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A perspective on contemporary youth spirituality

An essential ingredient for Catholic school religious education

If one looks at the religion curricula in Catholic schools in Australia, all of which are diocesan based, the content is very Catholic and theological. They are framed almost exclusively within traditional Catholic religious meanings with special emphasis on the ecclesiastical constructs: Catholic identity, new evangelisation, mission and faith development. In addition, they give the impression that **all** of the students either are or should be regular weekly mass-attending Catholics. One recent bishops' document made 'increased mass attendance' a performance indicator of success: "Progress toward significantly increased attendance at Sunday mass, and deeper involvement in the life of the local Church by students and ex-students."[1] Many classroom teachers of religion have never regarded mass attendance as an exclusive aim, or measurement of success, for religious education.

The Catholic Religious Education documentation showed little or no acknowledgement that a large majority of Catholic students are not

1 Catholic Bishops of NSW and ACT, *Catholic Schools at a Crossroads*, Sydney 2007, p. 18.

churchgoing – figures from the 2006 Church life survey showed that about 7% of young Catholics are, or will be, regular Mass goers. Similarly, there is no acknowledgement of the fact that 30% of the pupils in Australian Catholic schools are not even Catholic. Much of the recent growth in the Australian Catholic school population has been with students who are not Catholic. In the period 2006–2012, the overall increase in Catholic students across just over 1,700 Catholic schools was 1,000, while at the same time there was an increase of 47,000 non-Catholic students. This suggests that there is a discontinuity or hiatus between the assumptions within Catholic school religious education and the real spiritual situation of the students.

Thus, there is an important need to recontextualise religious education in Australian Catholic schools so that it will be more meaningful in resourcing the spirituality of the majority of the students, while at the same time providing the best sort of religious education in the Catholic tradition.

The 'conservative' curriculum orientation in religious education is not in itself a bad thing; it is conservative in the good sense of 'conserving' the tradition; and this is important for giving young people access to their religious cultural heritage which is a birthright. This is valid, even if many of them never become engaged members of a local community of faith. All young people need an education in religion if they are to be informed citizens in a multicultural society. But, an exclusive, insular curriculum orientation in this direction is inadequate. It is no longer appropriate or desirable because it ignores many of the most important spiritual needs of today's young people who are searching to find a meaningful life within a very enticing – but challenging and problematic – culture. And in this search, they tend to ignore what the Catholic Church offers. Something else is needed to help address the different ways people construct meaning, purpose and value in life with little or no reference to religion. Religion teachers need to know how young people today both do, and do not, pay attention to the spiritual and moral dimensions of life.

A critical understanding of youth spirituality is a fundamental ingredient for thinking about what else might be done in school religious education to enhance and resource their personal spirituality, over and above what is done to educate them in the Christian tradition and in

religions generally. At the conclusion of this chapter, more attention will be given briefly to the reasons why a re-contextualising of the purposes and practices of Catholic school religious education needs to address youth spirituality. From here, the bulk of the chapter will be concerned with 'painting a portrait' of contemporary youth spirituality.

1. Research on youth spirituality

Within the last twenty years there have been a number of significant research studies of youth spirituality.[2] While there are young people who are religious, and whose church involvement is an important part of their lives, there is a majority who still identify to some extent with a religion or denomination, but this remains very much in the background as they tend to be preoccupied with other matters like lifestyle, looks, feeling good, new experience and generally trying to be happy. However, the research also shows that this is hardly different from the spirituality of their parents. "Young people from every corner of the culture… echo their parents' religiosity to an astonishing degree… Parents are normally very important in shaping the religious and spiritual lives of their teenage children, even though they may not realise it."[3]

The trends in adolescent spirituality are consistent with those found for adults and young adults.[4] Social researchers have also analysed

2 For example: the studies noted here by name only which are listed in detail in the Bibliography: Smith & Denton (2005); Smith & Snell (2009); Roehlkepartain et al. (2005); Crawford & Rossiter (2006); Hughes (2007), Mason et al. (2007); Engebretson (2007); Maroney (2008); Moore & Wright (2008); Kimball et al. (2009); Barry & Abo-Zena (2015); Ezzy & Halafoff (2015); Vincett et al. (2015).

3 C. Smith, M. L. Denton, *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*, Oxford 2005, Back cover and pp. 35, 56.

4 See the references to: D. Tacey, *Reenchantment: The new Australian spirituality*, Sydney 2000; D. Tacey, *The spirituality revolution: The emergence of contemporary spirituality*, Sydney 2003; P. Heelas, L. Woodhead, B. Seel, B. Szerszynski, K. Tusting, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Malden MA 2004; W. C. Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*, New York 1993; W. C. Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, Princeton 1999; R. Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the* 1950s, Berkeley 1998.

cultural influences on thinking and behaviour, that in turn affect spirituality.[5]

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to review these studies in any detail, the following will attempt to identify some key characteristics of youth spirituality and put these into perspective. This chapter is part of a suite of five publications that have drawn on this research in an attempt to explain and interpret how and why there have been significant changes from a traditional Christian spirituality to the greater prominence of a secular spirituality.[6] These publications suggest that studying the change over time is an insightful way of interpreting contemporary secular spirituality and the significant cultural factors that have influenced developments. The discussion will revolve around two diagrams that together attempt to show that for many young people (and adults) there has been a radical change in the way their spirituality is constructed and how it functions psychologically, particularly with respect to the role for religion. The first diagram looks at a traditional Christian spirituality (which still operates for some), and the second describes

5 For example the references: R. Eckersley, *Well and good: Morality, Meaning and Happiness (2nd edition)*, Melbourne 2005; R. Eckersley, *What is wellbeing, and what promotes it?* Paper published by the Australia Institute on the Wellbeing Manifesto Website 2006, http://www.wellbeingmanifesto.net/wellbeing.htm (26.06.2006).

