

Religious Identity and Plurality amongst Australian Catholics: Inclusions, Exclusions and Tensions

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Abstract

In recent years, the Catholic Education Offices in the State of Victoria, Australia, have collaborated on a large research project with the Catholic University in Leuven that focuses on Catholic Identity. This is an interesting situation when there are, indeed, multiple Catholic identities evident in Australian society. This article, discusses the fluid and changing multicultural context that has shaped Australian Catholic identity by drawing on a variety of sources including research and statistical data, content analysis as well as snapshots of the lived experience of Australian Catholics from different backgrounds. The discussion will raise the question about a possible colonization of Catholic identity when a specific Catholic identity in a community is preferred while ignoring pluralistic identities in that community. The discussion will also attempt to offer some insights into the significant role that identity may or may not have in a pluralistic climate and its relevance for religious education.

Keywords: interspiritual religious education, colonization of Catholic Identity, religious identity

Introduction

Australia, with her colonial heritage beginning in the 1800s during the period referred to as White Settlement was, at that time, largely peopled by British, Irish and Indigenous Australians. The British maintained control since they

held the leadership roles in all areas. Both Irish and Indigenous Australians were marginalized for most of the following two hundred years. By the end of the twentieth century, Australia had grown into a migrant nation composed of a visibly multicultural society but Indigenous Australians were still struggling for equality and recognition and today, as we have passed the first decade of the twenty-first century, various tensions continue to be apparent which revolve around inclusivity and exclusivity. In the Australian Human Rights document, 2011 *Freedom of Religion and Belief in 21st Century Australia*, the authors noted that:

The 20th century has seen the growth and arrival of new traditions in Australia, including Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu, Humanist, Islamic, Sikh and Taoist traditions, as Australia is drawn into Asia – culturally, economically and religiously. The rapid increase in the numbers of settlers migrating to Australia during the 18th and 19th centuries and early 20th century led to mainly inter-Christian rivalry, especially between British Protestants and Irish Catholics. However, since the Second World War, and particularly since the dismantling of the White Australia policy, successive migrant intakes have considerably diversified the Australian population So, Australia is partly a Christian country, partly a multifaith country, and partly a secularist country. This can make speaking or generalising about religion in Australia complicated. As this report shows, many religious and spiritualist voices mingle with secularist and humanist voices, with little unanimity on issues (Bouma, Cahill, Dellal & Zwartz 2011:4).

Many of these current tensions relate to religious and cultural differences and, indeed, the varying level of importance given to religion within different cultures. This does not only relate to different religions but also to different cultural adaptations of the same religion. For instance, Anglo Australian Catholics¹ have a worldview that does not always align with Catholics from other regions and cultures. As well, the secular worldview of many Australians comes into play in this ever evolving dance of unity, plurality and diversity.

¹ In general, Anglo Australian Catholics as it is used in this article refers to Australians with Anglo Saxon/ Celtic (Irish) origins.

In identifying some relevant issues, this article is developed on the basis of exploring a few critical concepts within Australia where some research and findings, historical description, statistical data, realistic situations and perceptions of experiences of Catholics from different backgrounds as well as content analysis within the international context will be used to problematize the issue at hand. This is a theoretically construed positioning article which may serve as an introduction to a broader discourse that would benefit from an interdisciplinary approach since issues related to individual and communal identity and to religious and cultural plurality are common features of many countries around the world today. To begin with characteristics of contemporary Australian society are identified followed by a discussion on the plural identities of Australian Catholics today. Finally, there will be a discussion of the research into Catholic identity in Australia and its relevance for religious education in a multicultural Catholic Australian society.

A Brief Overview of Australians and their Contemporary Social Context

The first two hundred years of White Settlement in Australia saw the development of a colony that had its roots most strongly in Britain and Ireland. Not surprisingly, then, by the twentieth century, Australian culture was largely an Anglo Saxon/ Celtic culture and while each successive Australian government, until the 1970s, was pre-occupied with increasing the population through an active migration program, the fields from which they drew and encouraged new settlers were largely British and Irish and, after the two World Wars, from other parts of Europe. Nonetheless, underlying the government migration program was a policy of assimilation which had expectations that new arrivals would adapt to the existing Anglo-Australian culture and learn to speak English. This also meant that religious practices of the new arrivals were affected, for instance, Italian Catholics who arrived in large numbers after World War II were expected to leave their Italian practices of prayer and worship at home when they attended church services, and through Catholic schooling, which was mostly staffed by Anglo Australians, migrant children learnt to become ‘Australian’.

