

Global Perspectives on Catholic Religious Education in Schools

Michael T. Buchanan · Adrian-Mario Gellel
Editors

Global Perspectives on Catholic Religious Education in Schools

Volume II: Learning and Leading
in a Pluralist World

 Springer

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of
Rev. Prof. Mario D'Souza, CSB
(1956–2017)
The scholarship of Catholic Religious
Education in schools was enriched by his
contributions*

Foreword

Just another Sunday in a church somewhere in Germany. A priest of advanced age stands at the ambo with his hands propped up, looking into his manuscript and reading the sermon. In the nave, there are a few believers listening, most of them also of older generations. So far familiar—at least in Germany and probably in many other countries, especially of the Western world. However, the scene, drawn by the German cartoonist Plaßmann (2018), turns surreal as soon as at a second glance some details catch the eye: all listeners are wearing headphones; at the edge of the scene a man is sitting next to the priest in a booth with the word ‘interpreter’ (Dolmetscher) written on it. Obviously, the audience is receiving a simultaneous translation of the sermon read by the priest. A fantastically useful invention, one might say.

The punch line of this caricature works because it plays with a widespread experience: In our times, religious language and notably the proclamation of the Church seem to need translations in order to be understood. And this does not only mean that—due to global migration flows—people of different origins, who very often do not speak any common language, come together in Catholic communities worldwide. Certainly, this is a great challenge in many places! Yet there is another aspect behind this snappy caricature, pointing to the far-reaching transformation of religious socialisation, which can be observed in many contemporary societies. Increasingly fewer children and adolescents grow up in the Christian tradition learning its language naturally as their ‘mother tongue’. If at all, for most it is comparable to learning a foreign language (Altmeyer, 2011). Hence, the proclamation of the Church as well as Religious Education is facing a translation challenge. If religious learning processes are to lead to a mutual encounter between religious traditions and their worlds and learners within their worlds, then a common language basis is a necessary prerequisite that often no longer exists. The task of religious educators is becoming increasingly like that of language teachers: they must translate the Christian tradition wrapped in a language of the past into a language of the present, lead pupils to a differentiated understanding of this language and at the same time enable them to develop a personal and experiential language for matters of religious concern.

This book impressively reflects the complexity and richness of such translation processes taking place in Catholic Religious Education worldwide. It is thanks to the tireless dedication and great care of the editors—Prof. Adrian-Mario Gellel from the University of Malta and Prof. Michael T. Buchanan from the Australian Catholic University—that leading scholars from all around the world have been brought together to form a comprehensive panorama. In 52 chapters, authors from 18 countries and six continents provide theoretical insights and practical experiences on what religious learning in Catholic Religious Education can look like, taking seriously the diverse translation tasks that religious learning is confronted with within the context of a plural world. In addition to significant theoretical questions, the focus is widely on questions of inter-religious learning and contextual sensitivity, which always raise crucial issues about how teachers can be educated and trained for such challenging tasks. In the end, all the different perspectives and approaches centre on a fundamental question that requires theological and pedagogical reflection: what does (not only!) Catholic Religious Education contribute to the education and development of young people so that their lives might succeed under the conditions of today's plural world? In other words, how is the empowering message of the gospel translated into an educational practice serving (young) people's needs?

Looking closer on the translation challenge of Religious Education, it seems obvious that translations belong to all religious traditions in both the literal and figurative sense. Quite naturally, they assume that there are experiences documented in texts and traditions from bygone times and foreign cultures, which provide at all times and even today a 'life-bearing ground' (Lk 1:4) being worth to recall. If, however, every generation is necessarily confronted with the task of re-fathoming the meaning of what has been handed down on the basis of present experience, then the question arises as to the criteria by which these re-presenting translations work. What is the difference between good and bad translations; or in the sense of the caricature quoted above: who grants his licence to the religious interpreter, and based on what competences?

The translation problem touched upon by these questions is, theologically, without any doubt, as fundamental as it is boundless. At this point, we shall only mention one thought that the French philosopher Bruno Latour expressed in a remarkable essay on religious speech. Being neither a theologian nor an educator, he nevertheless tells something elementarily important about how translations should work in the context of the Christian tradition. For him, it is fundamental that religious translation should not be confused with information or explanation. In other words, whoever wants to transfer a tradition into the present day must not reduce it to a content of information that only needs to be packaged intelligibly. Neither should he or she try to explain the 'real' message theoretically, e.g. through historical knowledge or philosophical concepts. According to Latour, both ways do not achieve the desired goal. What religious translation is about instead, he shows with an example (Latour, 2013):