6 See the references to: G. Rossiter, *Understanding the Changing Landscape of Contemporary Spirituality: A useful starting point for reviewing Catholic school religious education*, "The Person and the Challenges" 3 (2013) No. 1, pp. 157–179; G. Rossiter, *A Case for a 'Big Picture' Re-Orientation of K-12 Australian Catholic School Religious Education in the Light of Contemporary Spirituality*, "The Person and the Challenges" 5 (2015) No. 2, pp. 5–32; G. Rossiter, *Decoding the iconography of contemporary lifestyle: Towards uncovering and evaluating the spirituality in consumerist culture. Part 1. The context, the approach and the relevant literature*, in: *Education and creativity*, ed. E. Osewska, Warszawa 2014; G. Rossiter, *Decoding the iconography of contemporary lifestyle: Towards uncovering and evaluating the spirituality in consumerist culture. Part 2. Contrasting the mise-en-scène in medieval Christian spirituality with that of contemporary consumerist lifestyle: Sociological and educational implications*, in: *Education and creativity…*; and also: M. Crawford, G. Rossiter, *The Spirituality of Today's Young People: Implications for Religious Education in Church-related Schools*, "Religious Education Journal of Australia" 9 (1993) No. 2, pp. 1–8; M. Crawford, G. Rossiter, *The Secular Spirituality of Youth: Implications for Religious Education*, "British Journal of Religious Education" 18 (1996) issue 3, pp. 133–143; M. Crawford, G. Rossiter, *Reasons for living: Education and young people's search for meaning, identity and spirituality. A handbook*, Melbourne 2006.

a contemporary, individualistic, subjective, relatively secular spirituality. A more instructive, animated version of the diagrams is available for download and viewing on the web address http://203.10.46.30/spirituality/youth.html. As with all diagrams of this type, they are oversimplified and do not account for all the data adequately; but nevertheless they do convey some of the 'big picture' issues that need to be taken into account in religious education. Not all young people will fit neatly into either picture; but the issues identified may often be operative in their lives to a greater or lesser extent.

It is not a matter of thinking that the traditional spirituality has passed its 'use by' date, and that the contemporary spirituality needs to be 'baptised' and accepted in its place. Both of the pictures of spirituality have their natural problems and possibilities; both need critical evaluation. But at least the two pictures show that there has been a far reaching change in the way people acquire and construct spirituality, and how it may influence their lives; and it identifies issues that need to be addressed both in the Catholic Church and in its school religious education.

2. Picture of a traditional Christian spirituality (cf. Figure 1)

The purpose of this section is to identify an earlier historical marker of Christian spirituality that could be said to be 'traditional' in the 1950s in many countries. Vestiges of this outlook on spirituality still remain for some, even if their number is few. However, much of this thinking is still reflected in current Catholic school religion curricula.

Traditionally, in countries with European cultural origins, spirituality was identical with being religious in a Christian format: spirituality was equivalent to religiosity. Nowadays, there is a trend in divergence between the spiritual and the religious, such that some would see themselves as 'spiritual' but not necessarily 'religious'.[7]

7 See the references: R. Fuller, *Spiritual but Not Religious*, New York 2001; M. Crawford, G. Rossiter, *Reasons for living: Education and young people's search for meaning, identity and spirituality. A handbook*, Melbourne 2006, p. 179.

For a traditional Christian spirituality everything began and ended with God (top-left of Figure 1). God and then the Church, Bible and a comprehensive supporting religious culture constituted the **overarching authority in matters spiritual**. People believed with a sense of certainty about divine revelation and God's authority; it was as 'true' and as 'solid' as the ground beneath their feet. The Christian view of life was a **grand metanarrative** that made sense of it all; the individual as a **child of God** had a **cosmic significance and an inalienable value**. Being spiritual/religious was then a matter of worshipping and obeying God. Of many images of God, the picture of God as judge, rewarder of the good and the punisher of evil was prominent. It was understandable that the Christian life was sometimes perceived as a warfare (following up images from St. Paul) and that fear of becoming a sinner and the danger of ultimate damnation in hell were prominent; this was encapsulated in the notion of **saving your soul'**.

In Figure 1, the psychological dynamics of the individual are pictured in terms of three closely interrelated constructs: meanings, spirituality and identity.[8] The authoritative cultural religious meanings proposed by the Church were internalised, becoming personal religious meanings, including beliefs which are also regarded as a component of religious faith. In addition, the notion of faith that seemed more important was faith as a 'personal relationship' with God. You were committed to God and God was committed to you.