Further, there was a White Australia policy, the basic aim of which was to keep Australia populated with ‘white’ people. However, in the 1960s,

this began to change so that people from non-white countries were allowed to migrate but the rules were stringent so that, for the most part, these people were highly educated professionals who were considered to be westernized in terms of their habits and outlook. Furthermore, they had a sound knowledge and usage of the English language so they would be able to adapt to the Anglo Australian culture and ‘fit in’:

Australia’s approach to immigration from Federation until the latter part of the twentieth century, in effect, excluded non-European immigration. The ‘White Australia policy’ as it was commonly described, could not, however, withstand the attitudinal changes after World War II, and the growing acknowledgment of Australia’s responsibilities as a member of the international community. In 1966 the Liberal-Country Party Government began dismantling the White Australia policy by permitting the immigration of ‘distinguished’ non-Europeans (Public Affairs, Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs 2005).

In the 1970s, the White Australia policy was finally disbanded along with the assimilation policy and this was replaced with a multicultural policy which aimed at integration. In practice this meant that ethnic communities could continue to celebrate their cultural practices and ethnicity but, at the same time, they were expected and encouraged to seek identification as a member of the mainstream Australian society and culture. At this point, migrants from non-European countries were welcomed and they started arriving in large numbers. Today, one can sometimes hear an Australian being identified with reference to their country of origin such as Indigenous Australia, Lebanese-Australian, Chinese-Australian, Indian-Australian or, of course, Anglo Australian. Writing in the early nineties, Hugh Mackay, a well-known Australian social commentator described Australia as a multi-racial society and added,

the traditional Australian attitude towards migrants is that they have come here to become part of the Australian way of life and that, accordingly, they should be assimilated as quickly as possible (Mackay 1993:155).

Hence, Mackay identified an element amongst the Australian people that, it could be argued, was a residual from the attitudes of a previous era when assimilation policies held sway.

Moving forward to a quick overview of contemporary Australia, revealed through the 2011 Census (<http://www.abs.gov.au/census>), we find that 26% of Australians were born overseas. Of those born in Australia, 20% have one or both parents born overseas. There are 260 languages spoken and while Christianity may still be the dominant religion, there are many other active faith communities with Buddhism and Hinduism being amongst the fastest growing belief systems in Australia. Indeed, contemporary Australian culture reflects a vast array of influences from many European and non-European countries alike. Henry and Kurzak (2013) claim that,

it is one of the great triumphs of recent Australian history that so many people, with such diversity of culture and history, have been absorbed so peacefully into Australian society ([.http://www.australiancollaboration.com.au/pdf/FactSheets/Multicultural-Australia-FactSheet.pdf](http://www.australiancollaboration.com.au/pdf/FactSheets/Multicultural-Australia-FactSheet.pdf). (Accessed 13 January 2014.)

While Henry and Kurzak's claim has credibility, it is important to recognize that the tensions that underlie diversity and difference continue to lie just below the surface, ready to erupt when provoked. Such tensions become apparent in the media on a regular basis from the ongoing situation of the attitude to and treatment of asylum seekers who come from Middle Eastern and Asian countries. An example is the Australian government's response to a very recent debate triggered by the current Attorney General of Australia, George Brandis. He argued for the right to free speech and stated to Parliament that a person had a right to be a bigot. Accordingly, he has proposed changes to the Racial Discrimination Act. Following this, articles, letters to the editor and talk-back shows reflected the discomfort and unease felt by many Australians about these proposed changes and Tim Soutphommasane, the Race Discrimination Commissioner wrote:

When I began my term as Race Discrimination Commissioner last year, I never imagined I would be asked to comment on whether Australians enjoyed 'the right to be bigots'. It is a measure of how dangerous some of the debate about the Racial Discrimination Act

has become The proposed changes to the Racial Discrimination Act appear to favour a freedom to practise bigotry over a freedom to live unaffected by it (*The Age*, Saturday 29 March 2014, The Forum, 36).

Another national television program which aired on Monday 31 March 2014 also exposed the tension linked to the debate on bigotry and racism. It was Q&A chaired by Tony Jones and the topic was: *Human Rights and Wrongs*. The panel consisted of various well known public personalities from political, media and human rights groups and the questions mostly related to bigotry, freedom of speech and asylum seekers. One panel guest who identified herself as an Egyptian-American said:

MONA ELTAHAWY: I think sometimes it helps in these discussions to get really down to the bare bones and just say it as it is and that is people are scared of brown and black people coming into your country. And that's essentially what it is. And once you take it down to the bare bones, when you talk about things like the dole and they're coming to take our jobs, they're coming to take our money and all these incredibly, as you said, Lucy, toxic ideas that people have, it is, at the end of the day, about racism. It's about people who don't look like us (<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/txt/s3956512.htm>; (Accessed 28 April 2014.)

