



The Construction of Religion as a Subject in Western Australia: Monsignor McMahon (1920- 1950)

David Byrne[†]

The University of Western Australia

The history of religion as a school subject, as with the history of the school curriculum in general and the history of individual school subjects in particular, tend to be neglected.¹ As a contribution to that corpus of work, a study of religion as a school subject in Western Australian Catholic schools offers some interesting insights. In particular, the contribution made between 1920 and 1950 by a priest of the Archdiocese of Perth, Monsignor McMahon (1893-1989), is worth some examination.

Introduction

Western Australia is one of six federated Australian states and occupies the western third of the Australian continent with the capital city, Perth, situated on the banks of the Swan River. Within Western Australia, the Catholic Church, over time, established four ecclesiastical regions or dioceses.² Of these the Archdiocese of Perth came to be recognised as the main centre. This Archdiocese

[†] Address for correspondence: David Byrne, The University of Western Australia, M428, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, Western Australia, 6009. Email: dbyrne@aapt.net.au.

¹ R. Freathy and S. Parker, "The necessity of historical inquiry in educational research: The case of religious education," *British Journal of Religious Education* 32, no. 3 (2010), 232.

² A diocese is an autonomous administrative and pastoral area or division of the Catholic Church.

incorporates the State's largest population centre, the city of Perth. Leaders of the Catholic Church established the first Catholic school in 1843.³ Today, Catholic education is a large education enterprise with each Catholic school operating within a Catholic education system that encompasses the four dioceses.

Catholic education in Australia in the first half of the 20th century conformed broadly to a pattern found in Catholic systems around the world in several ways.⁴ That included following the same structure operating in state systems, using the syllabi prescribed for state schools in each particular state, and relying upon many of the same teaching methods used by teachers in state schools.⁵ However, Catholic education in Australia also had a number of distinctive features.⁶ Catholic schools were private institutions.⁷ That occurred because of a lack of state aid and a desire within the Catholic community to maintain an independent system of schooling.⁸ In turn, that led each Catholic diocese in each state, including in Western Australia, to establish its own system of education.⁹ Catholic schools were also staffed largely by members of religious

³ P. Pental, *Continuity in Change: The Journey of Catholic Education in Western Australia from 1843 to 2008* (Inglewood: Victor Publishing, 2008), 1-16.

⁴ T. O'Donoghue, *Catholic Teaching Brothers: Their Life in the English-speaking World, 1891-1965* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 95-101; T. O'Donoghue, *Upholding the Faith: The Process of Education in Catholic Schools in Australia, 1922-65* (New York: P. Lang, 2001), 71.

⁵ T. O'Donoghue, *Catholic Teaching Brothers: Their Life in the English-speaking World, 1891-1965*, 95-96.

⁶ P. O'Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community: An Australian History*, (Kensington: University of New South Wales Press, 1985), 240-241.

⁷ However, not all Catholic schools in other parts of the world were private.

⁸ C. Stuart, *Nurturing Faith within the Catholic Home: A Perspective from Catholic Parents Who Do Not Access Catholic Schools* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of Notre Dame Australia, 2007), 24; A. Carter, *Beyond all Telling: A History of Loreto in Western Australia 1897-1997* (Perth, W.A.: Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Australia, 1996), 49.

⁹ A loose network of parochial and order-owned schools, not a centralised or coordinated system. J. Laffin, *Matthew Beovich: A Biography* (Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 2008), 74.

orders.¹⁰ That ensured the existence of a cheap and trained labour force that could be relied upon to maintain the Catholic nature of the schools.¹¹

Regarding religion as a subject in Western Australian Catholic schools, in common with the situation in other parts of the country, several identifiable features had developed.¹² Known as religious doctrine,¹³ it operated according to a broad understanding of how the Catholic faith should be taught in Catholic schools.¹⁴ Three interrelated processes contributed in that regard.¹⁵ The first involved the actual teaching of Catholic religious knowledge and practices in the daily religion class. The second education process involved the maintenance of a particular religious environment.¹⁶ The third education process involved ensuring that the school year and the daily life and rhythms of the school were permeated by a pervasive religious atmosphere.¹⁷ Together, all three processes

¹⁰ P. Tannock, "Catholic education in Western Australia 1829-1979," in *Education in Western Australia* (Nedlands: University of WA Press, 1979), 144.

¹¹ C. Suart, *Nurturing Faith within the Catholic Home: A Perspective from Catholic Parents Who Do Not Access Catholic Schools*, 24; T. O'Donoghue, *Catholic Teaching Brothers: Their Life in the English-speaking World, 1891-1965*, 96; T. O'Donoghue, *Upholding the Faith: The Process of Education in Catholic Schools in Australia, 1922-65*, 71.

¹² M. Leavey, *Religious Education, School Climate and Achievement: A Study of Nine Catholic Sixth-Form Girls' Schools* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Australian National University, 1972), 94-97.