Usually the whole package of religious doctrines was accepted without question on the authority of the Church and God – even if some of them were difficult to understand and hard to apply to one's life. With a strong sense of supportive religious culture from the local and wider Church, it was relatively easy to identify oneself as being religious and an integral part of a community of similar faith. Those who questioned or doubted were readily marginalised and made to feel like outsiders or defectors.

The enveloping religious culture, even when a religious group may have been a minority in the larger society, strongly supported a personal

8 These understandings of meanings, identity and spirituality are explained in detail in: M. Crawford, G. Rossiter, *Reasons for living…*

spirituality. This was also the case in Eastern European countries when they were dominated by Communist governments. For Christians, their spirituality centred on religious practices – especially worship, prayer, and reading the Bible. Individuals not only had a clearly identified religious reference group, they had personal access to God through prayer. Christian meaning and purpose in life also had some reinforcing cultural parallels where the Christian history of Europe left its mark on civil society, art, literature and music. Religious holidays also were some indicator of the relevance of Christian culture.

The individual's experience, behaviour and moral values were informed by their personal religious meanings and sense of personal religious identity. As we know only too well, having religious beliefs and professing religious values does not always result in morally impeccable behaviour – that is the human condition. But at least the figure shows the Christian purpose of life.

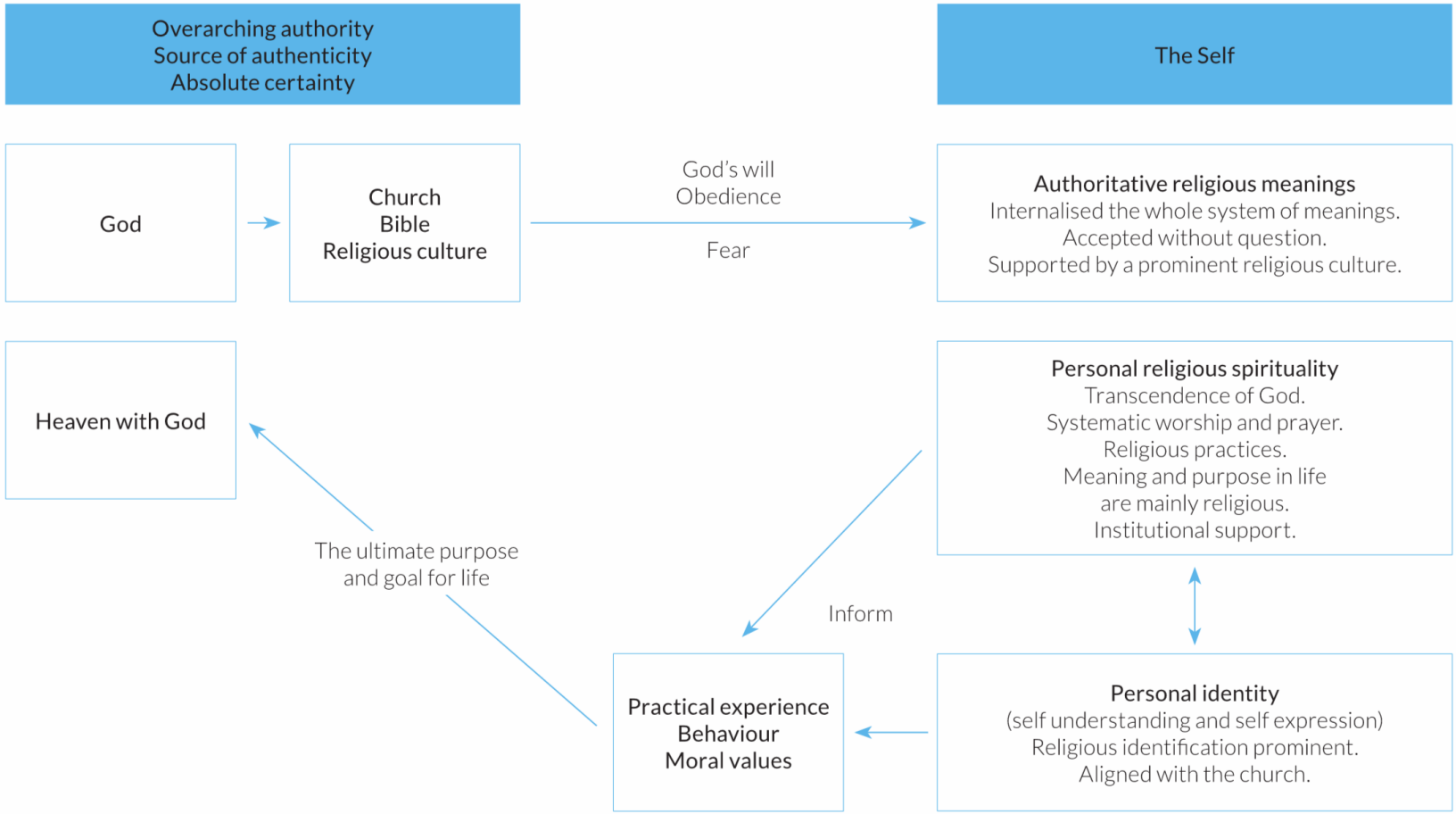
Also prominent in traditional Christian spirituality was the firm belief that **one's true home was with God**. This present life was said to be not the 'real' life, but just a 'preparation' for life eternal with God. In this sense, **Christian spirituality was 'other worldly'** in focus.