Thus, topics and reported incidents in the media consistently highlight issues related to 'them and us' situations in Australian society and for the most part, the differences relate to race, culture, religion and skin colour.

Returning to Henry and Kurzak's (2013) report, what was not so clearly identified by them was that while Australians, generally, regard themselves rather complacently as a 'tolerant people', their tolerance extends to welcoming new settlers into the country but, when those new settlers come from a different race and culture and have little spoken English, there are few windows of opportunity for engagement or interaction between the host and the migrant at the more intimate levels of family and social life. Instead, the new arrivals gravitate towards people of their own or similar cultural and religious backgrounds and form their own ethnic communities. This was reflected in a report into the *Impact of Racism on the Health and Wellbeing of*

Young Australians in 2009. It identified a particular problem for schools who were attempting to address the needs of large numbers of students who came from particular ethnic group:

Whilst there are a plethora of multicultural policies, cultural diversity plans and other guidelines aimed at operating in a culturally inclusive manner, some schools in poorer areas with a high percentage of 'ethnic' students have come under attack for these very policies and are critiqued for having produced ethnic ghettos as with the 'too-heavy concentration of Muslim students, particularly Lebanese' (Bolt 2004).

Not surprisingly, these communities, other than the encounters they experience through their working or schooling lives, can sometimes live quite apart from the mainstream culture in almost ghetto-like groups. This would have been a similar scenario for Irish Catholics in the early years of White Settlement where Catholic schools served to further marginalize them from the rest of society. Equally unsurprising is that the tensions linked to living as a minority group can erupt and this was seen in 2005 when cultural and religious tensions rode high in Australia, fuelled by political and media hyperbole and public statements that identified Muslims as 'them' and not one of 'us'. The situation had evolved as the aftermath of the events of 9/11 and the subsequent involvement of Australia in the War against Terror. Furthermore, after the 7/7 London bombings, there had been many arrests in Sydney and Melbourne of young Muslims who were perceived to be linked to terrorist activity. The 2005 incident meant that most Australians were horrified when they were confronted by the ugly scenes from the riots that took place in Cronulla, a seaside suburb, when Anglo and Lebanese Australian youth clashed violently. Six months after the riots a Forum was organized by the local council in Cronulla and community groups in an attempt to restore some peace and harmony into their community. One young Lebanese Australian who had participated in the riots spoke at the Forum. He said:

I want to return to the harmony and tolerance of my childhood where I felt included, a valued member of society. I stand before you today as a proud Lebanese Australian but in a very different Australia

(Participant at a Forum organized by the Shire of Cronulla, screened by Channel 7 on *This Day Tonight*, 1 June 2006).

It is this experience of displacement after initial feelings of belonging that is, indeed, a significant problem in any pluralist community that desires social and communal wellbeing and cohesion and there is a distinct need to recognize the causal elements so that they can be addressed. For instance, many Muslims have lived in Australia since the 1930s and their children grew up as part of the mainstream Australian culture, thereby experiencing a secure sense of belonging while still identifying with aspects of their own religion and culture. However, in the first decade of this century, the global situation seriously influenced Australian society so that many young Australian Muslims, through no fault or action of their own other than their religious and/ or cultural heritage, experienced a sense of alienation and found themselves a displaced people within what they perceived to be their own country. Such experiences not only can create anxiety and distress but also bewilderment and loss since individuals find themselves on the outside of the wider community to which they once had belonged.

In addition, there remains one source of cultural tension that is not always recognized or spoken about and this relates to the fact that there are often different cultural practices and, even, beliefs that exist amongst members who belong to a particular faith tradition but who come from different cultural regions. This is the case of Muslims in Australia who have come from a range of different countries, for instance, Albania, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq, so that culturally and physically they are different from one another and many do not engage easily with other Muslims who come from backgrounds different from their own. This is also the case with Australian Catholics and it is the specific situation of intrinsic tensions linked to a dominant Anglo Australian Catholic leadership that is examined in the rest of this article.