¹³ Archdiocese of Perth Catholic Church, *Religious Instruction: Report of the Diocesan Inspector and Syllabus for the Archdiocese of Perth (Western Australia)* (Perth: John Muhling, 1924), 1.

¹⁴ Rummery refers to the 'catechetical ideal', by which he means "religion is integral to education" and "penetrated all aspects of the formal teaching and learning situation". G. Rummery, "The development of the concept of religious education in Catholic schools, 1872-1972," *Journal of Religious History* 9, no. 3 (1977), 302.

¹⁵ T. O'Donoghue, *Catholic Teaching Brothers: Their Life in the English-speaking World, 1891-1965*, 96

¹⁶ A. McLay, *Women Out of Their Sphere: Sisters of Mercy in Western Australia from 1846* (Northbridge: Vanguard Press, 1992), 379-380.

¹⁷ For example: frequent, daily prayer; the daily life and routines of the religious; time spent in the chapel for mass and benediction; regular participation in retreats, sodalities, processions and other devotions. A.

reinforced, modelled and made tangible both the abstract and formulaic learning provided in the formal religion classroom.

Another identifiable feature of religion as a subject was its dependence upon the use of a catechism as the chief source and instrument for instruction.¹⁸ In Australia, that text was referred to as the ‘Penny Catechism’. Catechisms were used as a manual for learning¹⁹ and were the central if not the only text used in the classroom.²⁰ The content found in them was the goal of learning. Teaching relied upon rote learning and recall of content was considered important.²¹ The dominant pedagogical approach used in classrooms also relied upon a question-and-answer format that reflected the structure of the catechism. Moreover, the use of a catechism and its associated teaching methods tended to remain constant across different year levels or grades.²² Over time, it also became an intergenerational experience. Also, little was expected of the classroom teachers of the subject who relied upon a prescribed catechism text to identify the content to be taught and the methods to employ in the religion classroom.

From the 1920s through to the late 1950s, however, individuals and groups endeavoured to further develop religion as a school subject. Their attention focussed on the quality of teaching provided in the

Carter, *Beyond all Telling: A History of Loreto in Western Australia 1897-1997*, 176-180.

¹⁸ The ‘Green Catechism’ or ‘Penny Catechism’ was in use in Australia Catholic school. That catechism was approved in 1905 by the Third Plenary Council of the Australian Hierarchy and was based on the 1875 Maynooth Catechism. The Fourth Plenary Council in 1937 reaffirmed that decision. J. Laffin, *Matthew Beovich: A Biography*, 73.

¹⁹ P. O’Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community: An Australian History*, 242; M. Buchanan, “Pedagogical drift: The evolution of new approaches and paradigms in religious education,” *Religious Education* 100, no. 1 (2005), 21-23.

²⁰ C. Suart, *Nurturing Faith within the Catholic Home: A Perspective from Catholic Parents Who Do Not Access Catholic Schools*, 24.

²¹ *Ibid*, 18.

²² Different dioceses did develop various syllabi documents. Those documents provided teachers with guidance about how they might use the catechism to instruct students in different year levels or grades.

religion classroom, on the resources used by teachers and on deepening teachers understanding of the subject.²³ Some, during the first half of the 20th century, were cognisant of new approaches to teaching and learning in education and recognised that those had a lot to offer both teachers and students of religion. They also indicated they appreciated that dissonance could occur as both the teacher and the student experienced different and even contrasting approaches to learning provided across various subjects, including religion. For some theorists and practitioners, and increasingly so towards the end of the period under consideration, there was a growing sense too that the certitudes and authority contained within the catechism and use of that text by teachers in the classroom were becoming less viable than previously in a changing world. According to Massam,²⁴ though, “reservations about the catechism centred on its limitations for keeping children interested, not in its basic approach”.

While deficiencies were recognised, many teachers and students still continued to value the simplicity, clarity and certitude that came from learning by rote through the question-and-answer format of the catechism. Thus, it was believed, students would be equipped to “triumph in didactic debate”.²⁵ Others, however, claimed that when challenged or placed in a challenging situation, traditional approaches provided little guidance and left teachers struggling to adapt.²⁶ Amongst the arguments of those concerned were that the

²³ A common complaint made was that the methods employed were hindering the religious formation of young Catholics. G. Rummery, “The development of the concept of religious education in Catholic schools 1872-1972,” *Journal of Religious History*, 302-317.

²⁴ K. Massam, *Sacred Threads: Catholic Spirituality in Australia 1922-1962*, (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1996), 44-45.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 44.