Just how and why things have changed, making it evident that traditional Christian spirituality is not as prominent as it was say 50 years ago in Australia, is beyond the scope here. A detailed consideration of the change process is given elsewhere.[9]

A common form of contemporary spirituality is individualistic (rather than communal), eclectic in the way it pieces together various elements from different sources (often little may be drawn from the religious tradition), subjective in that it is private and personal without much communal identification, and secular in that it has little or no overlay of religious cultural meanings. Rather than accepting a given set of cultural religious meanings, this sort of spirituality is either constructed personally

9 An interpretation of how and why secularisation occurred is given in the references: G. Rossiter, *Understanding the Changing Landscape of Contemporary Spirituality: A useful starting point for reviewing Catholic school religious education*, "The Person and the Challenges" 3 (2013) No. 1, pp. 157–179; M. Crawford, G. Rossiter, *Reasons for living…*, pp. 171–200.

Figure 1. Schema highlighting aspects of traditional Christian spirituality. See also http://203.10.46.30/spirituality/youth.html



or selected from a range of readily available options.[10] For some, there may be no interest in the word 'spiritual' at all; they may be much more concerned about 'lifestyle'; in such cases, there is an 'implied spirituality' in the values they hold and which inform their behaviour.

But what seems to be more radical is that the basis for validating spirituality, as well as for judging about most aspects of life, has devolved from attention to pertinent authorities (like God and the Church) to be embedded in **individuals themselves** – the individual has become **his/her own ultimate touchstone for authenticity in beliefs and values**. Smith & Denton considered that: "American youth, like American adults are nearly without exception profoundly individualistic, instinctively presuming autonomous, individual self-direction to be a universal human norm and life goal. Thoroughgoing individualism is not a contested orthodoxy for teenagers. It is an invisible and pervasive doxa, that is, an unrecognised, unquestioned, invisible premise or presupposition. US teenagers' profound individualism informs a number of issues related to religion."[11]

Schweitzer painted a similar picture for German youth.[12] It is evident that the situation is the same with Australian youth and perhaps also in many other Westernised countries.

Individuals themselves have become the supreme authorities for judging what is relevant to them, even what is right and true. Cultural postmodernity has questioned the previously held certainty and authority attributed to spiritual, religious knowledge and it casts doubts about the value of metanarratives. In this cultural atmosphere of scepticism, the truth and reliability of personal knowledge and knowledge of the spiritual seem to deteriorate; what is now certain is that there is a natural uncertainty to this type of knowledge. Hence it becomes very relative, and it is then up to the individual to decide what to believe. **Spirituality**

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10 This change is well explained in the reference: R. Eckersley, *Well and good…*

11 C. Smith, M. L. Denton, *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*, Oxford 2005, p. 141.

12 See the reference to: F. Schweitzer, *Religious individualization: New challenges to education for tolerance*, "British Journal of Religious Education" 29 (2007) issue 1, pp. 89–100.

now becomes personal, subjective and DIY (Do It Yourself) rather than both personal and communal as in traditional Christian spirituality.[13]

This relatively secular spirituality is hard to identify. Formerly, it was easy to see overt religiosity in prayer and religious practices. Now that the cultural religious overlay with personal spirituality is hardly evident, what spirituality remains is often an implied in values rather than overt in practice – it is like basic human spirituality. There are some, referred to in the research literature as 'spiritual but not religious', who actively seek out spiritual ideas and practices in constructing a spirituality that consciously excludes religion.[14] However, very few young people are in this category. Rather, most of them, while not being anti-religious, are just too concerned with lifestyle and other related issues to have any time to consider religion – which in any case is not regarded as of much relevance to them.

People with this sort of secular spirituality still have personal meanings and a sense of identity; but they are not coloured strongly by cultural religious meanings as formerly. This does not mean that they are not influenced by culture. Their values, hopes and aims for life are indeed strongly coloured by cultural meanings; however, they may not be willing to admit to this because they feel that they alone are authors of their own attitudes, values and behaviour – uninfluenced by any cultural meanings. For young religious people in the United States, Smith & Denton described the situation as follows: "Most [young people] are at least somewhat allergic to anything they view as trying to influence them. They generally view themselves as autonomous mediators or arbitrators of all outside influences; it is they themselves who finally influence their own lives. Other people and institutions provide information that youth see themselves as filtering, processing, and assimilating. Based on this information, they then make their own decisions for themselves. Or so the story goes."[15]

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13 See the reference to: M. Crawford, G. Rossiter, *Reasons for living…*, p. 215.

14 This description is found in the references: R. Fuller, *Spiritual but Not Religious*, New York 2001; C. Smith, M. L. Denton, *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*, Oxford 2005; M. Mason, A. Singleton, R. Webber, *The spirit of Generation Y: Young people's spirituality in a changing Australia*, Melbourne 2007.