Australian Catholics – The Same but Different

The intake of migrants from countries other than Europe has also led to the variety of cultures that are now evident amongst Australian Catholics. Figures from the 2011 Census show that 25.3% of the total Australian population which numbered 21,507,719 people, indicated that they were

Catholic. A further breakdown of the background of the Catholic population showed that:

- In 2011, nearly a quarter of Australia's Catholics were born overseas, and about three-quarters of those were born in non-English speaking countries.
- Australia's Catholics are more likely to come from a non-English speaking country than Australians who are not Catholic: 17.9% of Catholics were born in a non-English speaking country, compared to 14.9% of people who are not Catholic.
- Italy, the United Kingdom (not including Northern Ireland) and the Philippines, in that order, were the top three countries of origin of overseas-born Australian Catholics in 1996, and they still hold those positions in 2011. Poland and Malta have slipped down the list, while New Zealand, India and Ireland have risen up the table. For the first time, Iraq and South Korea are included in the top 20 source countries for Australia's Catholics.
- Catholics make up 25.3% of Australia's population, but this figure varies widely for Australians born overseas: almost 92% of Australians born in Malta and 91% of those born in Italy are Catholic, but only 3.5% of those born in China are Catholic (data taken from Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) Pastoral Research Office, Friday 10th August, 2012, E-news Bulletin)

The census data from 2011, then, provides an insightful picture of the multicultural nature of Australian Catholics today. At one level, these are people identified as a community that is unified by being named Catholic and sharing Catholic beliefs and practices. At another level, however, there is quite significant diversity within this community and, if we examine the countries of origin of members of this broad Catholic community, it is not difficult to understand that there are important cultural and language differences which are bound to impact on their ways of being Catholic. These visible differences tend to impact on any efforts to identify them as members of one and the same community. In fact, Maronites, Chaldean and Syrian

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Catholics are identified as distinct groups within the wider Catholic community and these communities also now have specific Churches and parishes identified according to their specific rites.

Table 1 provides a more detailed overview of the countries of origin of Australian Catholics:

TABLE 1: Country of birth: Catholic and total population 2011

Country of birth	Catholic	Total	% Catholics in birthplace group
Australia	4,065,104	15,021,799	27.1
New Zealand	73,145	483,396	15.1
Other Oceania	23,307	125,499	18.6
United Kingdom (except Northern Ireland)	137,209	1,078,474	12.7
Ireland (including Northern Ireland)	56,309	89,912	62.6
Italy	168,801	185,401	91.0
Malta	37,816	41,274	91.6
Netherlands	24,861	76,052	32.7
Germany	30,478	107,991	28.2
Austria	9,732	17,014	57.2
Croatia and other former Yugoslavia	49,197	143,314	34.3
Poland	36,117	48,685	74.2
Hungary	10,426	19,087	54.6
Other Eastern Europe, Russian Federation & Baltic States	23,188	104,581	22.2
Other Europe	41,892	219,244	19.1
Vietnam	39,892	185,030	21.6
Philippines	134,655	171,224	78.6
Indonesia	16,821	63,158	26.6
Malaysia	16,791	116,197	14.5
Other South East Asia	22,978	166,243	13.8

India	48,209	295,366	16.3
Sri Lanka	20,216	86,414	23.4
China (except Hong Kong & Taiwan)	11,279	321,254	3.5
Hong Kong (SAR of China)	11,144	74,958	14.9
Korea, Republic of (South)	16,705	74,538	22.4
Egypt	7,990	36,539	21.9
Lebanon	28,004	76,447	36.6
Iraq	17,184	48,170	35.7
Sudan (including South Sudan)	7,983	22,866	34.9
Other Middle East & North Africa	10,599	121,871	8.7
South Africa	19,978	145,684	13.7
Mauritius	16,072	23,281	69.0
North America	22,743	116,426	19.5
Chile	15,846	24,947	63.5
Other Central America & South America	51,625	82,373	62.7
Other	24,588	287,522	8.6
ID/NS	90,389	1,205,488	7.5
Total	5,439,273	21,507,719	25.3

It is pertinent here to recount some anecdotal evidence that highlight perceptions of the lived experiences of some Australian Catholics from non-Anglo backgrounds and which illustrate tensions associated with being part of a group, and yet, not.

Several years ago I was teaching a group of practising teachers in a country town in the northern region of the State of Victoria. The program was linked to the accreditation for RE teachers and was funded by the Diocese in that region. The class was held in one of the primary schools which was based on an Open Space structure where different classes were grouped in different spaces within the larger open space. The consequence is that all

classroom activity is visible and classroom noise is muted but audible. The class space that had been assigned to me was next to the library space and, at the first coffee break one of the librarians came out to chat to me. She had heard me talking about how we needed to recognize different ways of being Catholic in our multicultural classrooms and I had referred to the 1950s when Italian Catholics had to learn Australian ways of being Catholic. She prefaced her comments by saying that I had really captured the situation accurately and that it had brought back memories of when she had first arrived in Australia as a little girl and had to learn to avoid Italian practices in the Catholic primary school she attended.

