

# Decoding the contemporary religious imagination: Evaluation of media orchestrated images of life and the rise of 'consumerist' religion

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## Background and introduction to the presentation

### Professional background:

- Teaching science and religion in Australian Catholic high schools;
- Research for the government national survey of school religious education and for doctoral studies on comparative theories of religious education;
- Professional academic work focused on school religious education and contemporary youth spirituality; spiritual and moral influence of media; values and moral education.
- Extensive experience in voluntary youth ministry, adult religious retreats and community theology programs.
- Professional development programs for religion teachers in a number of countries.
- Teaching mainly in Masters of Religious Education programs; extensive involvement in doctoral research supervision.

### Main professional focus: School religious education

Nevertheless, the issues raised in the presentation are pertinent to other religious education contexts. Potential implications for different contexts can be discussed.

### Main work context: Teacher education related to religious education in Australian Catholic schools:

In the Catholic Church in Australia, most of the interest and involvement in religious education is concerned with school religious education. In Australia, with a population smaller than that of California, there are about 1100 Catholic schools which educate over 20% of the Australian school population (one in every five Australian schoolchildren is in a Catholic school).

30% of the children in Catholic schools are not Catholic. In the 10 year period to 2012, there was an overall increase of 1000 Catholics enrolled whereas there was an increase in 47,000 students who are not Catholic in the same time. The last Australian church life survey (2006) showed that about 7.5% of 16-20 year old Catholics are regular church goers. It may be more than that for children in Catholic schools. But it is evident that about 90% or more of the Catholic children in Catholic schools are not, or will not become, regular church attenders or part of a local parish. This raises questions about the nature, the focus and relevance of the current religion curricula.

Catholic schools are in reality **semi-state schools** because they are principally funded by the state and federal governments. However, much of the ecclesiastical discourse about Catholic schools and Catholic school religious education is not congruent with the schools' semi-state constitution. The presumptions in this discourse give the impression that the Catholic school is regarded as if it were a seminary or theological college – that is an exclusively Catholic institution.

**Proposed approach to religious education:** I consider it unrealistic and somewhat illusory to think that religious education can be used to turn young people into regular churchgoers. I also think that the idea of producing churchgoers is not an adequate aim for school religious education in any case. I would like to see purposes and curriculum for **religious education more overtly directed to the spiritual and moral needs of today's young people, no matter what their religious affiliation or level of religious practice.**

My own view has always been that while a core task of school religious education is to **acquaint young people with their religious heritage**, this is not enough. In addition, it needs to help them learn **skills and**

**gain knowledge and insight into how to negotiate a meaningful life in an increasingly complex world.** This means more emphasis given to **resourcing their human spirituality** and to helping them **learn how to critically discern the shaping influence that culture can have on people's imagination of what life is about.**

To illustrate the contrast: Whereas you might see the image of a priest giving a homily to the faithful as one icon for the traditional perspective on Catholic school religious education, now I think that a more pertinent image would be **St Paul on the Areopagus Rock in Athens dialoguing with people with no particular faith or sense of god.** Is the traditional view of religious education dealing only with a relatively formal religious agenda? Does a relevant religious education today need to go beyond this to address the agendas that are really affecting people's lives?

By comparison with the attention given to school religious education, the Australian Catholic church does not give a lot of attention to adult, congregational religious education. There seems to be an unspoken assumption that "we do all our religious education through Catholic schools" – even though there a significant number of Catholic children who attend state and other independent schools. Hence there is no demand for university programs for adult parish religious education or youth ministry. I think that the other Christian churches tend to give proportionally more attention to adult local community of faith religious education.

### **Religious imagination and religious education**

#### **Some background ideas about Imagination – related to the conference theme**

The following is a summary of the presumptions about the relationship between religious imagination and religious education that underpin the presentation.

**Imagination** is the construction of mental images and ideas of what *might be*, contrasted with present reality. Or, it might be a mental construction of what one thinks reality to be. It has freedom and creativity to explore new images, ideas and hopes. And it draws on rich sources of images and ideas from the past. Imagination is resourced by *memory* and *history* as well as by present experience, but is not necessarily constrained by them. Imagination can hold tradition and change in creative tension; but, entrenched imaginations can also inhibit change and can be a source of fear of change.

**Imaginative learning:** Individuals can imaginatively *identify* with others and learn from what it would be like to be in their shoes; and they can imaginatively *rehearse* in advance what they might be inclined to do in new or different circumstances. Imagination is therefore a process of trying to deal creatively with reality. And imagination can be a *pathfinder*, for 'testing the waters', that precedes and informs future decisions and action by the individual. Imagination can lead to innovation in thinking and acting, as well as informing conservation. Imagination can decidedly influence the trajectory of an individual's life. Actions initiated by imagination can later be judged or appraised as successful – or not; imagination might lead to failures. But much can be learned from acknowledging and 'owning' such failures – 'nothing ventured, nothing gained'. The imagination can fuel confidence in future achievement as well as instil fear of potential failure.

Imagination is the process through which individuals develop some sense of their own capacities and potentials. Imagination can have a *healthy* relationship with reality when there is a creative tension; and it can also be unhealthy – when the imagination is too disconnected from reality, it becomes delusional.

**Cultural imaginations:** Through imagination, individuals build up their sense of *social reality* – what they think are the factors and ideas that are affecting people's lives, whether or not this is congruent with what is really happening. Imagination is always referenced in some way to the *culture* that individuals have experienced or know about. Imagination can take on board what are in effect the *prefabricated imaginations* of life and the world that others have developed and projected into the culture. Appeal to the imagination can be a source of inspiration as well as an avenue of power over the individual – it can mediate freedom and a type of enslavement. Those who in various ways construct and project imaginations of what life should be like can have considerable power over others; hence the need to scrutinise the construction and orchestration of images and imaginations of life (c/f M Warren and R Williams).