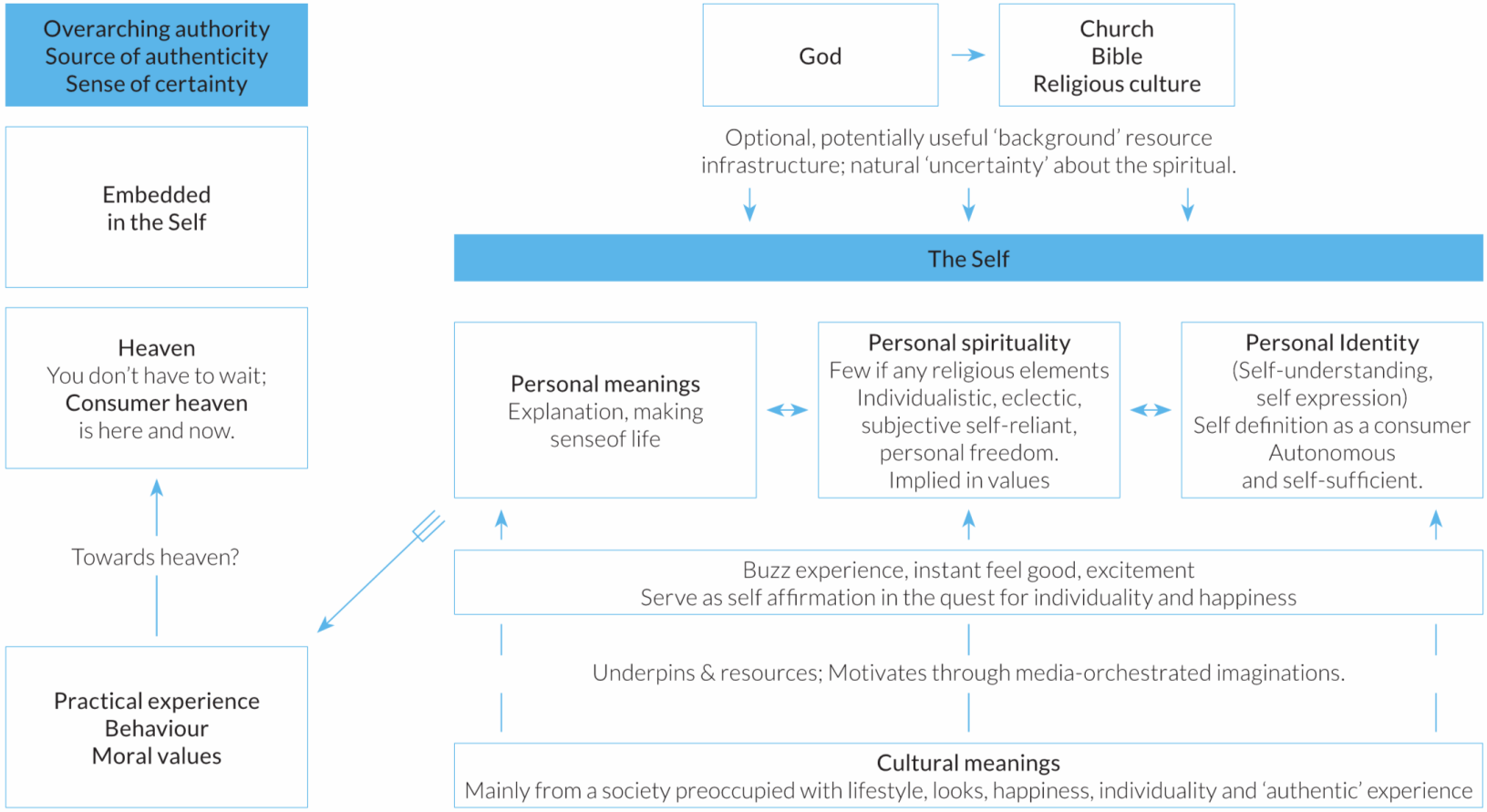
15 See the reference: C. Smith, M. L. Denton, *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*, Oxford 2005, p. 144.

The figure suggests that deeply embedded cultural meanings in Westernised societies are all about: lifestyle; getting ahead; being wealthy, attractive and happy; and in constant search of new 'authentic' experience. Being free and an individual are of paramount importance. If these cultural meanings are taken for granted, they are relatively invisible but therefore potentially more influential precisely because they are not identified and open to critical appraisal. In particular, the complex of marketing/advertising/media constantly offer orchestrated imaginations of what life should be like that are in all likelihood effective in suggesting what people should come to expect of life.[16] And hence they are potentially very significant for shaping people's spirituality.