²⁶ M. Ryan, *A Common Search: The History and Forms of Religious Education in Catholic Schools* (Brisbane: Lumino Press, 2013), 52-53.

catechism as a text was not well suited to modern developments in society,²⁷ education²⁸ and theology.²⁹

Responding to such concerns, attempts were made to construct a more appropriate text. However, arriving at agreement on how best to proceed was difficult. For example, in the 1920s the Australian bishops gave some consideration to the writing of a new text but were not able to come to agreement on how that work might be best completed.³⁰ Laffin³¹ argued that the “authority structures of the Catholic Church did not favour a national approach” because “there was no national primate, and individual bishops guarded their independence”.

Internationally, the first part of the 20th century saw “modest inroads”³² being made in the way Catholic Church personnel taught religion as a subject. Gellel³³ suggests that developments in certain places were driven by “the irreligious character of public schools, the religious indifference of parents and the advancements in the educational sciences”. From the early part of the 20th century the modern catechetical movement began exploring how best to address many of the issues Catholic teachers of religion encountered.³⁴ In response to those shortcomings, those seeking to

²⁷ A. Gellel, “Putting Catholic religious education on the map,” *Revista Pistas* 9, no. 3 (2017), 704-5.

²⁸ P. Devitt, *That You May Believe: A Brief History of Religious Education* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1992), 74.

²⁹ M. Ryan, *A Common Search: The History and Forms of Religious Education in Catholic Schools*, 62.

³⁰ M. Sheehan, “Some remarks on the catechism problems,” *ACR*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1937), 182; J. Laffin, *Matthew Beovich: A Biography*, 83-92.

³¹ *Ibid*, 86.

³² A. Gellel, “Putting Catholic religious education on the map,” *Revista Pistas*, 707.

³³ *Ibid*, 706-707.

³⁴ B. Marthaler, “The modern catechetical movement in Roman Catholicism: issues and personalities,” in M. Warren, *Sourcebook for Modern Catechetics*, Vol. 1 (Winona, Minn: Saint Mary's Press, 1983), 275-289; M. Trainor, *Nurturing the Spirit: Faith Education within Australian Catholicism*, (North Blackburn, Vic: Collins Dove, 1991); C. Sultana, “Catechesis in Europe during the 20th century,” *Sophia - Paideia. Sapienza e Educazione (Sir 1, 27)*, *Miscellanea Di Studi Offerti in Onore Del Prof. Mario Cimosà*, (Roma, 2012); M. Ryan, *A Common*

renew catechetics focused on the child and his or her needs as a learner. That focus led them to pay attention to the work of such educators as Johann Herbart, John Dewey, and Maria Montessori.³⁵

Diocesan Inspector of Religious Doctrine

In the process of establishing religion as a subject in Western Australian Catholic schools, the Archbishop of Perth, Archbishop Clune (1864–1935), appointed a newly ordained priest from Ireland, John Thomas McMahon (1893-1989), to be the Archdiocese’s first Diocesan Inspector of Religious Doctrine. Subsequently, Rev. McMahon was appointed to several key education positions within the Archdiocese of Perth, specifically, Diocesan Inspector of Religious Doctrine³⁶ (1921-1941) and Director of Catholic Education and Chairman of the Diocesan Council of Education (1941-1950).

Rev. McMahon was not only a cleric but also a university-trained educator.³⁷ In his role he undertook several tasks. He regularly visited Catholic schools and parishes throughout the Archdiocese where, as inspector,³⁸ he met students and teachers, conducted examinations of student learning and counselled teachers of religious doctrine. He also prepared written reports for his superior, the Archbishop of Perth. Some of those reports he had published for

Search: The History and Forms of Religious Education in Catholic Schools; A. Gellel, “Putting Catholic religious education on the map”, *Revista Pistas*.

³⁵ P. Devitt, *That You May Believe: A Brief History of Religious Education*; M. Ryan, *A Common Search: The History and Forms of Religious Education in Catholic Schools*; A. Gellel, “Putting Catholic religious education on the map”, *Revista Pistas*.

³⁶ Later he was referred to as the Diocesan Inspector of Schools

³⁷ By the time Rev. McMahon accompanied Archbishop Clune to Perth in 1921 for his first appointment as a priest, he had completed his seminary training (1919), a Bachelor of Arts (1915), Honours in his Diploma of Education (1917) and a Master’s in Education (1920). Later, taking leave from his Perth duties, he undertook postgraduate studies at Catholic University of America, Washington DC (1926-1928). This study enabled him to complete his doctoral thesis, *Some Methods of Teaching Religion* (1928) through the National University of Ireland.

