

Science's Loss Was Religious Education's Gain: An Appraisal of the Contribution of Graham Rossiter to Religious Education (Part 1)

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In a career that has spanned almost 40 years, Graham Rossiter has become a household name for those involved in religious education in Australia. His insights and ideas are considered pivotal in the development of religious education in this country and are well known and acclaimed in countries such as New Zealand, Canada, USA, U.K., Ireland, South Africa, Hong Kong and the Pacific. Rossiter has made a significant and lasting contribution to research, theory and debate in the area of religious education. His work and ideas have done much to enhance the academic study of religious education and the professional development of many educators, and perhaps more than any other, he has influenced the development of a teaching framework for religious education that is most suitable and effective in the classroom context. Rossiter's ideas have been extensively published, widely read and broadly accepted. He has made numerous contributions to the development of religious education via the many leadership roles he has undertaken and he has been greatly received when presenting to conferences and workshops across Australia and the globe. His extensive experience, expertise and wisdom are well known, respected and admired and his contributions to religious education are considered highly influential and in many ways groundbreaking. No Australian could claim to have contributed so much to the development of religious education theory and practice as Graham Rossiter.

Rossiter has always been very interested in the quest for meaning, identity and spirituality in young people and in the contribution schools can make to their religious, spiritual and moral development. At the heart of Rossiter's work has been a desire to identify and articulate those principles and practices that underpin the most effective model of school based religious education to support and nurture young people through this formative and challenging time in their lives. A cornerstones of his work and undeniably one of his most significant insights is the influence that context has on the nature, role and effectiveness of religious education. Rossiter has the ability to study a context and make insightful observations and diagnosis about the issues that arise in that setting. His work takes serious account of the experience of teachers and his responses reflect wise interpretation of the possibilities and limitations of classroom religious education. As a result of this his work has won credibility with both theorists and practitioners alike.

While his 1981 publication, *Religious Education in Australian Schools* and his doctoral research concluded in 1983 were concerned with analysis of religious education across the spectrum of educational settings in government and independent schools, most of his reflections and conclusions relate primarily to religious education in confessional settings with a particular emphasis on Catholic Schools. His extensive research and groundbreaking writings have been influential in bringing about a paradigm shift in understanding school religious education and the way schools can most effectively bring this process to life.

Inauspicious Beginnings

While a prodigious writer, Graham Rossiter's writing career had quite inauspicious beginnings. While at school at the bottom of his first Year 11 essay his teacher wrote "This reads like a third rate politician's first speech!" Rossiter acknowledged that he was not the most naturally talented creative writer and that he would have to work hard to master this craft. And that he did! At the age of 20 he published his first article on ecumenism in the light of the first sessions of the Second Vatican Council. A significant influence on him at that time was the noted Australian educator Brother George Columba Davy. He continued writing and learnt many valuable, although somewhat painful, lessons revising and polishing his two honours year research theses when studying Biology at the University of Sydney in the early 1960s. One of his thesis supervisors was insistent on the need to write accurately and articulately. It was during this time he developed the high level of detail and precision in research and writing that he would bring to academic work throughout his career. No doubt there are a number of research students in moral and religious education in Australia who will have felt that some of this punishment has been revisited on them!

Interestingly, in 1967 Graham Rossiter became one of the few world experts on cardiovascular dynamics and neuromuscular cough reflexes in sharks, and on the early hatching and larval behaviour of obscure marine parasites in the Australian seas. One of the cunjevoi parasites living in Sydney harbour that Rossiter discovered and was instrumental in naming is the crustacean *Haplostomella Australiensis*! Its early larval behaviour and that of another crustacean parasite he found living in the gills of sharks were so different from what was previously thought typical of crustaceans worldwide that these animals, as far as marine crustaceans go, were more unusual, and hence more distinctively Australian than the Koala and Platypus. Rossiter's biology research resulted in a number of publications in an academic journal of biology. But then, how many people are really interested in obscure marine parasites or in what happens in shark brains when they cough! Science's loss was religious education's gain as he turned from this research to a career as an educator in Catholic schools.

