

# Chapter 1

## Contextualising the Catholic Religious Education Project

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In an era where globalisation has brought the contemporary world together in previously inconceivable ways, the impetus to find the means to communicate on common ground has contributed to a reorientation towards intercultural and interfaith dialogue. This has also led various policy makers to either implement a policy of a separation of church and state, resulting in either not providing for the teaching of religion in the classroom or the promoting of a multifaith approach in religious education that fosters social conviviality among people of different faiths. Within such a context an edited collection on *Global Perspectives on Catholic Religious Education in Schools* may appear to be confronting in contemporary times.

However, this endeavour is necessary both for the catholic community as well as for religious education scholars, teachers and those interested in religious education. Although the teaching of religion in the classroom has a long history, the development of religious education as an academic discipline is in many ways a fairly recent one. The developments in pedagogy, catholic theology and the human sciences, the widespread adoption of compulsory schooling, as well as the rapid changes in societies have contributed to the renewal of the discipline. This renewal has become somewhat more tangible through such initiatives as the Religious Education Association in the US and the Catechetical movement in the Catholic Church, both initiated a century ago. Furthermore, this renewal is also reflected in the developments that occurred in religious education in the UK in the second half of the twentieth century as well as the recent official Catholic Church pronouncements

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on the identity of Religious Education in schools (see for instance Congregation of Catholic Education, 2009).

Yet, one must not forget that the basic sources of Catholic Religious Education go back to well before the beginning of the twentieth century. Like the other Christian churches, the Catholic community treasures teaching as one of its core ministries (see for instance Eph 4:1; 1Cor 12:28–29; 2 Tim 2:2). Christ's commandment to make disciples, literally to develop master-student relationships, and to teach all nations (Mt 28:19–20) has spurred generations of believers to reflect not only on the content but also on the pedagogy of how to share the message with different audiences. From the very beginning, we find various examples of the intimate place of pedagogy in the life and mission of the Church. For instance, van den Hoek (1997) suggests that by the mid-second century the Churches in Rome, Alexandria, and possibly also in Jerusalem, a number of house churches actually developed into school churches. The school churches consisted of members who gathered around an elder (presbyter) who was also the designated teacher. In these school churches, the faithful met to study the Scriptures, to eat meals together and to celebrate the Eucharist. Both Markowski (2008) and Young (1997) point to the centrality of the teaching ministry in constructing a Christian culture. At a time when Christians were a minority in a pluralistic and pagan society, Christian scholarly and pedagogical reflection was not done in isolation from the literature and thought of the prevailing culture. This dialogue between the Christian and the other worldviews was already present in the process of writing the New Testament where one finds evidence of the influence of Hellenistic thought and theology (Pilgaard, 1997; van der Horst, 1994). For instance, in his Gospel, Mark presents Jesus as a figure who could have been easily identified by first century readers as an itinerant preacher of salvation common in the Mediterranean region (Pilgaard, 1997; Robbins, 1984).

By the second century, the Church developed a pedagogical sensitivity towards different audiences. Thus, we do not only find a catechetical itinerary for neophytes, and another for the maturation of one's faith but also itineraries intended as protocatechesis as well as a means of conversing, arguing and exposing the message to non-Christians (van den Hoek, 1997). A glimpse of the will to dialogue and to present a worldview that is different from the predominant one may be noted in the exposition of the teachings of Christianity by Origen to the mother of the emperor, Julia Mamaea, well before Christianity was even tolerated by the Roman empire (van den Hoek, 1997).

Consequently, a commitment to be authentic to the message received through the previous generations, but at the same time an openness to the worldview of the other as well as an awareness of the multilevel reality of constructing and sharing our worldview, may be found at the very basis of the theological and pedagogical endeavour of the apostolic and post apostolic church. Notwithstanding any other examples which may point to the contrary, it is contended that this is main paradigm that is at the heart of Christian theological and pedagogical reflection. Well before any 'scientific' discourse on psychology or education, believing scholars and practitioners, such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Ignatius of Loyola, Jean Baptist de La Salle and Montessori, developed, in dialogue with the knowledge of the time, the

pedagogical as well as psychological concepts and theories in order to facilitate the teaching ministry of the Church. Their endeavour would not have been possible were they not passionate about the Word that they received and their openness to explore new frontiers.

The germ that sprang out from the nascent Church has contributed to a plurality of good fruits. This collected volume is motivated by the same paradigm that moved elders and teachers in the apostolic and post-apostolic ages. In an age of globalisation where plurality of cultures, faiths and ideas is so evident, we wish this book to contribute to:

1. Further clarify the identity of Catholic Religious Education in schools;
2. Explore means of being authentic to the message received through theological and pedagogical reflection;
3. Be open to dialogue, first and foremost with other Christian scholars and Religious Education colleagues as well as policy makers and practitioners.

In our encounters with colleagues, especially during conferences, we were always struck by how Catholic scholars are easily identifiable through their particular stance in research. Yet there is still no systematic way for Catholics working in the field of Religious Education to come together to share and discuss. The desire to facilitate this coming together is not spurred by sectarian motivations. This would indeed be going against what it truly means to be Catholic. There is a need for scholars, church leaders and practitioners contributing to the field to share their own experiences, reflections, research, difficulties and hopes within a community that shares the same language. This is, first of all needed, because there is an urgent need for catholic scholars to become more aware of the different realities and expectations in various contexts. The presence of the church in different parts of the globe over the past two millennia brings about a richness of practice, research and expertise that is in urgent need of dissemination. School-based Catholic Religious Education is accessible to millions of students worldwide, not only Church Schools but also in many State schools. Furthermore, there is a need for various stakeholders to understand and rediscover the identity of this ministry within the Church. Context influences the model and type of religious education that is conducted in school. The place and understanding of Religious Education in the wider society and within the believing community is a contested one. Even though Church documents have been paving the way for a clear distinction between religious education and catechises, we still meet with many instances where the local magisterial often reflects a lack of clarity about the distinctiveness and at times the interplay between these paradigms.

To be Catholic means to embrace universality. This should influence the way we understand and approach knowledge as well as the way we relate with the world. Consequently, a second impetus that moves this collection is to respond to pope Paul VI's invitation to be truly faithful to both message and to students with whom we are to share it (Pope Paul VI, 1975, para. 4). This implies that we need to continue in our endeavour and commitment to reflect both through pedagogy and theology. To study and work in the field of Religious Education means to be conversant

with a myriad of subjects ranging from educational theories, to sociology, to psychology and above all the different theological and religious studies and trends. On the one hand, this could be remarkably stressful for scholars and practitioners alike yet, on the other hand, it offers the possibility of approaching knowledge, and life, through a creative lens. It requires scholars and those committed to religious education to be constantly aware of change and hopeful that our work with students will make a difference in their lives and their meaningful communities.

We trust that this publication may contribute to develop a community of practice among catholic scholars working in the field of Religious Education. In the long term, it can contribute not only to enhance and strengthen the mission of the Catholic Community, but above all it can contribute to strengthen the process of dialogue with the wider community of scholars and practitioners working in the field of religious education.

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