Do a test: compile a list of everything said by the angels in the Bible, despite supposedly being tasked ‘with conveying messages’, and you’ll learn next to nothing about anything. The information content of those thousands of injunctions remains close to zero – unless they’re turned into clues guiding the erudite labours of linguists, archaeologists or specialists in angelology. This is because angels do not convey messages; they change those they address. (p. 32)

Imagine if the interpreter from the beginning was able to translate words that were merely informative or explanatory into words that changed the lives of those to whom they were addressed. The most important competence of the translator would then be to meet the demands of his present and of the people he or she is dealing with. A translation being good would then depend on whether it could reveal any real meaning for the present. Latour puts it like this: ‘The original is not in the past but in the present, always in the present, the only asset we have’ (p. 97).

It might be worthwhile to apply this thoroughly challenging idea to the theory and practice of Religious Education. Of course, such a Religious Education would still be about knowledge and skills, but they would need to be embedded into an integral approach that asks about the importance of all content for life. None other than Pope Francis (2013) has called it ‘the greatest danger’ of the proclamation to ‘hold fast to a formulation while failing to convey its substance’ (par. 41). And for him, this substance can only be translated into present by a community which ‘gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; [...] bridges distances, [...] is willing to abase itself if necessary, and [...] embraces human life’ (par. 24). Where in numerous chapters of this volume such religious educational approaches are outlined which centre consequently on the basic concepts of identity and dialogue, encounter and understanding, the path into the future of a theory and practice of Religious Education has already been taken which in a real and literal sense deserves to be called ‘Catholic’.

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Catholic Religious Education: Journeying On

Through the first volume of the *Global Perspectives on Catholic Religious Education in Schools*, we aimed to contribute to the building of a community of practice of scholars in the field. We hoped that together, we would embark on a journey seeking to further clarify the identity of Catholic Religious Education in schools, and through pedagogical discussion, explore means of being authentic to the Christian message. Furthermore, we wished the book to promote a process of dialogue both within the Catholic Community and especially outside the faith community (Gellel & Buchanan, 2015, p. 3). Four years on, these three objectives are still very much central to our goal. Through the response that we received from the community of religious education scholars and other interested parties, we were assured that the volume was responding to a real need felt by many. This spurred us on to embark a second volume of *Catholic Religious Education in Schools*.

Our invitation to scholars to contribute to a second volume was much greater than we had originally imagined, even though we were aware, that even if not formalised, Catholic scholars were already engaging a community of practice that fosters its own common language and that shares a fairly common theological basis. The call, inviting scholars, mainly Catholic, working in the field of religious education around the world to come together to reflect on Catholic Religious Education in schools, was purposely open and did not limit contributions to a specific focus. In this way, we wanted to encourage scholars to bring forward their projects, concerns and vision.

Just as in the first volume, the contributors came from all the continents. Sixty-four contributors hailing from 17 countries are presenting 52 papers that were all subjected a rigorous-double blind scholarly review process.

Going through the papers, we noted that the authors are grappling with a limited number of overarching issues. For this reason, the chapters are organised around five different parts, namely, Theoretical Issues, Teacher Formation and Professional Development, Pedagogical and Content Issues, Inter-religious Issues and Contextual Issues. Nonetheless, the reader will note that many of the chapters could have easily been placed in another part. Indeed, the themes that the authors deal with overlap each other and the organisation into parts is only meant to help the

reader to structure one's experience of this volume. While in the first volume a considerable part of the book was dedicated to contextual issues, in this volume, we purposely made sure to give precedence to the other themes. Thus, while the author/s may be reflecting on a subject or problem from the point of view of a contextualised experience, we anticipate the reader may reflect on the issue in relation to similar topics explored in different contexts.

The part dealing with the theoretical foundations of the subject covers less than a quarter of all chapters in this volume. The reflections in this part stem from both theological and pedagogical considerations. A considerable amount of energy is devoted by the authors to reflect on the religious education—catechesis relationship. In this regard, we note that the Catholic Church hierarchy and scholars have consistently debated upon whether religious education in schools is distinct from, yet complementary to catechesis. This discourse has led to a lot of palaver and new policies, curricula and textbooks that at times seem to be in contradiction with the official position of the Holy See (see Congregation for Catholic Education, 2009). Whilst acknowledging the myriad local and national initiatives and the many studies to address the issues, there has not been a concerted effort to come together as a universal community. Almost 40 years have passed since the initial acknowledgement made by St. Pope John Paul II in 1981 about the distinction and complementarity between the two areas (Pope John Paul II 1981). Yet, in the meantime, societies have changed and so did the context and the world in which the younger generations live. No one can deny that religious education in schools occurs in a very peculiar context. Paradoxically, while being at the borders of the faith community, with high proportions of its audience being non-practicing or non-believing, it is at the same time an activity that is very much at the centre of the evangelising mission of the Church. The tensions between positions at the extreme end of the spectrum of the debate are ironically represented by American scholars in the first three chapters of the book. Yet moving further on through the chapters, one notes that there is a will to overcome this impasse and to solidly ground the action of religious education in theology and/or the educational sciences.