As a writer and a reflective thinker, Rossiter has learnt much from his long-term friendship with Professor Charles Birch. Following up their association in the University of Sydney's School of Biological Sciences in the 1960s, they worked together in 1975 writing biology texts for senior school students in New South Wales. Birch helped him see that he tended to write "like a good structural engineer – all of the sentences were of sound grammatical structure, but they were like skyscrapers!" Birch encouraged him to write with greater simplicity and clarity. A simpler structure and shorter sentences could convey complex meanings more effectively. Rossiter admits that he still struggles with this, and only his computer keyboard could testify to the deliberations that go into each sentence and the polishing of final texts for publication. Birch, now in his eighties, still meets periodically with Rossiter on a social basis.

The Dynamics of Retreats

The book, *Beyond the Classroom: New Approaches to Personal Development and Religious Education*, published in 1978, reflected Rossiter's expertise and special interest in the conduct of

youth retreats. This book resulted from work on an Innovations Grant from the Australian Schools Commission. He often remarked that he was much better at conducting retreats than he was at teaching religion, even though it would be in the classroom teaching of religion that he would make a most significant academic contribution in the future.

The significance of youth retreats in the religious education of young people is well documented in the work of Marcellin Flynn (1975, 1985) and others. Of particular note is the positive nature of the feedback of young people about these experiences. Rossiter's work explored in detail the psychological dynamics at work when students are involved in a live-in retreat experience away from the school site and how the favourable community climate and the enjoyable social interaction create an excellent opportunity for personal discussions, reflection, prayer and liturgy. Rossiter derived two distinct insights from his involvement in the design and conduct of these experiences and his reflections on the high degree of success they were awarded by those who participated in them. Firstly, he interpreted the power of, the importance of, and the responsibility that came with, the emotionality that was a key dimension of retreats. It was central to their psychological dynamics. However it needed to be considered as one dimension that contributed to the overall educational value of the experience. When the emotion is the by-product of an educational activity or when it is an integral part of a learning experience then this would seem natural and appropriate enough in an educational setting because there is a natural emotional component to holistic learning. The emotional high that is a part of these experiences should not become the primary aim of the experience. Rossiter pointed out that the emotional component of the retreat needed to be put into a larger perspective; students needed to understand why so much emotion was generated on retreats; and they needed to take home reflections on personal development, beliefs and spirituality that might have an enduring effect beyond the fading emotional hype.

The second insight would prove very significant for the future of religious education in this country and beyond. These experiences around emotionality and the positive feedback about retreats led him to consider the role that context plays in the appropriateness and effectiveness of various learning experiences in classroom religious education and, in what ways could classroom religious education most effectively contribute to the faith development of young people. The questions generated by these reflections would form the basis of more than twenty years of research and debate.

Research on Religious Education

Graham Rossiter won an Australian Postgraduate Award Scholarship for doctoral research in religious education at Macquarie University in 1977. However, before he was able to commence his studies he was seconded to the Commonwealth Curriculum Development Centre in Canberra on behalf of the Sydney Catholic Education Office to work on the Centre's Religious Education Project. This was a most significant period for Rossiter's development as a scholar in the area of religious education. The Curriculum Development Centre's Religious Education Project was devised and led by him and the monumental two volume set of findings titled *Religious Education in Australian Schools* (1981) were produced in the amazingly short space of 18 months.

This publication, even more than twenty five years on, remains the single most definitive study of religious education in Australian schools ever undertaken. As well as describing and interpreting the theory and practice of religious education in different school contexts in Australia, it also addresses some of the fundamental issues surrounding the nature, role and delivery of classroom religious education. Evident in its structure and content is the insightful importance that Rossiter's research applies to the exploration, classification and differentiation of the terminology and language used to identify the processes, and name the experiences, that take place under the banner of religious education. His attention to detail in this area provided a level of clarity in understanding that previously had not been articulated in relation to religious education. In 1982 the Research Editor of the North American journal *Religious Education* (1982, p. 452), Dr John H Peatling, selected Rossiter's work *Religious Education in Australian Schools* (1981) for the Sam Gamgee Award for Surprising Service to Religious Education through Research. It is worth noting that another winner of this award was one James W. Fowler for his 1981 work titled *Stages Of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*.

In his foreword to *Teaching Religion in the Secondary School: Theory and Practice* (1985, p. vii) eminent United States religious education scholar Gabriel Moran highlighted the importance of Graham Rossiter's research and writing to the development of theory in the area religious education,

Australian educator Graham Rossiter is one of the few people around the world who has made substantial contribution to a theory of Religious Education. [He speaks] to the universal problem from an Australian perspective. Few people in the United States are accustomed to reading Australian literature, but in an area such as Religious Education, we might be missing something.