³⁸ That pattern of inspection reflected the practice of school inspection in Western Australian State schools. C. Campbell and H. Proctor, *A History of Australian Schooling* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2014), 110-111.

the benefit of those involved in and responsible for Catholic education in the Archdiocese. In taking that action he added a layer of accountability, promoted his own approach to the teaching of that subject, and instructed those involved in the teaching of it.³⁹

Archbishop Clune's decision to appoint Rev. McMahon was enlightened.⁴⁰ The latter held many of the qualities found in leaders and administrators of State-based education systems in Australia.⁴¹ He was a professional who was university educated in the latest education theory and practice. When compared to many other Australian dioceses,⁴² that situation was quite unusual in the 1920s.⁴³

Born in Ennis, County Clare, Ireland, Rev. McMahon was proud of his Irish heritage. Growing up, he was a good student and by the time he accompanied Archbishop Clune to Perth in 1921 to take up his first appointment as a priest he was an experienced and well qualified educator. He had a Bachelor of Arts degree (1915), a Diploma of Education (1917) with honours, and seminary training. He was ordained a priest in 1919 and received first-class honours in his Master of Arts in Education degree in 1920. Later, he undertook further postgraduate studies at the Catholic University of America, Washington DC (1926-1928).⁴⁴ Those studies prepared him to

³⁹ For an example, see, Archdiocese of Perth Catholic Church, *Religious Instruction: Report of the Diocesan Inspector and Syllabus for the Archdiocese of Perth (Western Australia)*.

⁴⁰ Archbishop Clune was a strong supporter of Catholic education and of teacher training. He also established a mostly cooperatively working relationship with many non-Catholic leaders in Western Australia. Rev. McMahon likewise established cooperative working relationship throughout his career including with many leaders of State education. J. McMahon, *College, Campus, Cloister* (Perth: Alpha Print, 1969).

⁴¹ P. Tannock, "Catholic education in Western Australia 1829-1979," in *Education in Western Australia*, 145.

⁴² For example, Archbishop Sheehan in Sydney and Father Beovich in Melbourne.

⁴³ J. Laffin, *Matthew Beovich: A Biography*, 72.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 52-70, 143-188.

complete his doctoral thesis, *Some Methods of Teaching Religion*⁴⁵ (1928) through the National University of Ireland.⁴⁶

Rev. McMahon's thesis reflected his desire to put his education ideas into practice. On that, he recounted the following:⁴⁷

In 1921 I was eager to try out my ideas on teaching religion. With the approval of the Archbishop, I taught Christian doctrine each week in the schools of the cathedral parish ... I really enjoyed those visits to the classrooms and I think the children were pleased with the break from ordinary class work. I tried to teach rather than talk at them. Homework was prescribed and this I checked on my next visit. I got children doing things rather than sitting and listening. I appealed to head and heart, instruction and devotion, to know their faith and to practice it, for it is a poor preparation for life to have an instructed head and a cold heart ... I introduced object lessons which pleased pupils and teachers. Baptizing a doll, preparing a table for the Last Sacraments.

This example, along with many others, illustrates Rev. McMahon's efforts to constantly apply the latest education theory to classroom practice in the teaching of religion as a subject in an effort to improve the quality of associated learning.

Several influences shaped the education thought and practice of Rev. McMahon. Those included his family life in Ireland.⁴⁸ His own education was extensive and brought him into contact with a variety

⁴⁵ J. McMahon, *Some Methods of Teaching Religion: A Survey* (Doctoral thesis, National University of Ireland, 1928).

⁴⁶ C. Mulcahy, "McMahon, John Thomas (1893–1989)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University*, 3 March 2021, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mcmahon-john-thomas-15007/text26196>.

⁴⁷ J. McMahon, *College, Campus, Cloister*, 76-77.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-14.

of religious personnel who were teachers.⁴⁹ His autobiography fondly recalls all those teachers he admired, including teachers he worked with and met in Western Australia.⁵⁰ One of the most formative teachers in his life, he claimed, was Rev. Timothy Corcoran S.J., the first Professor of Education at University College, Dublin (1909-1942).⁵¹

Rev. McMahon also learnt during the period he spent studying in the United States⁵² and in particular at the School of Education at the Catholic University of America. There he learnt from Professor McCormack about the history of education, Professor Jordan on the philosophy of education, Professor Johnson on method, and Professor Pace on the teaching of religion. At the university he was exposed too to Catholic education thought and practice and was able to gain access to the academic resources that university had at its disposal. He particularly expressed an indebtedness to the work of Thomas Edward Shields who was seen by the university as a pioneer in religious education,⁵³ particularly in relation to ‘inner character’⁵⁴ and Christ as the model teacher.⁵⁵

Rev. McMahon, like Archbishop Clune who was a strong supporter of Catholic education, established good working relationships throughout his career with many State leaders of education, both

⁴⁹ He was educated by Mercy Sisters (Convent of Mercy, Ennis), Irish Christian Brothers (Christian Brothers School, Ennis) and Vincentian Priests, in high school (St Vincent’s College, Castleknock) and in the seminary (All Hallows College, Dublin). J. McMahon, *College, Campus, Cloister*, 52-70.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Corcoran taught and supervised Rev. McMahon during his education studies and the five years of post-graduate studies. Corcoran was influential in early Irish education history writing, particularly in terms of his work on Irish hedge schools. B. Titley, “The historiography of Irish education: A review essay,” *Journal of Educational Thought* 13, no. 1 (1979), 66–77.