The second incident occurred at a RE symposium that we held a few years ago at one of the university campuses. A practising teacher who had recently completed doctoral studies at our university was seated next to me during dinner. After the first course she went off to speak to somebody and when she returned, she muttered, 'If you are not Anglo-Australian, you have to work five times as hard to get anywhere in this system'. I could only assume that she had applied for a promotion or some position and had just heard that she had been unsuccessful. I do recall my immediate response to her was, 'And if you are not Anglo-European Australian, you have to work ten times as hard'.

These are two incidents that reflect experiences of inclusion and exclusion amongst European Australian Catholics in response to their experiences of Anglo Australian Catholics. Another Anglo Australian colleague who read this paper responded as follows:

... because of my background as a Catholic attending Catholic schools in my childhood and adolescence, I found much resonance with the historical, and political, context articulated in your paper. Equally, I could clearly identify with the people and situations described in your anecdotes ... to me, they were 'spot-on', as it were, and in a larger paper, could well benefit from further expansion, as they encapsulate the lived reality of Catholics (or non-Catholics) of a certain age, which continues to inform the construction or development of a particular identity as a Catholic (Cartwright 2014).

I have written elsewhere about the dominance of Anglo Australians in all positions of leadership in Catholic schools and in Catholic Education Offices

in this country (see de Souza 2006; 2009a). In fact, a web search of thirteen Catholic Education Offices across Australia² revealed the fact that, in 2014, every Director was an Anglo Australian despite the fact that European Catholics, particularly those of Italian origin, are now third and fourth generation Australians, and this is a further example of a community where being the same (as in sharing a faith tradition) but yet different (as in having a different culture and, therefore, a different way of practising that faith tradition) can create tensions within the community but it is a tension that often goes unrecognized and therefore, is seldom addressed. It is about experiences of belonging and yet, not belonging; about being brought in and yet, left out. The situation is exacerbated because a significant number of the leaders in Australian Catholic education are products of a time when Catholics were marginalized and sought support and solidarity amongst members of their own communities. It is also more than possible that the non-conscious learning of these leaders would still reflect the influence of the government policies that intentionally sought to prevent non-white migrants from entering Australia (see de Souza 2009b; and 2010 for a further discussion on non-conscious learning). If attitudes and behaviour driven by such non-conscious learning are not addressed, they have some implications for the dynamics and practice in religious education classrooms in Catholic schools where, so often, the student and teaching population reflect the high levels of multiculturalism evident in Australian society today but where leadership roles in the system, in the schools and in religious education are held by 'white' Australians, many of whom grew up in a 'white' Australia when Catholics were marginalized and had little or no engagement with non-Europeans.

A further story captures this situation succinctly: I was travelling back to Australia from London a few years ago and, on boarding my flight, I found myself sitting next to an elderly couple. He told me that he and his wife were returning from a holiday in the Lake District visiting members of her family. She had migrated to Australia when she was three years old. Then, in response to his query, I said my trip was work-related and the inevitable question came – What do you do? On discovering that I taught Religious Education at Australian Catholic University there was a pause in the

² For instance, the websites of the Catholic Education Offices in Melbourne, Sale, Ballarat, Sandhurst, Sydney, Parramatta, Lismore, Brisbane, Townsville, Cairns, South Australia, Perth and Darwin.

conversation. He then said he had some ‘Catholic’ friends and they were ‘good blokes’. A little further into the conversation he added: ‘When I was growing up, we didn’t mix with Catholics, you know. It was very much a “them and us” situation’.

Accordingly, one could argue that experiences of inclusion and exclusion have been characteristics of Australian Catholics and their position in the wider society from the earliest days of White Settlement. However, in the current multicultural context, these are the experiences of non-Anglo/European Catholics with regard to their position in the wider Catholic community. Certainly, such experiences of inclusion and exclusion are significant since they are liable to create undercurrents that can disrupt goodwill and positive relationships that are important for social cohesion and they have some implications for the recent research that has focused on the concept of a Catholic Identity conducted by some Catholic Education Offices in this country especially when the leadership is largely confined to Anglo Australian Catholics. The research project has been generated by European thinking by academics from Leuven. This is an interesting situation and the following quote has some relevance and implications:

Pope Francis’ comments on the need for the Church to develop non-Western expressions of the faith are a breath of fresh air. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, he wrote: ‘We cannot demand that peoples of every continent, in expressing their Christian faith, imitate modes of expression which European nations developed at a particular moment of their history, because the faith cannot be constricted to the limits of understanding and expression of any one culture’. He thus reaffirmed the spirit of the Second Vatican Council that had been obscured in the past decades by a militant restorationism (*Fr Robert Kaggwa*, 11 December 2013; <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/1/174/the-church-urgently-needs-to-stop-seeing-itself-as-a-western-export>. (Accessed 18 December 2013.)