The Curriculum Development Centre Project changed significantly the doctoral research proposal that Rossiter had been working on. Originally he had proposed an empirical study of young people's attitudes to religious education. However, he changed this to a philosophical analysis and interpretation of contemporary theory in religious education. While *Religious Education in Australian Schools* (1981) provided a snapshot of practice across the spectrum of educational settings, his doctorate used religious education in Catholic Schools as the point of comparison with religious studies courses offered in government schools. He preferred to undertake this study in Australia as this provided a better perspective on comparative theory than would have been the case if he worked in particular overseas universities such as Boston College, University of Lancaster or University of Birmingham, where there were established normative views of what religious education should be like. His supervisors at Macquarie University, Deer and Kleinig, were not familiar with religious education, but they supervised the research with expertise in curriculum development and the philosophy of education. The PhD research gave Rossiter the opportunity to read practically everything available at the time on religious education and from his learnings he distilled a practical vision for religious education. In the words of Professor David Steward former Dean of the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California (2002),

Rossiter's PhD dissertation (1984), which undertook the first systematic comparison between theory for Religious Education in the new state Religious Studies courses and theory for denominational school Religious Education in the Australian context, with the example of Catholic schools, still remains the definitive work on interrelationships between these two 'forms' of Religious Education. (Steward, personal communication, 2001).

The research confirmed the outstanding contribution made by religious education to student learning opportunities. However it also highlighted for Rossiter that a great deal of debate, confusion and uncertainty existed about the nature and role of religious education in confessional schools, and in particular in Catholic schools. A number of questions appeared to plague teachers as they struggled to develop an authentic approach to handing on the lived faith tradition in a meaningful and personal way, while maintaining the integrity of the educational principle that formed the foundation of classroom educational practice. These questions represented the tension that existed between different educational philosophies and they presented themselves to teachers as contrasting polarities such as; religious education versus religious socialisation; religious education versus catechesis; education in faith versus education in religion; and religious education versus religious studies. In simple terms religious education teachers were asking 'What should religious education in a school setting look like?' The articulation of a response to these quandaries would form the foundation of some of Rossiter's most valuable contributions to the development of theory and practice in religious education, however it was also the point of some controversy.

Setting the Record Straight- Education in Faith and Education in Religion

The Curriculum Development Centre Project presented Rossiter with an aerial view of the landscape of religious education in Australia. His observations highlighted the dichotomy that exists between the nature of religious education in secular schools and that in confessional schools. Of great interest to Rossiter was the value and insight that could be gained if dialogue was fostered between the two settings and about the approaches that take place therein. While there was a commonality of practice, Rossiter found it helpful to name the difference in emphasis that was placed on various components of the learning process and the desired aims or outcomes of the course of study. In his own words, Rossiter (1981, p. 5) chose to name the "two distinct points of view on Religious Education-Education in Faith and Education in Religion". He has however been widely misrepresented about the choice of terms he used and the meaning that he sought to convey.

Many interpreted the terms as approaches or theories that classified distinctive forms of religious education. Religious education in some settings was seen to contribute to faith development while in others it was presumed it did not. Implicit in this was the notion that teachers could choose specific teaching practices that would result in the direct development of student faith. Further confusion developed when Rossiter and Crawford (1988, p. 79) developed a suggested curriculum that promoted a more 'academically challenging' form of religious education.

Rossiter saw Education in Faith and Education in Religion as different perspectives that shared a number of common aims and practices. Certainly this interrelationship was clear in Rossiter's (1981, p. 5) thoughts as he wrote that:

One useful way of comprehending the wide range of practices in Religious Education in Australian schools is to take a perspective that considers practices in the light of both these viewpoints. It is necessary to point out that the viewpoints are interrelated and are not mutually exclusive.

Rossiter concedes that it would have been more productive to use terms that were less ambiguous or open to such misrepresentation such as 'educational perspective' and 'faith oriented perspective' or the like.