⁵² J. McMahon, *College, Campus, Cloister*, 144-161.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 152-154.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

Catholic and non-Catholic.⁵⁶ For example, he lectured on education at The University of Western Australia and was a member of that university's Senate. In his autobiography, he also recounts many professional and personal friendships within the State and his extensive network of education contacts inside and out of Australia.⁵⁷

Christian Doctrine Syllabus

In 1924, in addition to publishing his report as Diocesan Inspector, Rev. McMahon published a syllabus for the classroom subject, religious doctrine.⁵⁸ About both, *The Catholic Press* at the time wrote:⁵⁹

McMahon has the useful suggestion that, "as a stimulus, to the subject, so essential to the modern youth attending our Universities, or pursuing, any professional career, we should have an inter-collegiate examination in Christian apologetics." In the matter of Church music, "The English speaking world has accepted the Reformation's heirloom of silent services," and Father McMahon recommends that the children be taught the music of the Benediction service, as well as the Gregorian chant of the 'Missa' de Angelis.' Another useful suggestion is that the senior pupils should be taught, at least in outline, the attitude of the Catholic Church towards the great industrial and economic issues of the day. He says that "a personal acquaintance with some problems which our own country provides would be a training for the growing minds of the children." The course of instructions should be based on some of the Encyclicals of Leo XIII. Father McMahon notes that those schools

⁵⁶ A. McLay, *Women Out of Their Sphere: Sisters of Mercy in Western Australia from 1846*, 336.

⁵⁷ J. McMahon, *College, Campus, Cloister*, 129-144.

⁵⁸ Archdiocese of Perth Catholic Church, *Religious Instruction: Report of the Diocesan Inspector and Syllabus for the Archdiocese of Perth (Western Australia)*.

⁵⁹ Archdiocese of Perth, "Report of the Diocesan Religious Inspector," 1 May 1924, *The Catholic Press* (Sydney, NSW: The Catholic Press, 1895-1942), 17 October, 2019, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article106405477>.

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show the best results in the various departments of study where the local priest lends a helping hand to his teachers. Father McMahon's report is a weighty and thoughtful document.

Considered together, the two publications presented several elements considered important for the teaching of the subject. First, it was to be treated in the same way as other subjects in the school. Secondly, a model for teaching and progressing the learning of students at all ages was outlined. Thirdly, specific approaches for teaching that subject to particular age groups, including suggestions for teaching secondary school students were identified. The fourth element was a listing of the topics and specific content that those in each age group were to study. The syllabus' fifth element suggested a wide range of recommended texts that could be used by teachers to support their teaching. The sixth element outlined for teachers of the subject was the type of attitude they needed to develop to be successful in the classroom. McMahon's final element explicitly linked the religious doctrine syllabus with the examination he set as diocesan inspector of student learning.

Rev. McMahon's approach to the catechisms are also noteworthy. Rather than be the sole source of content, they were to be part of a larger vision of the subject's content and he directed teachers to explain the meaning of technical words and phrases to students prior to them memorising the text.⁶⁰ Further, those explanations, he said, needed to be age appropriate, with technical words "simplified and translated into words familiar to children"⁶¹.

Rev. McMahon's approach was motivated by an educational rationale. His aim was to produce "enlightened Catholics"⁶². He insisted that the offering of an explanation of a catechism point had

⁶⁰ Archdiocese of Perth Catholic Church, *Religious Instruction: Report of the Diocesan Inspector and Syllabus for the Archdiocese of Perth (Western Australia)*, 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Laffin refers to this approach as the "'synthetic method of teaching". J. Laffin, *Matthew Beovich: A Biography*, 73.

to precede memorisation of it. He emphasised too that teaching catechism points required that the teacher have a good grasp of the theology used in the text while at the same time recognising that teachers could not be theologians. For that reason, he argued, teachers needed to have access to libraries well stocked with catechetical literature that included “explanatory manuals, teachers’ aids and popular compendia of theology”⁶³.

‘Bible History’ was also included in the syllabus. That, Rev. McMahan noted in 1924, “is the popular part of the programme” and “should be a delightful change from the hard work of learning the catechism”⁶⁴. His goal was to make the Gospel narrative real for application to life by the child. On that, when teaching parables, teachers were advised to follow a three-step process involving an introduction, a recount of the story in the words of the Scripture, and a treatment of the story’s moral lesson.⁶⁵ Once again, Rev. McMahan encouraged the use of such teaching aids as pictures and charts. However, he also noted that the use of Scripture was not common in the Catholic school and home and he wanted to shift practice from just citing Biblical text to a reader paying attention to the context and circumstances of the text.