Even though the notion of personal identity is somewhat vague, it is regarded as very important by young people. 'Be yourself' and 'live life to the full' are popular mantras. Developing some sense of authentic personal identity is an ongoing developmental task for young people; it is as if they were born with a 'congenital identity deficiency' and must work continuously to maintain a distinctive individual identity. At the same time, consumer industries exploit people's identity vulnerability by proposing that they can achieve their identity by buying the 'right stuff', often identified because it has a 'cool brand'. Hence people may be acquiring a 'retail identity' with a dependence on purchasing consumer products ('external' identity resources) and on the status or cachet they these goods seem to convey, while neglecting an authentic identity that gives more attention to 'internal', spiritual identity resources like values, principles and beliefs. An important ingredient in catering to the consumer identity mentality is the need for constant self-affirmation and salving of apparent identity needs. Hence people's need to quest for new 'buzz' experiences (with an ever higher 'voltage threshold'), feel-good

16 This issue is explored in detail in the 2 chapters on Decoding the mise-en-scène of contemporary lifestyle in the references: G. Rossiter, *Decoding the iconography of contemporary lifestyle: Towards uncovering and evaluating the spirituality in consumerist culture. Part 1. The context, the approach and the relevant literature*, in: *Education and creativity…*; G. Rossiter, *Decoding the iconography of contemporary lifestyle: Towards uncovering and evaluating the spirituality in consumerist culture. Part 2. Contrasting the mise-en-scène in medieval Christian spirituality with that of contemporary consumerist lifestyle: Sociological and educational implications*, in: *Education and creativity…*

Figure 2. Schema highlighting aspects of contemporary, individualistic, and secular spirituality. See also http://203.10.46.30/spirituality/youth.html



experience, excitement and risk behaviours becomes the psychological mechanisms through which consumer industries keep people's identity related to spending on the boil.[17] The sociology researcher Richard Eckersley identified part of the problem: "As consumerism reaches increasingly beyond the acquisition of things to the enhancement of the person, the goal of marketing becomes not only to make us dissatisfied with what we have, but also with who we are. As it seeks ever more ways to colonise our consciousness, consumerism both fosters and exploits the restless, insatiable expectation that there has got to be more to life. And in creating this hunger, consumerism offers its own remedy – more consumption."[18]

People's basic human spirituality is implicit in their lifestyle, and their identity is expressed in what they do with their time and money. But because this is not overt like religious spirituality, the spiritual and moral dimensions need to be uncovered, identified, and most important of all subject to critical appraisal by people themselves.

The sort of meanings, spirituality and identity noted in the below figure inform morality and behaviour. However, the figure, because of its simplicity, is biased in the way it identifies only potential problems without balancing this with the positive, noble and altruistic meanings and identity resources that can also be appropriated by individuals. How 'good' an individual's moral behaviour will be according to accepted community values will then depend on the ultimate blend of meanings and values that operate in their lives.

The figure suggests that few people today would seriously consider that this life is only a preparation for the next. The purpose of getting to heaven while avoiding hell is not likely to be a serious motivation for many Christians today – while still believing in God and an afterlife. Hence, there is the added inclination for people to be very existential and to live for the here and now. And a consumer-oriented society plays this tune

17 This issue is explored in detail in the reference: M. Crawford, G. Rossiter, *Reasons for living*, p. 129–170.

18 See the reference: R. Eckersley, *What is wellbeing, and what promotes it?* Paper published by the Australia Institute on the Wellbeing Manifesto Website 2006, http://www.wellbeingmanifesto.net/wellbeing.htm (26.06.2006), p. 11.

well. 'Why wait when you can have consumer heaven here and now – visit your local mall!'

While problematic in their limited scope, the two figures do highlight key issues for spirituality related to fundamental changes in the basis for judgment about ultimate epistemological and truth questions (**from God to the individual self**) and in the changing role for religion (**from dominant, authoritative source of cultural meanings about the purpose of life to an optional resource** from which one can pick and choose according to perceived value). Also foregrounded in the diagrams is the **change from a cultural/institutionalised religion and religiosity to a much more individualised and privatised spirituality**, where there is considerable variation in the contribution that formal religion might made to personal meanings and identity. In addition, the role of cultural meanings in shaping the thinking and values of people is made prominent. This has important implications for religious education where studying the origins and communication of cultural meanings becomes a central task.

It is considered that neither of the figures represents desirable, healthy, and religion-related spirituality. The difficulties they point towards need to be scrutinised when educating in spirituality.

3. A general spiritual profile of today's young people

This chapter concludes with a summary of some aspects of the spirituality of young people. While these generalisations do not apply to all, they provide a useful composite picture. The search for a conspicuous spiritual dimension to life is hardly uppermost in the minds of many young people. The major part of their psychological and emotional energy is usually taken up with surviving the perils of adolescence and negotiating the tasks of school and potential employment that, they hope, lies beyond it. They will be more concerned with what has an immediate bearing on their wellbeing: their looks and social acceptability, their friendships, entertainment, films, television, music, leisure and sport.

Nevertheless, a scheme like this highlights the various backgrounds that young people bring to their thinking about spirituality. They have

complex patterns of belief and spirituality acquired through life experience and contact with religious and non-religious views of life. This scheme was originally devised over 20 years ago by my colleague Marisa Crawford.[19] Its perceptive insight into the lives of young people still rings true. It was updated and refined in 2006.

3.1. Nine prominent elements in the spirituality of contemporary young people

3.1.1. Ideals

As regards direction for living, young people look for guidance in clear statements of ideas and ideals about life and its management. This does not mean that they are always ready to adopt these views. An ambivalence may appear in their reluctance to consider ideals proposed by authority; some may oscillate between being idealistic and not caring. For some, definite, black-and-white answers are needed; others can live comfortably with fuzzy ideas about life by focusing on the here and now and on pursuing a particular lifestyle.