Collaboration with Marisa Crawford

In 1981 Rossiter joined forces with colleague Marisa Crawford in some professional development programs and in writing student resources. In 1985 they published *Teaching Religion in the Secondary School: Theory and Practice*. In 1988 they followed this up with a second publication, *Missionaries To A Teenage Culture, Religious Education in a Time of Rapid Change*. With Catholic Schools as the point of reference they set out to distinguish religious education from the many other ecclesial terms and processes with which it had been grouped in the past. These included catechesis, evangelisation, witness, ministry, religious socialisation, faith formation and so on. The linking and interchanging of these terms carried with it a number of presumptions about the students and teachers alike that were either unfounded or inaccurate and many of which were hangovers from an era in Catholic education that had long since past. Rossiter and Crawford felt defining religious education in this way would be of great assistance to teachers who were confused by the ambiguity of these titles and the expectations they carried with them. Both publications were a remarkable blend of good theory and excellent practice. *Missionaries to a Teenage Culture: Religious Education in a Time of Rapid Change* (1988), has become a classic in religious education, not only in Australia but in overseas countries like New Zealand, USA, Canada, UK, Ireland, South Africa and elsewhere in places like Hong Kong and the Pacific.

Perhaps more than any teachers' books, Teaching Religion in the Secondary School (1985) and Missionaries to a Teenage Culture (1988) contributed to the change of theory and practice for Catholic Religious Education from a 'devotional/catechetical' process to a more appropriately 'educational' one. And this was done without compromising commitment to the importance of the religious tradition' (Professor David Steward, 2002, former Dean of the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California, Personal communication).

Rossiter and Crawford's writings were extremely well received and highly influential within religious education circles. Their work was distinctive for a number of reasons. Firstly, Rossiter and Crawford's work was realistic. They showed a good understanding of the realities of the contemporary classroom within the Australian context. Too much writing in the theory of religious education either did not connect as well with the limitations and possibilities of the classroom or was based on experience of religious education in a foreign setting. Their writings also contain insightful diagnoses about the practical problems that existed for classroom teachers, the limitations of contemporary theory, the difficulties caused by school and education sector politics, and the spirituality, thinking and attitudes of young people. Their theory was

always clear and comprehensive and took into account what is happening in theory and practice in other sectors as well as overseas. Rossiter and Crawford's ideas fostered a pedagogy that was student centred, practical and gave teachers confidence in what and how they were teaching. It is of interest to look at the Years 7-12 religion curriculum that Crawford and Rossiter devised in 1985. Even though they would probably revise it significantly today, it is comprehensive, well balanced and engaging for students and it certainly compares well with any of the many school religion curricula developed since that time. As a result of their two books, Crawford and Rossiter were invited to conduct professional development seminars and address educational conferences throughout Australia, Europe, North America and the Pacific.

The Place of Personalism in the Teaching of Religious Education

Eminent Professor John Hull (formerly at the University of Birmingham for many years) in a salutation (2002) of Rossiter's work in this area commented that:

A key platform in Rossiter's theory of religious education, perhaps ultimately one of his most original and lasting contributions is his interpretation of the subtle, complex place for the "personal" dimension in classroom learning/teaching processes. Over the years, his articles have drawn attention to the unrealistic assumptions that are often uncritically implied within writing about "faith development", "faith responses", "personal testimony" and "expressed emotion" etc. By contrast, he proposed a substrate of open intellectual inquiry as the basis of Religious Education within the public forum of the formal classroom; and it is within this educational inquiry where expression of emotion and personalism find a natural, healthy and unforced place when, and if this is felt to be appropriate by students and teacher." (J. Hull, personal communication, 2001)

Through his work with the Curriculum Development Centre Rossiter had become acutely aware of the significant emphasis placed on personal reflection and response in religious education within confessional settings. He took up this issue in great detail in his publications with Crawford in 1985 and again in 1988. Rossiter and Crawford were quite critical in their analysis of the shift to a personalist orientation that took place in religious education in the 1970s and early 1980s. Numerous changes in the design, structure and content of religious education classes swept in on the tide of enthusiastic support for the ideas of American Episcopal minister John Westerhoff (1976) and his book entitled *Will Our Children Have Faith?* His work was based on a study of successful youth groups in parishes and identified the significant impact that personal and intimate faith sharing and the process of religious socialisation had on the faith development of the participants of the group. His ideas were widely embraced by school religious educators and it was believed that if the classroom setting could be altered so as to take on the style and appearance of a youth group setting then it was more likely to result in the faith development of students.

Efforts to promote faith-sharing introduced informality, more relaxed classroom arrangements, community building, a devotional orientation, an emphasis on process and group dynamics and a de-emphasis of content and intellectual learning (Rossiter, 1988, p. 67).