In his article, Kaggwa extends this perspective and says:

Coming from Africa, I have seen how the Church has been Western not only in its liturgy but also in its personnel, finance and theology. Although recent decades have seen dramatic improvements, one can

still see how this dependence is not going away soon. While a lot has been achieved in new forms of worship, and today one can speak of Christianity already becoming a truly African religion, a lot remains to be done, particularly in the area of theology (*Fr Robert Kagwa*, 11 December 2013; <http://www.the-tablet.co.uk/blogs/1/174/the-church-urgently-needs-to-stop-seeing-itself-as-a-western-export>. (Accessed 18 December 2013.)

In addition, the World Mission Day 2013 report from the Vatican indicated that ‘the world percentage of Catholics increased by 0.04 %, settling at 17.50%. By continent: increases were registered in Africa; Asia and Oceania, while a decrease was shown in America and Europe’ (see <http://www.news.va/en/news/vatican-world-mission-day-catholic-church-statis-3>. (Accessed 28 January 2014.) Further, it noted that diocesan priests increased in Africa; America; and Asia but decreased in Europe and Oceania.

Finally, a report in *The Telegraph/Ucanews* on April 23 2014 stated that China was set to be the ‘world’s most Christian country’ by 2030 (<http://cathnews.com/cathnews/17467-china-set-to-be-world-s-most-christian-country-in-a-generation>. (Accessed 24 April 2014.) While Protestants in the form of Evangelical Christians made up the larger numbers, Catholics are also numbered amongst the growth in Chinese Christians.

Significantly, these statements and statistics clearly point to the fact that adherents of the Catholic faith have continued to grow in numbers in Africa and Asia rather than in Europe and the US and that it is time that the European dominance on the ways of being Catholic is amended to include and recognize that other ways of being Catholic are equally authentic. For instance, I recall many years ago, listening to an Anglo Australian priest speaking from the pulpit about the traditional practice of prostrating oneself on the floor before the altar which he had observed on a visit to the Philippines. He was quite scathing about this practice and his attitude revealed a sense of superiority towards the Catholic practices of his Asian neighbours. Further, on different occasions in recent years, I have heard colleagues at Australian Catholic University of Anglo Australian origin, refer to newly arrived Indian Australian Catholics as being very ‘devout’. Each time, the person immediately followed up by saying that they did not mean to be derogatory or cause any offence by using that word. Arguably, the fact

that they added the follow-up statement implied a particular attitude towards those Indian Catholics.

This article, so far, has identified a distinctly multicultural society in contemporary Australia which is reflected amongst the Catholic community and which has given rise to plural Catholic identities. It has also noted the dominance of Anglo Australian leadership in the Catholic Education system and some of the associated tensions in Catholic education. The next section will examine the drive to develop the concept of a ‘preferred’ Catholic identity in order to apply this to Australian education institutions.

The Focus on Catholic Identity in Australian Catholic Education – Some Implications

The recent focus on Catholic Identity has been evidenced by the introduction of school leadership roles in Identity and Mission as well as the Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project which was a joint initiative of the four Victorian Catholic Education Offices and the Catholic Education Commission Victoria in Australia and the Catholic University in Leuven, Belgium. The reasons for and aim of the project was to assist schools to realize their *preferred* Catholic identity (italics are mine – see (<http://www.schoolidentity.net/>). (Accessed 7 January 2014.) These are stated as:

Today, schools are challenged to:

- articulate their identity and vision
- express their distinctiveness as Catholic schools in a society where the Christian faith is increasingly marginalized

The Project was designed to assist schools to understand better how their Catholic identity may be expressed in work and practice and to support them in their future development. The main questions explored were:

- How is Catholic identity lived and shaped in the school?
- What is the *preferred* situation?
- What is the potential present in the school to realise its *preferred* Catholic Identity? (italics are mine); <http://web.cecv.catholic.edu.au/projects/identity/ecsip.htm>. (Accessed 28 April 2014.)

Thus, in the past few years, there has been much talk about ‘atholic Identity’ amongst leaders in Catholic Education in the Victorian dioceses in Australia as well as amongst those who offer leadership in religious education programs for Catholic schools. Certainly, the word ‘preferred’ in the questions above is, itself, exclusionary, and implies a rejection of the ‘other’ and there have been several articles written about the positive and negative aspects as academics, educators and researchers ponder the concept of identity (see Rossiter 2013a; and 2013b for a detailed overview). Pertinent questions that have been raised are: Why identity? Whose identity? What identity?