He also suggested that teachers and their students should write their own Church history. Each work, he argued, should focus on a particular period with a focus on a historical figure and would “with a constant appeal to local colour” become “a great panorama” with “every new scene or incident a vivid coloured picture, fascinating, unforgettable”⁶⁶. To illustrate what he envisioned, he referred to mystery plays, guild plays, and Passion plays. He argued also that there should be a focus on biographies of “modern Churchmen and

⁶³ Archdiocese of Perth Catholic Church, *Religious Instruction: Report of the Diocesan Inspector and Syllabus for the Archdiocese of Perth (Western Australia)*, 4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

⁶⁵ Archdiocese of Perth Catholic Church, *Religious Instruction: Report of the Diocesan Inspector and Syllabus for the Archdiocese of Perth (Western Australia)*, 4.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 6.

Catholic statesmen”⁶⁷ and he encouraged teachers to use readings from the Catholic Press in their lessons.⁶⁸

Rev. McMahon also encouraged the teaching of what he titled, ‘Social Study’ in senior classes. Distinct from a social science course, the focus would be on a religious study of social issues.⁶⁹ The aim was to “give an indication of the attitude of the Catholic Church towards the great industrial and economic issues of the day”⁷⁰. For teachers, he suggested that they have several components to be delivered in a short series of lectures. These were to be on such Church teaching as in Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*⁷¹. His vision was that student awareness of some social issues in Australian society would be raised and that the learning would be supported with the formation of such student guilds as the Society of St. Vincent De Paul.⁷²

Rev. McMahon also advocated the use of drama in the teaching of the subject, referring to examples from Church tradition such as the St Francis’ use of the Christmas Crib on how to instruct. He encouraged the use of class-dramatisation of Bible stories and found some teachers, but not all, welcomed that. He added that an educational perspective, the use of drama in the classroom, could have three positive outcomes. First, drama presented the opportunity to bring together all aspects of the learning involved in religion as a school subject. Secondly, use of drama in the classroom by teachers would present them with opportunities for casual instruction. Thirdly, he argued, learning better “sticks” in the

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 8.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Pope Leo XIII, “Encyclicals,” The Holy See, 26 February 2021, <http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/index.html>.

⁷² Archdiocese of Perth Catholic Church, *Religious Instruction: Report of the Diocesan Inspector and Syllabus for the Archdiocese of Perth (Western Australia)*, 8.

mind of the children when “it is connected with something they are doing”⁷³.

Rev. McMahon also articulated an education vision that involves the use of music in the classroom. On that, as O’Donoghue⁷⁴ has observed, his ideas reflected both the work of contemporary theorists about the liturgy and ideas that prefigured developments that were to become central to Church thought about the liturgy early during the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council in 1962.

Rev. McMahon also divided his programme of study into three stages, each related to a specific age range. Each stage “covered the whole ground of Religious Doctrine but from a different angle”⁷⁵. That model of spiral learning meant that the same content was covered but the method employed at each stage varied. For each stage, McMahon also offered a list of books written by a range of different authors that would support the teaching of the subject.⁷⁶

Christian Doctrine Through the Liturgy

In 1931 McMahon issued a new Christian Doctrine Syllabus.⁷⁷ Included in it were two discrete programs for teaching religion as a subject in Catholic schools. One, was a development of his earlier work on a Christian doctrine syllabus. The other, the centre piece of the document, was a new program entitled *Christian Doctrine Through the Liturgy*. That was designed for the teaching of religion as a subject based on the liturgy and it was developed further in

⁷³ Ibid, 7.

⁷⁴ T. O’Donoghue, *Upholding the Faith: The Process of Education in Catholic Schools in Australia, 1922-65*, 74-80.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 11.

⁷⁶ For detail about those texts see, Archdiocese of Perth Catholic Church, *Religious Instruction: Report of the Diocesan Inspector and Syllabus for the Archdiocese of Perth (Western Australia)*, 12-19.

⁷⁷ “Christian Doctrine Syllabus for the Archdiocese of Perth, Western Australia” (1931), *The Record Press*, (Perth, WA).

1934 and 1937 in a publication entitled *Liturgy for the class-room*⁷⁸ For McMahon, the rationale for the program was twofold. First, it was to help students to better understand the ‘why’ of their religion. Secondly, it was to foster within students an enthusiasm for the practices of their faith.

McMahon’s new program was a discrete and separate program of study designed to complement his religious doctrine syllabus. It was to be taught for one lesson a week. Many of his suggestions on how to teach it focused on providing a range of pedagogical strategies for teaching different age groups. Those included direct instruction, object lessons, storytelling, dramatization and engagement in reflection. The program also contained encouragement and suggestions for the use of a range of different texts, including biblical ones. The missal too was to be a key text, an essential tool to aid learning.