3.1.2. Varied sources of spirituality

Young people draw from varied sources in constructing their spirituality: family, friends, personal mentors, their own religion, other religions, or secular movements. Their values can be modelled on prominent people, heroes/heroines and celebrities. Their eclectic spirituality can be affected by magazines, films, television and music. They tend not to see any so--called division between the secular and the religious. They see a spiritual dimension woven through life. Some actively search for meaning and are said to have a 'hunger' for spirituality. But the proportion that does this may be small; a much greater number are more concerned with lifestyle.

19 See the reference: M. Crawford, G. Rossiter, *The Spirituality of Today's Young People: Implications for Religious Education in Church-related Schools*, "Religious Education Journal of Australia" 9 (1993) No. 2, pp. 1–8.

3.1.3. Being part of a community of faith

If they are interested in religion, it will need to appear personalised, and not too prescriptive as regards morality and beliefs. The feeling of being accepted and comfortable within a local faith community is crucial; they need to feel that their needs and interests are being attended to, and they want to have a say in religious affairs. It is not inconsistent for some youth to want to dismiss particular religious beliefs and rules, while at the same time wanting to be part of the community. Some identify with popular Pentecostal Churches. Many youth have little or no interest in organised religion.

3.1.4. Group membership

Social and friendship groups often provide a psychological 'home base' for adolescents, that has a major influence on their thinking and behaviour, especially for girls; the 'group' is often their principal 'interface with the world'. Online 'chatting' and their inner circle of SMS have become prominent in group communication and identification. There is often some internal conflict between the desire to be an individual while paying the price of conformism for group acceptance. Some may see ethnicity as important while others will dismiss it as irrelevant. Group identification can underpin aggression and violence.

Rather than join specifically religious groups, they may prefer to participate in movements with social and environmental concerns such as Amnesty International or protest groups, especially those concerned with improvement of the quality of life. Yet there are a significant number of young people who do want to be part of a religious group. At universities, many but not all of those in religious groups tend to be active in evangelising activities.

3.1.5. The prolongation of adolescence

While perhaps more individualistic, more aware of lifestyle options and with higher life expectations than their forebears, young people face an increasing period of dependence on family before becoming financially independent and fending for themselves. This situation generates various social and

psychological frustrations that impact on personal relationships and group membership. It affects all of the following in complex ways: a pragmatic and existential approach to life; the urge to travel, often in backpacker format; sexual relationships, especially casual ones; partying, and the use of alcohol and recreational drugs; playing video games; career choice; sense of responsibility; capacity for commitment and long-term relationships; ambivalence about traditional goals such as settling down, marriage and raising a family. They see life like a 'degustation menu' – they can pick and choose from a variety of lifestyle options at will, trying them out. They have many more options than did the precocious 'baby boomers' and they are more ready to explore them. Tasting from an extensive range of sporting opportunities is also available for Australia's sport-hungry teenagers.

Some youth can appear to 'amble' along this path feeling reasonably self-centred and comfortable until something dramatic leads to a change in their circumstances or confronts their opportunistic approach to life – an experience that accelerates their development as adults as the world intrudes on their thinking.

The prolongation of adolescence tracks back to those of school age and affects their expectations. Some can adopt the extended adolescent lifestyle well before they leave school, regarding school attendance as an extension of their leisure time with some incidental learning.

3.1.6. Cultural plurality

Young people value the global aspects of popular culture with which they identify, especially clothing styles and music. But at the same time they are ambivalent about the extensive cultural plurality they experience in Western countries. They are puzzled about how to understand the extraordinary range of belief systems and behaviours in the culture and they may take refuge in closed social groups.

3.1.7. Social and political concerns

Compared with the politicised views of youth in the 1960s and 1970s, today's young people are generally wary of, and disillusioned with, political institutions and large corporations; authority is questioned and

not respected. Yet they do little to challenge the status quo, realising that they do not have much political leverage in any case. Rebellion and dissent are expressed through violent and anarchic lyrics in rap and hip-hop. There is a level of acceptance of job insecurity; there is a pervading sense that they will have to be adaptable in employment. Some will be prepared to barter a 'good' job for lifestyle options. Still, there is concern about unemployment and exploitative business practices such as problems with economic rationalism and the globalisation of commerce – irresponsible economic activity on the part of the corporate world; 'fair' trade rather than 'free' trade that masks the production of goods by child labour or sweatshops; casualisation of employment and the deregulation of the Australian workplace. Some young people will not worry too much about these potential threats as long as they do not appear to affect their lifestyle. For others, the gap between hopes for career and a successful life and the reality of possible unemployment is an ongoing source of worry.

3.1.8. Environmental concerns

In addition to the increased public acknowledgment of environmental issues, more awareness of these issues is fostered in school subjects such as science, geography, economics, society and culture, and religion – as well as in media awareness programs like Cleanup Australia. The young have an excellent environmental education but this does not readily translate into actual support by young people; for example, Cleanup Australian usually attracts only a small percentage of youth. But there is in spirit strong support for initiatives that are pro-environment. Some, but not too many, see the inconsistency between pursuing a consumerist lifestyle and being concerned about environmental and consumerist issues. Others are agitating in favour of ecological sustainability and in opposition to environmental degradation.