Depending on the context in which they may be working, teachers are at the forefront of the Church's effort to offer either a religious education that is grounded in the Ministry of the Word, or in the Ministry of Diaconia or in both. The difference in recruitment procedures, as well as in the religious composition of the particular society, leads to variations in the religious identity of the religious education teacher as well as in the initial and ongoing formation. Once again, the differences are strikingly accentuated when one compares educational institutions in societies where Catholicism is a minority to contexts where Catholicism is rooted in a long tradition. Yet even in the latter case, there are complex issues stemming from pluralism, secularism and the ever decreasing number of religious and practicing lay faithful that need to be dealt with. Just as it is urgent to clarify the nature of religious education in schools, it is likewise crucial to define the role and stress the importance of the religious educator, maybe as a recognised minister of the Church.

However, as evidenced by the contributors, close to heart of Catholic Religious Education scholarship is the content and method employed in the subject. The two

dimensions are intimately tied to each other since the content chosen influences the method and the method is in itself part of the content shared. It is interesting to note how a number of contributors converged in a number of themes particularly on art and early childhood education.

In an age of globalisation very much marked by pluralism, this project wishes to stand out as a Catholic project, not so much because most of the contributors are Catholic but primarily because it endeavours to embrace universality and plurality. It intends to present a plurality of contexts, theological and pedagogical positions, as well as a will to include and to dialogue with non-Catholic Religious Education scholars. Reading through the contributions, it transpires that even though we live in a globalised society context still plays a pivotal role in shaping views, theologies and pedagogies. This becomes clear as one goes through the contributions from traditionally Christian societies that have become radically secular, or those stemming from a post-communist era society, or those coming from societies where Christianity and Catholicism, in particular, have a fairly recent history and where it is experienced as a minority reality. Indeed, regarding the latter, the contributions coming from South Africa and China are true eye-openers because they depict a reality that is not only marginal within the society in which they are situated but also at the fringes of the predominant Western-centric discourse on the Church. Yet, the power of Western theological discourse is such that it does not provide enough space for the development and strengthening of local, contextualised thought. In an age where all post Second Vatican popes have emphasised the central role of evangelisation in the life of the Church and who, from St. John Paul II onwards, have constantly reminded the Church on the necessity to embark on a new evangelisation project, it appears imperative that the communities in the Asian, African and Latin American contexts be empowered to develop their own theological and pedagogical discourse. The will to come together and to journey together is, or at least should be, a means whereby one appreciates how the rays of truth (see Second Vatican Council *Nostrae Aetate*, 1965) are also present in other cultures, not only in their knowledge and experiences but also and especially in their method of reasoning. Thus, it is heartening to witness attempts by some scholars and in particular early career to dialogue and to make use of the wisdom present in their world.

This diversity is further enriched through the plurality of pedagogical and theological stances that the contributors take. Catholicism is not a monolithic reality. This is also clearly reflected in this volume where the reader may encounter a wide spectrum of positions that may at times lead to tensions. Thus while some advocate for a rigid separation between religious education and catechesis, others advocate for a more faith-based approach. Likewise, the stances taken towards other religions or other Christian Churches vary from teaching about to an inter-religious approach within Catholic religious education to a total pluralist approach.

We offer this scholarly collection at a time when the Catholic community appears to be passing through a dark hour. This darkness is sensed especially through the scars and sorrow that sins against children and the most vulnerable have left, as well as the ever-growing divide between those holding fast to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and those who fear that Church doctrine is being

relaxed or changed. To be fair, this is not the first time that the Church is experiencing a crisis. Even a scant knowledge of history is sufficient to demonstrate that during various moments the Church passed through innumerable dark hours.

Darkness arises from the fragile nature of humanity. As a Church, we are continuously required to struggle against individual and collective demons. As scholars, one way of doing this is to come together on the way in an attitude open to the Holy Spirit and therefore in dialogue amongst ourselves, with our colleagues adhering to other traditions and with the wider Church.

Adrian-Mario Gellel
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