Included in McMahon’s program also were suggestions about how teachers could organise and develop their teaching of the program during the year and across different age groupings. Those suggestions were that first, there should be a focus on preparing children for the Sunday Mass. Next, the teacher should organise learning around the particulars of the Liturgical Year. A third suggestion McMahon made involved encouraging teachers to explain various elements of the ritual involved in liturgy. Similarly, he suggested that teachers should explain ‘ordinary’ prayers. Fifthly, he argued, an active relationship between the life of the parish and the life of the school should be fostered. Finally, McMahon encouraged teachers to ensure they were educated and ‘formed’ in the liturgical life of the Church.

⁷⁸ J. McMahon, *Liturgy for the Class-room* (Sydney: Pellegrini, 1934).

‘Pray the Mass’: A classroom text

In 1935 McMahon published a textbook entitled *Pray the Mass*.⁷⁹ It was written for use by teachers and students inside and outside of the religion classroom. The majority of the first of two parts made clear the detail of each step in the Mass. Each described what the priest did, why he did it and “the dispositions of mind and soul suitable to each step of the Mass”.⁸⁰ It then ended with two short chapters entitled “Preparing the Altar for Mass” and “Watching the Priest Vesting”.

The second part of *Pray the Mass* was written for secondary school students⁸¹ and was presented in four sections. The headings of those were ‘The Story of Sacrifice’, ‘The Sacrifice of the New Law’, ‘Devotion to the Mass’ and ‘Let Us Offer’. To teachers, McMahon proposed adopting a concentric plan of teaching, with the final section being deemed the most important. As with the first part, it was also presented and written in a style designed to be appealing for students. Unlike the first part though, in which images were used, it also included several diagrams.

In a 1937 publication, he identified several sources of inspiration and support for that work. First, there was the work of Dr Pasch “an acknowledged fountain head of the liturgical movement in Austria”⁸². Secondly, there was Dom Beauvain, who pointed to “a contrast between the catechism way and the liturgical way”⁸³. Another, source of inspiration and support was the papal teachings of Pope Pius X and Pope Pius XI. Both were strong supporters of those paying attention to the liturgy and catechesis. They also advocated strongly for a more active participation by the laity in the Mass.⁸⁴ A fourth source of inspiration referenced by Rev. McMahon was the work of Abbe Spiritus. That work recommended

⁷⁹ “Pray the Mass,” 24 January 1935, *The Catholic Press* (Sydney, NSW: 1895-1942), 14, 30 August 2019, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article10451013>.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*.

⁸¹ The second part was also considered suitable for converts to Catholicism.

⁸² *Ibid*, 11.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 18.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 21.

the use of object lessons on the Mass and promoted a notion of a need for a shift from private devotion to corporate worship.⁸⁵ Finally, Rev. McMahon also referenced his own book, *Some Methods of Teaching Religion*, that was the result of his doctoral studies.⁸⁶

The Bushies' Scheme

Under the leadership of McMahon, another important element of religion as a subject was that it was taught to some in a program that came to be known as the Bushies' Scheme.⁸⁷ That was intended specifically for teaching religion to children unable to attend Catholic schools. Often they lived in smaller rural and remote settlements in the 'bush'.⁸⁸

The Scheme had several features. First, a small number of female religious coordinated and ran it under McMahon's leadership. Secondly, the program of learning was provided through correspondence.⁸⁹ To supplement that learning, another feature was the introduction and use of residential schools during school holidays. These 'schools' were organised for students, termed 'Bushies', because they lived in 'the bush', hence the term 'Bushies' School'. A fourth feature was that families from Perth metropolitan parishes were invited to 'adopt' a bushy family and to correspond with each other about a range of areas of life, but especially religious matters. Another feature included regular publication in *The Record*, the local weekly Catholic newspaper, of a column called *Aunt Bessy's Corner*. In that column, children's questions and responses to questions asked by actual children about

⁸⁵ Ibid, 27.

⁸⁶ J. McMahon, *Some Methods of Teaching Religion: A Survey*.

⁸⁷ Also known as 'Religion by Post'.

⁸⁸ P. Pental, *Continuity in Change: The Journey of Catholic Education in Western Australia from 1843 to 2008*, 166-172.

⁸⁹ Hence why it was first titled 'Religion by Post'.

Catholic faith, were detailed. About the Bushies Scheme, Suart⁹⁰ stated:

Despite all efforts made by the bishops, two large groups of Catholic children were not receiving any form of religious instruction. These were children who for whatever reason were attending the state schools and those who lived in isolated areas. Priests were asked by the bishops to provide catechists to undertake the religious instruction of these children. As this catechesis became difficult some bishops suggested that the families take on the role of catechist and educate their own children. In Western Australia in 1923 Fr J.T. McMahon initiated a correspondence course known as 'Religion by Post' for children living in isolated areas.

