Editor's introduction

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This special issue of the Journal of Religious Education, is titled *Religious Education in Catholic Schools: International Academic Conference*. It is no surprise then that many of the articles in this issue were developed from papers given at a recent International Conference on Religious Education in Catholic schools. The conference was held six months ago when an international group of some 80 academics gathered in Melbourne to deliver papers and advance the academic dialogue on Religious Education in Catholic schools. The co-sponsors of this conference were the ACU La Salle Academy (co-publishers of this journal) and Catholic Education Melbourne. I should at this point declare that my ACU colleague Michael Buchanan and I co-hosted the conference and that I am a Director at Catholic Education Melbourne.

Although the conference was only recently held, it feels like a lifetime ago, given that the seeds of the current pandemic were only just germinating and pushing up through the soil of our consciousness at the time of the conference with some of our Asian colleagues informing us that they would not be able to attend. Little did we know then how profoundly all our lives would be affected and just how impossible it now seems that we held a conference where delegates travelled across the world to join together in such a rich and fruitful academic dialogue. Who knows when this will be possible again?

Although many contributors to this issue were delegates at the conference, the first article was contributed by Didier Pollefeyt and he was not a delegate. His article is an updated version of a paper that was previously published in Dutch. References to the Australian bushfires and the pandemic provide two obvious examples of the ways in which the original article has been updated. Less obvious is the challenge that only appears in this later version for religious educators to be wary of one-sided renderings of the tradition where students in Religious Education classes only encounter positive dimensions of life and where teachers deliberately avoid those elements that are more challenging or ambiguous such as suffering, sin, evil, doubt or anxiety. One-sided 'saccharine' presentations of the faith may be initially attractive for students but they become indigestible and incredible once the fuller range of life experiences open up in adolescence. Didier's reflections are grounded in a Christian anthropology that comprehends human persons as being open to meaning and always capable of moving into a broader horizon. He proposes a hermeneutic-communicative model of Religious Education that is premised on this openness but he

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acknowledges that the hermeneutic space is fragile and only kept open when teachers have the requisite skills and commitment to do so.

Rina Madden's article follows nicely on from Didier's and although they write from opposite sides of the planet, with Didier in Belgium and Rina in Melbourne, the trajectories of their research intersect at many points. Rina offers us insights from her PhD research into teacher professional learning and reflects on the Kataphatic and Apophatic theological orientations where experiences such as commitment and fulfilment (Kataphatic) and experiences such as vulnerability and responsibility (Apophatic) are considered. Rina reinforces the point that Religious Education curriculums tend to neglect human experiences such as vulnerability and ambiguity to the detriment of their students.

The next article by Toni Foley, Maree Dinan-Thompson and Nerina Caltabiano draws from the resources of hermeneutic phenomenology. Once again there are many references to the research that has been promoted by Didier Pollefeyt and his co-researcher colleague Jan Bouwens. Rich links are made between identity, interreligious learning, pedagogy and the mission of the Catholic school. The authors use the phenomenological categories advanced by Max van Manen to organise the insights they gained from the interviews and other data collected and analysed by Tony Foley, the study's primary researcher. Van Manen's phenomenological categories of relationality, spatiality, corporeality, temporality and materiality provide a substantial framework for analysing the lived experience of interreligious learning and teaching that we encounter in this article.

Diane du Val d'Eprémesnil is from the French speaking Université Catholique de Louvain which is sometimes confused with the Dutch speaking Katholieke Universiteit Leuven some 30 km away in Flanders, that has provided the home for the Pollefeyt and Bouwens research that has influenced the articles referred to above. Diane advocates strongly for reclaiming contemplation as an essential feature of Religious Education, describing it as 'a contemplative playground where students experiment with the sacred space inside themselves that urgently needs to be unveiled'. Paul Faller's reflections from South Africa on a new way of telling the Christian story through the lens of modern cosmology initially seemed like a world away from Diane's, but there is common ground when he argues that the cultivation of contemplative states through meditation should be at the core of religious education. Paul considers how a cosmic consciousness energises young students, drawing them 'deeply into the story'. Creation, evolution, Rahnerian anthropology, the Incarnation, sin, suffering and salvation are all considered from a cosmic perspective and the implications for various aspects of the life of the Catholic school are explored, including liturgy, theology, spirituality, leadership and the curriculum.

Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer presents key elements of her well-received conference keynote in her article where she explores from a more reflective and experiential perspective the oft forgotten question of who the academic 'is' as a teacher of religious education. Monique shares her own life experience as she moves from the 'micro level' to the 'meso level' to identify talents, qualities and strengths which are the foundations for what one *does* in life. At the 'macro level' the strengths and the personal experiences find expression in encounters with people and the context and world in which one lives.

Kevin O'Donnell's article pulls the lens out wider to consider how spirituality finds expression not only in Religious Education but in the wider life of the school and also in health care and pastoral care. His presentation begins by acknowledging many alternative definitions for spirituality and he then emphasises four themes he sees as being central in spirituality: language, love, alterity and transcendence. He argues that these themes can inspire, energise and recalibrate teaching and have a particular relevance for Religious Education where 'the experiential must never be discarded for a list of facts'. The article by

Tuuli Lipiäinen, Martin Ubani, Kaisa Viinikka and Arto Kallioniemi examines 'new learning' skills from the perspective of Finnish in-service Religious Education teachers. New learning includes skills such as problem-solving, empathy, creativity and collaboration. A mixed-methodology was employed in the study which began with an online questionnaire sent to 83 religious educators and semi-structured interviews were then conducted with 18 teachers and were focused on four themes: RE nowadays, the competent RE teacher, teacher education, and RE in the future. Thinking skills were emphasised by participants not only in their responses to the questionnaires but also in the interviews. Understanding diversity was also a prominent skill as were a number of others associated with new learning.

Stephen McKinney introduces us to the educational work of David Stow a nineteenth century Glaswegian educator. Stephen argues that Stow's role in the evolution of formal teacher training is not as well-known as it should be. Stow's vision was to educate the whole person which included the intellectual and physical but very clearly within a religious and moral framework. His vision for education was motivated by a desire to educate but also to socialise the poor working class and to 'create good Christians' and he developed a coherent educational system that extended from the infant school to the training of teachers. The final article written by Monica Dempster continues the theme of character education but this time in Jamaica where the recent spate of violence in Jamaica's schools has raised concerns about the value systems underpinning the social development of children and youth. Whereas some have advocated a variety of punitive measures for addressing these deviant behaviours, Monica holds that character education is a more sustainable approach to addressing the challenges currently faced in Jamaica and she argues that character education should be implemented in teacher training colleges with the hope that each trained teacher will be equipped to morally educate his or her students.

The articles in this issue come from a variety of places, not only geographically but conceptually and methodologically. They provide a very clear witness to the diversity and vitality of Religious Education research at this time.

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