In an editorial for the *Journal of Religious Education* 59,1 (2011), I referred to Bauman’s (2004) theory of ‘liquid’ identity, one that shifts and shapes in response to the plural contexts within which individuals live today. This has relevance here since it supports the argument that the pluralistic nature of contemporary societies is germane to the birth of multiple identities. Bauman suggested that the ‘problem of identity’ had become the ‘loudest talk in town’ (2004:17) and argued that the creation of a ‘national’ identity was a feature of the twentieth century. This was a time when countries began to change their boundaries as a result of war or civil rebellions had led to the displacement of large numbers of people. It was Bauman’s thesis that prior to the era where improved transport and other innovations meant that people began to travel from their birth places and settle in distant countries, most people remained close to where they and their families had lived for generations. Hence, they knew who they were and to which community they belonged and the question of identity did not arise (Bauman 2004:19).

Bauman claims that from the start, ‘national identity’ was an *agonistic* notion and a battle cry (2004:21) and governments and political leaders have used this notion to promote the corresponding behaviours and attitudes that they desire in their citizens. Arguably, religious leaders have used the concept of a religious identity to achieve much the same purpose – that is to encourage an alignment with the particular teachings and behaviours that they wish to see amongst their adherents. And just as citizenship education may be one avenue through which political authorities can promote the particular identity they desire in their citizens, religious education can also be used to promote the desirable religious identity. As the librarian’s story referred to earlier, this is what happened in Catholic schools in Australia when children of new migrants were ‘educated’ to adopt an Anglo Australian Catholic identity. Indeed, Rossiter (2013b) argues that when an

institution considers that it is failing to achieve its aims, it often becomes concerned about identity. Referring to the Catholic Bishops' of NSW and ACT statement: *Catholic Schools at the Crossroad* (2007), Rossiter suggests that it reflected a crisis of identity:

The impression given was that despite the extensive resources invested in Catholic schools, they were not arresting the slide away from parish participation and the decline in Catholic culture. Increasing the mass attendance rates of pupils was included as a key performance indicator of progress for Catholic schools (p.18). An impression was also given that if Catholic identity was 'stronger' and more 'overt' in the schools, then this would somehow 'stick – affecting the sense of the personal Catholic identity of pupils in a positive and lasting way (2013b:6)

This raises another issue related to religious identity in plural societies. It is the need to acknowledge the emergence of multiple identities amongst individuals, particularly young people. For instance, Erricker (2008) referred to plural identities of second-generation British young people from Muslim communities: the cultural identity of their parents, their religious identity and the national identity which was determined by the country of their birth. In particular, he noted the problems of having multiple identities following 9/11 when there was overt hostility towards British Muslims from other British. Equally, El-Haj and Bonet (2011) discuss the multiple ways of belonging that young Muslims experience in the US and which can lead to multiple identities. Speaking of a brother and sister from the same Palestinian family they described the following scenario:

Zayna and Kamal were actively involved in both the antiwar and the antioccupation movements. As they moved from adolescence to adulthood, Zayna and Kamal drew on the knowledge, experiences, histories and cultural resources circulating through the Palestinian diaspora to develop a sense of belonging, and cultural, civic, and political commitments, to multiple communities in the United States and abroad. But, they did so while also 'maintaining' – sometimes uncomfortably – their status as 'Americans', and they consciously worked to challenge and reshape US culture and politics (2011:31)

These references identify the tensions that emerge as a result of migration when religious groups attempt to preserve their religious identity which suddenly finds itself at odds with the host culture and they give rise to some significant questions: Which identity does the individual most identify with, the family's religious identity or the one that they have constructed through their education and learning experiences? And in a time of crisis, emotional or otherwise, which of these identities will be the most influential in determining behaviour?

More importantly and pertinent to this discussion is the fact that these questions take on an added meaning when they relate to Australian Catholic identity because we are not talking about different religious belief systems but rather, different ways of believing and practising in one belief system. Here there is need to recognize that there are different shades of Catholic identity and children from migrant families may lay claim to two different ways of being Catholic which shapes their Catholic identity – the one they have inherited from their parents' religious culture and the one they have learnt to adopt through their experiences in Catholic schools. A further question, here, is how does a child feel when, through their religious education classes, they learn that the religious practices of their parents are not perceived to be as authentic or credible as the religious practices they are taught about and expected to adopt which was, indeed, the experience of many Italian Australians in previous years. Further, which of these religious/Catholic identities become important and what kind of tensions might a child experience in this situation and how does this affect their identity constructs and sense of belonging?