The development in that regard of the Bushies Scheme pioneered new ways to teach religion⁹¹ through remote and distance education approaches.⁹²

Finally, after the Second World War, a sixth feature was added to the Bushies' Scheme. That was known as the *Motor Mission*.⁹³ It involved a few nuns travelling by car to country districts for extended periods. The purpose of their travel was to spend time in the homes of 'bushies' and their families, especially those in remote and isolated areas of the state.⁹⁴ A related feature of the scheme

⁹⁰ C. Suart, *Nurturing Faith within the Catholic Home: A Perspective from Catholic Parents Who Do Not Access Catholic Schools*, 25.

⁹¹ Rev. McMahon later saw parallels between his Bushies Scheme and a similar, contemporaneous religion program of learning for rural children in Oklahoma known as 'Extension'. For details, see F. Kelley, *The Story of Extension* (Chicago: Extension Press, 1922); J. McMahon, *College, Campus, Cloister*, 86.

⁹² The program developed by Rev. McMahon influenced others who used and adapted his program for use in other parts of Australia and the world. J. McMahon, *College, Campus, Cloister*, 101, 106.

⁹³ From the 1960s, the Motor Mission assumed a more significant role in the religious instruction of children in rural and remote areas. A. McLay, *Women Out of Their Sphere: Sisters of Mercy in Western Australia from 1846*, 354.

⁹⁴ P. Pental, *Continuity in Change: The Journey of Catholic Education in Western Australia from 1843 to 2008*, 208.

involved McMahon in his capacity as diocesan inspector of schools visiting country parishes and the families of ‘bushies’.

The introduction and development of the Bushies Scheme found its lead to some extent, in what was happening more broadly in the Western Australian State education system.⁹⁵ Up to 1918, the education authorities there engaged in several innovations that went some way towards addressing the educational disadvantage of many children who lived outside of major population centres.⁹⁶ Those included the use of part-time teachers,⁹⁷ the use of ‘tent schools’⁹⁸ and the development of ‘one teacher schools’.⁹⁹ Some schools in rural centres were also consolidated to ensure that “better teachers, better curriculum coverage, and better facilities”, were provided.¹⁰⁰

In 1918, a comprehensive response to the peculiar demands for education created by the geography of the State was commenced with the creation of the *Western Australian Correspondence School*.¹⁰¹ Those responsible recognised that the provision of correspondence education required the provision of specific learning materials and techniques and teachers required “a high degree of teaching skill, initiative, imagination, insight, sympathy and thoroughness”¹⁰². In addition, it was recognised that parents

⁹⁵ C. Mulcahy, “McMahon, John Thomas (1893–1989),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University*.

⁹⁶ E. Lopes, T. O’Donoghue, and M. O’Neill, *The Education of Children in Geographically Remote Regions through Distance Education: Perspectives and Lessons from Australia* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Pub., 2011), 78.

⁹⁷ A teacher would spend part of each week working in one school and the rest in another.

⁹⁸ These schools catered for shifting and scattered populations. For example, on a goldfield’s settlement or a logging camp.

⁹⁹ Those schools catered for very small numbers of children from a range of age groupings. Catering for that diversity in the classroom required much of the teacher.

¹⁰⁰ E. Lopes, T. O’Donoghue, and M. O’Neill, *The Education of Children in Geographically Remote Regions through Distance Education: Perspectives and Lessons from Australia*, 79.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 80-81.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 83.

needed support as they supervised much of each child's learning.¹⁰³ Therefore, they were provided with guidelines and support in the form of instructions.¹⁰⁴ Further, additional teaching support was given to the needs of "physically handicapped and chronically ill students"¹⁰⁵. Access to supplementary learning resources like library books, magazines, school tours and camps was also made available.¹⁰⁶

In 1935 an additional, significant development occurred. That involved the introduction of lessons by radio broadcasts to complement correspondence lessons.¹⁰⁷ Another important innovation was the introduction in 1946 of an Itinerant Teacher Service.¹⁰⁸ With the creation in 1959 of the Schools of the Air in Western Australia, provision of that service came to an end in 1967.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

Rev. McMahon's work illustrates several innovations evident in the corpus of his work. Many of those demonstrate an application of the latest education theory and practice present in both Australian education circles and in the catechetical reform movement.¹¹⁰ His work and his contribution to the religion as a subject is worthy of attention and goes some way towards addressing shortcomings in the history of religion as a school subject, the history of the school curriculum in general and the history of individual school subjects in particular.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 82.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 86.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 89.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 90.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 91-224.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 93-94.

¹¹⁰ R. Rummery, *Catechesis and Religious Education in a Pluralist Society* (Sydney: E.J. Dwyer, 1975), 7-10.

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