The religious education classroom was in effect de-schooled and the emphasis shifted from an academically oriented mode to one centred on personal sharing. It was hoped the spiritual and religious climate of the group would help inculcate beliefs in the students. The key point of Rossiter and Crawford's concerns arose out of their comparison of the context about which Westerhoff (1976) wrote and the reality of a religious education classroom. In particular they named the level of commitment and the degree of freedom of the students as pivotal in differentiating between the two contexts and the two modes of learning.

Crawford and Rossiter considered that there should be no inherent incompatibility between a personal and an academic study of religion. The two could go together. However, if the primary focus was on an open inquiring study of religion and there was no pressure on students to be personal and to reveal their own views, then the personal dimension would take on a natural and safe place within the teaching and learning process.

Distinguishing Religious Education from Catechesis

In his 1981 article, *Stifling Union or Creative Divorce? The Future Relationship between Catechesis and Religious Education in Catholic Schools*, Rossiter first articulated his concerns about the emphasis placed on catechesis as an approach to religious education in Catholic schools. Catholic church documents up to that time had tended to use the two terms interchangeably and a tradition developed that identified Catholic schools as the rightful home of catechesis. By definition catechesis revolves around promoting the sharing of faith insights by, and continued evangelisation of, believers. It presumes a level of personal commitment to the tradition and a desire to develop a deeper understanding of that tradition. Building on the observations of Gerard Rummery (1975), Rossiter set out to highlight that the assumptions made about the students level of faith commitment and the suitability of the classroom for catechetical teaching were incorrect. These thoughts were detailed even further in his work with Crawford in both 1985 and 1988. They identified that the natural context for catechesis was within a group of committed believers who were seeking a deeper experience of, and opportunity for, expression of this faith. It was akin to a pastoral ministry of the church. Religious education on the other hand took place in an educational setting and involved a group of participants that shared various level of commitment and engagement in a religious tradition. Therefore religious education would be most successful if understood as a process which seeks to raise the students' levels of awareness, knowledge and understanding of the beliefs, practices, and history of a particular faith tradition. It aims to develop within the student the skills required to reflect upon, evaluate, interpret, internalise and respond to this tradition in a way that is meaningful to them. Religious education is primarily a process concerned with intellectual mastery and disciplined inquiry through which it is hoped that each student may make a deeper personal response to God and develop a greater sense of the world in which they live.

Some of the most important outcomes of the collaboration between Rossiter and Crawford are reflected in their promotion of this understanding of religious education, which they called 'academically challenging religious education' (1988, p. 79). They encouraged teachers to develop a more study and research oriented approach to teaching religious education. One of the insightful components of their work came in response to claims that they had abandoned one of the key goals of religious education; that being the development of student faith. Rossiter and Crawford (1988, p. 82) argued that:

An intellectually challenging religious education is the best way of fostering personal faith (and educating emotions, attitudes and values) in the classroom. We reject the false dichotomy sometimes imposed by theorists who consider that an academic religious education neglects personal faith. Such a faulty view presents teachers with an unrealistic choice between an academic, secular, faith-less study of religion and a more informal discussion oriented, sharing of personal faith. Studying religion and sharing faith should not and need not be so artificially separated. In classroom practice, the latter develops more effectively as a natural outgrowth of the former.

Gabriel Moran (in O'Hare 1978, p. 106) when writing about the role of the Catholic schools in religious education supported this notion and went on to highlight the need for such a shift in paradigm:

The church has been more successful in providing community/inculturation than in providing schools for studying religion....The church is badly in need of schooling ... in which religion can be taught/studied, that is, critically examined and intellectually understood.

The idea of developing an 'academically challenging' course of study in religious education was widely embraced by teachers in Catholic and other confessional school settings. The personalistic approach had been seen by many to have undermined and devalued religious education. Rossiter and Crawford's work also helped establish two significant and lasting structural changes in religious education in confessional schools. Firstly, there was a significant movement at both school and systemic level to develop more detailed content orientated programs and curriculum guidelines and secondly, large numbers of students were given the opportunity and encouraged to undertake state based and designed courses in religion studies. As a consequence of this fundamental shift in practice, the status of religious education has risen significantly amongst students, teachers and parents alike. An expectation has also developed across the country that teachers of religious education should have formal training and academic qualifications in the area. Such outcomes can only serve to improve the quality of teaching and learning that takes place.

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