There is yet another aspect of a religious identity which may be linked to young people's search for meaning and spirituality along non-Catholic pathways, for instance, through mindfulness, yoga and other Eastern meditation practices and/ or Indigenous studies. These are all factors that help shape a personal spiritual identity and yet may not be addressed in a religious education classroom that promotes a particular Catholic identity. Crawford and Rossiter (2006) articulate a significant point here when they claim that 'young people's self-understanding and self-expression are worked out through complex interactions between their identity needs and the identity resources they find in culture' and therefore, 'for educational purposes, personal identity can be conceptualized as a process in which individuals

draw on both internal and cultural resources for their self-understanding and self-expression' (2006:124).

The issue of young people having multiple identities has significance for any research project that examines a particular religious identity. While much work has gone into developing different ways of understanding Catholic identity (see the website <http://www.schoolidentity.net/> for further information) there is little evidence that recognition has been given to notions of either multiple identities or multicultural Catholic identities. There is also little evidence that creating a particular Catholic identity in a school will actually bring young people to the Catholic Church. In fact, with all this attention being given to the identity of Catholic schools, I am reminded of Groome's (1998) reflection when he visited a Catholic school in Pakistan. He said:

I became intrigued by the fact that, although showing none of the outer trappings of Christianity and providing religious education in Islam, these schools are readily recognized within Pakistani culture as very 'different'....

The difference Groome noted was that:

They promote the value of the person, emphasizing the equal dignity of boys and girls – exceptional in this society; they encourage a positive outlook on life and challenge the fatalism that pervades the surrounding culture; they build up a sense of school community and promote friendship across class and ethnic divides. They also encourage students to develop a personal spirituality, to commit to justice and peace, to respect those who are different. They have strong academic curricula that encourage critical thinking In sum, these schools provide a *humanizing* curriculum, educating *for life for all* (1998:10).

Groome discovered that Christian perspectives permeated the ethos and style of the schools and quoted one nun who said: 'Though we cannot instruct in Christian faith, we see to it that gospel values pervade the life of the school and the general curriculum' (1998:10). I would suggest that this is a valuable lesson for leaders in Catholic education who are striving to create a Catholic identity for their schools.

Concluding Thoughts

Given the multicultural nature of Catholics and Catholic schools in Australia and the current focus on a 'preferred' Catholic identity, there are some implications for Catholic religious education. I would suggest, also, that some of the issues related to the Australian context would, in fact, have relevance for other countries, particularly those with a history of colonization where people had outside cultures, religions and political thinking imposed on them. Roux (2010:992) claimed that 'the importance of ethnicity, religions and cultures was not understood by its conquerors during colonization and Watson, de Souza and Trousdale (2014), indeed, found that there were different perceptions about spirituality, religion and education in those Asian countries with a colonial heritage in comparison to Bhutan, Thailand and Japan which had remained independent kingdoms. In the former, religion and religious education were perceived and treated as belonging to the private realm in society so that religious education was excluded from state school curricula. Certainly, this is the case in Australia where religious education is restricted to faith-based schools among which the Catholic Education system is the largest.

Ultimately, the ongoing discussion on Catholic identity in Australia needs to be examined from many vantage points which include the different ways of being Catholic that currently exist in this country and also, recognition needs to be given to the notion of multiple identities that are so much a part of a contemporary pluralist society. Certainly, the growth of non-European Catholics in Australia provides an argument that their views should be included in any discussion aimed at describing a concept of Catholic identity as it is being used in Australian Catholic education. However, their voices so far have not been part of the current debate. This is a significant oversight when policies and structures are put in place around a particular Catholic identity which affect the large number of non-European Catholic teachers in Catholic schools since, as Roux (2010) notes, 'teachers' biographical context and understanding of their social identity become more and more important as it influences and shapes their understanding of religion education' (Roux 2010: 994). In the Australian situation, a further question arises: How do teachers (and students, for that matter) perceive themselves when the 'preferred' Catholic identity determined by their leaders does not align with their own Catholic identity. Having a voice in the debate will

ensure that Catholics from different backgrounds feel included and their feelings of belonging may then become a convincing experience which will promote cohesion and wellbeing in the community. This will also counteract any effort to colonize Catholic identity and the transference of a specific identity to all communities. Further, as long as the debate is dominated by the leadership in Catholic education which, in turn, is dominated by Anglo Australian Catholics, one could argue that the eventuating process in existing discussions and research is merely the colonization of Catholic identity, something that should have no part in a Catholic education system contextualized by the global, plural Catholic world of the twenty-first Century.

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