3.1.9. Anxiety about a violent society

While earlier generations were anxious about a possible nuclear holocaust, since September 9/11, Bali, and terrorist attacks in Britain and Spain,

today's young people live with a backdrop of global terrorism that has almost daily reminders. As a result, in perceptibly higher numbers, there is a hardening in prejudice against minorities and those who do not appear to embrace lifestyle and belief systems similar to what they think is the Westernised norm; in turn, this generates contrary antagonism on the part of minority groups. A positive valuing of multiculturalism and a multi-faith community has been diminished as the hopes for a peaceful and tolerant society recede. Other concerns contributing to anxiety are levels of crime, more people in prison, increased evidence of security measures and surveillance, and tighter immigration and refugee controls.

4. Conclusion

This chapter has drawn on contemporary research to set out a generalised 'portrait' of contemporary youth spirituality that might inform Catholic school religious education. This interpretation will not come as a surprise to many who teach religion in Catholic schools in Australia, particularly in secondary schools. There would be others, however, who could not admit that there is such a secularised flavour to the spirituality of the majority of Australian Catholic youth; some of the conclusions, like the way in which many individuals **themselves** have become the authority for determining what is relevant and even truthful for their meaning and purpose of life, they will find quite shocking. Nevertheless, it is proposed that any meaningful religious education needs to address the fundamental issues and problems in such a secular spirituality. Understanding and acknowledging the situation is a first step in this direction. This chapter will conclude by listing briefly six arguments suggesting why this comparatively secular spirituality of young people needs to be taken into account in both the content and pedagogy of Catholic school religious education.[20]

20 Elsewhere, as explained in the article noted in the bibliography (G. Rossiter, *A Case for a 'Big Picture' Re-Orientation of K-12 Australian Catholic School Religious Education in the Light of Contemporary Spirituality*, "The Person and the Challenges" 5 [2015] No. 2, pp. 5–32), some implications for the content and pedagogy of Catholic school religious

Identifying, acknowledging and interpreting the relatively secular spirituality of youth can enhance Catholic school religious education as follows:

1. It draws attention to, and hopefully corrects, unrealistic aims that are focused too exclusively on trying to get more young people to attend Mass regularly.

2. It highlights the discontinuity between the official Catholic religion curricula and the relatively secular spirituality of most students.

3. It reinforces the argument that an excessive and relatively exclusive focus on Catholic identity is not consistent with the constitution of Australian Catholic schools as semi-state schools funded by the government and the broader Australian community.

4. It is fundamentally important because it helps teachers and curriculum developers work with more appreciation of the spiritual starting points of their students and of their spiritual and religious needs.

5. It prompts religious educators to give more attention to interpreting and evaluating the way contemporary pluralist, digital, and globalised consumerist culture in Westernised countries affects people's spirituality. This is turn can help young people gain knowledge and skills that will enable them to better find a meaningful path through a very complex and confusing culture.

6. A view of religious education that aims at addressing the spiritual/moral needs of young people today in a problematic culture is not

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education are proposed. In brief, it suggests the need for a twofold approach – firstly a systematic study of the Catholic religious tradition, along with some attention to other religious traditions; and secondly, a critical pedagogy that can skill young people in learning how to interpret and evaluate the way meanings in contemporary culture can have a shaping influence on people's thinking, values and behaviour. Two other publications (G. Rossiter, *Decoding the iconography of contemporary lifestyle: Towards uncovering and evaluating the spirituality in consumerist culture. Part 1. The context, the approach and the relevant literature*, in: *Education and creativity…*, *Decoding the iconography of contemporary lifestyle: Towards uncovering and evaluating the spirituality in consumerist culture. Part 2. Contrasting the mise-en-scène in medieval Christian spirituality with that of contemporary consumerist lifestyle: Sociological and educational implications*, in: *Education and creativity…*) suggest that one critical area for investigation is the way that media-orchestrated imaginations of life are having a significant influence on young people's thinking about lifestyle: it proposes that for many people consumerism is their real religion.

inconsistent with retaining a prime place for a systematic education in their own religious tradition – Catholicism.

If religious education in Catholic schools is concerned exclusively with trying to acquaint pupils with Catholicism, painting a favourable image of the Church, promoting the Catholic identity and inviting them to consider ongoing Church membership, then this formula will remain ineffective and self-defeating – all the evidence I see points to this conclusion. Given the prominence of this view with Catholic school authorities, it is no wonder that religion teachers get stressed by their job – teaching secondary school religious education is a 'health hazard'! But on the other hand, acknowledging the spiritual starting points of young people is the best way of seeing how religious education can still be educationally valuable for enhancing and resourcing young people's spirituality, no matter how secular it may be, and whether or not they ever become practicing members of a local hurch. How to address this situation in terms of content and pedagogy needs ongoing consideration. The issues discussed here are a useful beginning point for such attention.

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