**Religious imagination:** *Religion* is the imagination of life that makes special reference to the divine and the transcendent, as well as to what are thought to be the best ideals for what it means to be human. Religion is about the imagination of answers to ultimate questions about the meaning of human life. Religious beliefs can foster the imagination of oneself as having cosmic significance because of a personal relationship with the creator. Religious imagination is where individuals work out details of their own personal meaning and purpose to life, often in conjunction with the beliefs and practices of a local community of faith.

**Moral dimension to imagination:** Because imagination deals with what one thinks should happen or ought to happen, it has a *moral component*. Imagination is the domain where the individual's sense of morality is tested and evaluated. Imagination is where values are forged and where individuals work out what their commitments will cost in personal terms. Imagination is thus a precursor to moral action. What one imagines can influence the individual's sense of hope and it can be an important component of their personal resilience.

**Narrative dimension:** Values, beliefs and commitments can be embedded in the imagination in a *narrative* form; this is like one's personal *story*. Story has long been used as a cultural vehicle for preserving, celebrating and transmitting imaginations of life to present and new generations. Religions incorporate their stories into written texts, images and symbols and celebrate these liturgically. *Theology* is the imaginative exploration of the meaning and implications of religious beliefs and what is considered religious revelation.

**Media orchestrated imaginations of life:** In the 1960s, McLuhan pointed out how the emerging media could influence people's ideas and expectations about life -- hence the possibility of the exercise of power through media-orchestrated imaginations of life. Marketing, advertising, and political propaganda have all 'massaged' people's imagination, especially through visual imagery.

In westernised countries, a complex of commerce, marketing, advertising and media project images and imaginations of life in attractive and entertaining ways that foster a lifestyle revolving around consumerism. In this sense, because it affects beliefs about life, values, commitments, leisure and happiness, the consumerist complex functions like a religion. The transcendent has become the exhilaration of the existential -- living life to the full here and now; spirituality has become lifestyle; God's authority has been replaced by individuals' own personal judgement about what they believe is true and valuable for them.

**The consumerist complex conditions the imagination like a religion:** The decline of formal religion in social life is perhaps not best described as secularisation. Rather, many people appear to have simply changed their religion to consumerism, and in this sense they are living quite religious lives. Some are evidently bi-religious – maintaining some elements of traditional religious culture while at the same time evidently living out a religion of consumerism.

**Religious education and the critical evaluation of cultural imaginations of life:** A good education has long been thought to have an important critical element. It can help people 'interrogate their cultural conditioning'. In turn, there is a need for religious education to contribute to the critical evaluation of the projected imaginations of life that abound in contemporary culture. Religions need to foster this sort of educational evaluation in the light of their core beliefs and values. And religions themselves are also in need of evaluation.

**A critical pedagogy for religious education:** Looking at the potential shaping influence of cultural imaginations and cultural meanings on people's thinking, values and behaviour is a type of critical pedagogy. Such a critical pedagogy has a long history in Christianity. This is just a new name for the Jesus pedagogy, especially in the parables which were used to challenge people to stop and think about the presumed meanings and imaginations out of which they had been operating. And to see how God's view and what God values could be so much the un-expected, from 'left field'. And where did Jesus the Jew get these ideas from? He was following in the footsteps of the Hebrew prophets. They would call their people into account when the prophets judged they were not being faithful to the covenant – there was a need for fidelity modelled on the fidelity of the God of Israel to the covenant.

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## Web materials related to the presentation

Conference participants may access web materials that complement and follow up the presentation. Section C9 within a Masters of religious education unit called *Education in meaning and identity: Implications for school religious education*, covers most of the content in the presentation. This is available on either of two websites. No user name or password are required for these private ACU websites. Any materials and presentations can be downloaded. Scroll down to section C9 and there are links to the two parts that cover the topic decoding contemporary secular spirituality and the rise of consumerist religion.

The two web addresses are: –

<http://203.10.46.30/mre/636/646-2015.html>

<http://203.10.46.163/grrossiter/636/646-2015.html>

Participants may also be interested in looking over the content and presentations across the whole unit as an example of efforts within a Masters program to look into **new agendas** for religious education. While focused on school religious education, implications could be drawn for other contexts. Within the unit there are also links to chapters of the book *Reasons for living: Education and young people's search for meaning, identity and spirituality*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne, 2006, M Crawford & G Rossiter. You will see that this unit does not have the typical content for religious education units; it is an attempt to focus on real psychological/sociological issues for young people's spiritual and moral development.

Some participants may also wish to have a look at another example of a Masters unit that focuses on issues in the teaching and coordination of school religious education. It gives special attention to a critical evaluative pedagogy which aims at getting students to engage in an open, inquiring, research-oriented study of contemporary issues that affect people's thinking and behaviour.

<http://203.10.46.30/mre/623/index.html>

Another link illustrates the work of school teachers who were trying to model the investigative research methods in mini-studies that they would get their students to do – perhaps not with all of these often adult topics. <http://203.10.46.30/mre/636/623OnlineAssgt1.html>

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## **Questions for reflection and discussion following up the presentation**

What examples in your experience seem to fit the interpretation of contemporary consumerist religion?

If the consumerist complex tends to function like religion for many people, then what should religious education do about this – specifically religious education sponsored by faith communities – whether this be in congregations or in religious related schools?

How might a critical religious education provide people with opportunities to review and evaluate the stories/images/myths/values/imaginings out of which they are operating, to see whether they are healthy or not? Why is the question of having **balance** so important?

Identify what you think are the significant issues emerging from the presentation.

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