton (a member institution of the BTI) and remaining in touch with her over the years have been of major significance for me both personally and professionally. Maria's books, *Teaching and Religious Imagination: An Essay in the Theology of Teaching* and *The Dance of the Spirit: The Seven Steps of Women's Spirituality* in particular remain touchstones for my life and work.

Sadly, Maria Harris died earlier this year. In his eulogy for Maria Harris, Gabriel Moran referred to the sacramental principle that was the central theme of Maria's writing, her speaking and her life, the belief that God is revealed in all the elements of ordinary life. For me, this principle is expressed most eloquently in one of Maria's articles published in PACE titled, *Holy Water and Candles: Catholic Piety and Religious Education* where she wrote "stones and wood, earth and fire, song and dance and sculpture and poetry, touch and smell and hearing and sight and most of all people – are revelatory of the presence of holiness".

Together with Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran the names of religious educators such as Mary Boys and Tom Groome will be of relevance to Australians who took courses in religious education at Boston College. Each of these religious educators has travelled to Australia over the years. Their work is known here, in the USA, and internationally.

In recent years I have worked with labyrinth walking meditation as an artistic form for the embodied exploration of themes such as 'sacred journey', 'community', 'pilgrimage', 'homecoming', 'sacred presence'. On a labyrinth the path meanders, takes one deep into a centre and then returns one to the point at the threshold of the labyrinth from which one set out. To walk, or to dance the sacred pathway of the labyrinth can be both educative and transformative. To associate the symbol of the labyrinth with the significance for me as a religious educator of my study at Boston College seems an appropriate association to make by way of drawing this reflection to a close.

Judith Keller works as a freelance consultant.