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Special Religious Education in Australia and its Value to Contemporary Society

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Abstract In the postmodern world, there have been radical changes in human society. This is an era of globalisation. The traditional boundaries that separated ideologies and communities are being broken, creating a change in the "sense of place." The digital innovations—Facebook, Twitter, the internet, smart boards—are transforming the education scene. With the internet and Kindle, the whole notion of literacy has changed. The values that may have been context-specific and unique in particular social milieus are being challenged in the light of a global perspective and increasing secularisation. In addition, a key characteristic of "fluid modernity" is individuation, where each individual constructs, confirms, and maintains her/his identity according to her/his choice, desires, and tendencies. The current era brings with it a breaking and blurring of all kinds of boundaries—national, social, political, technological, and in communication. Within this complex picture, the validity of religion is being questioned and the percentage of the population which is affiliated with a specific faith group is declining. Yet, many people thought that with secularisation, religion would die, but this is not the case, and religion is still a very important actor in contemporary society. This creates significant challenges for religious education in government schools. As such, we seek to explore generational differences to help to illuminate the broader generational shifts and to highlight how, within the challenges of the post-modern world, current research highlights that it is still meaningful to teach values education within the framework of Special Religious Education (SRE) in the government school system.

1.1 Introduction

This book seeks to analyse the role, importance and value to society of maintaining Special Religious Education/Instruction (SRE/I) in government schools in Australia. The study focuses on the main faith communities in Australia and issues relating to how this system of Religious Education (RE) operates in the different Australian states. It includes the main Abrahamic monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as the Baha'i faith, and the Eastern religions of Hinduism and Buddhism. It also aims to discuss ways that the present system can

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be improved through greater transparency and accountability, and by understanding current thinking and pedagogy in relation to religious education.

This section, Part I, presents the introduction and background. In Part II, the book will discuss the major reasons as to why SRE is still of value to contemporary society. Part III will then discuss ways to improve the provision of SRE, so that its overall framework and pedagogy is relevant and appropriate for the twenty-first century. This part will include a thematic curriculum study with an analysis of the teaching and learning by the different faiths in SRE on the theme of "care and compassion", one of the key elements of the Australian Government's values framework document. The final part, Part IV, will summarise the main conclusions and recommendations of this in terms of our findings.

The starting point for this book is that Australian schools are entering a new era: one of continuous change and renewal, restructure and reconstruction, reform and transformation. The current era brings with it a breaking and blurring of all kinds of boundaries—national, social, political, technological, and in communication. The validity of religion is being questioned and the percentage of the population which is affiliated with a specific faith group is declining. This creates significant challenges for religious education in government schools. As such, we seek to explore generational differences to help illuminate the broader generational shifts, and to highlight how, within the challenges of the postmodern world, current research highlights that it is still meaningful to teach values education within the framework of religious education.

It is important to differentiate between beliefs and values, as they are not synonymous terms. Values are based on a rational premise, so it is important to be able to justify the reasons behind a value. On the other hand, beliefs are not rational, but emotional—something one feels intrinsically within oneself, which can be influenced by cultural transmission and the nature and temperament of a person or impulse (Hill 2010). In recognising the importance of emotional and social factors for student learning both from empirical and neurological research, in the last two decades there has been a greater focus on developing these skills through Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) so that the focus has shifted from just cognitive learning to affective engagement (Singh and Duraiappah 2020; Kress and Rotstein 2018).

The aim of this study is to argue that there is a confluence between ethics/moral education and religious education, and that it is still very important to enable parents within the government school sector to have the choice of SRE/RI for the education of their children. This relates both to the major societal changes taking place and to ensure that those who want a religious approach for their children will still have that opportunity.

At the same time, this study will argue that there is significant value in religious education for society, provided that it is offered within a reflective rather than a dogmatic framework. Currently, there is polarisation towards SRE and its value to our contemporary society, both at the global level and in Australia. Those opposed to SRE/RI give examples of problematic elements in Christian SRE that are due to the failure to ensure professional development for all providers (Byrne 2009, 2013, 2014; Bouma and Halafoff 2009; Maddox 2014), while those who support SRE/RI are

worried about the closure of these classes, which they passionately believe should be maintained. Objective research has demonstrated the importance of religious belief to health and wellbeing, a key aim within the Australian state government curricula.

Our aim in this book is to argue for a system of SRE for those families who choose SRE classes where students will be immersed in their own religious and cultural heritage and values, while at the same time having respect for all other faiths and cultures. The teaching of General Religious Education (GRE) is, therefore, also very important and we argue for a combination of the two, in what has been termed "cooperative education" (Schweitzer and Boschki 2004).

1.2 The Challenges: A Rapidly Changing World and Decline in Religious Practice

We live in time of rapid change. The way we make sense of our context and what society values is increasingly being shaped by a more global perspective. This section will first discuss the major societal changes that are taking place, then the emergence of multiple religious discourses and finally, the decline in specific institutional affiliations to a faith community.

1.2.1 Major Societal Changes

In the postmodern world, there have been radical changes in human society. This is an era of globalisation. The traditional boundaries that separated ideologies and communities are being broken, creating a change in the "sense of place." The digital innovations—Facebook, Twitter, the internet, smart boards—are transforming the education scene. With the internet and Kindle, the whole notion of literacy has changed. The values that may have been context-specific and unique in particular social milieus are being challenged in the light of a global perspective. In addition, a key characteristic of fluid modernity is individuation, where each individual constructs, confirms, and maintains her/his identity according to her/his choice, desires, and tendencies (Bauman 2000, 2004).

We live in a highly materialistic society. With the effects of globalisation and transnationalism, there has been "the commodification of educational programmes whose purposes are underwritten by economic forces" (Swanson 2010, p. 137). Resulting from this neoliberal agenda, vital considerations embedded in human nature relating to spirituality and wellbeing have been neglected.

Pluralism is another key concept in modern society, but it is a complex one with a multiplicity of meanings. It incorporates three major elements: methodological, political, and cultural, which are separate but overlapping. The methodological or philosophical element refers to different points of view in contrast to monism or

absolutist approaches; political refers to the individual's right to choose between different strands of thought or identification; and cultural relates to the development of multicultural theory and cultural pluralism (Conyer 2011).

Another key process that has intensified is secularisation. The theory assumed that religion and traditional values would vanish with the progress of time and the advance of modernity, and this would pave the way to a stronger emphasis on, and prioritisation of, humanistic values.

Well-known veteran Australian journalist, Greg Sheridan, has published an important eBook, *God Is Good: A Defence of Christianity in Trouble Times* (2018). In his introduction, he argues that this prioritisation of humanistic values is problematic because it removes the purpose of human existence and the transcendent nature of religions, whether it is Christianity or other religious beliefs and practices. He notes the ongoing removal of religion from the public space, with the state also starting to restrict religion: "These are small steps so far, but they will become bigger steps in time. It is very difficult now to teach scripture in a Victorian state school. Queensland education bureaucrats moved to discourage children from mentioning Jesus in the playground" (p. N/A). He argues that the growing secularisation and the potential "death of God" as having negative repercussions on the fabric of Australian society and aims in his book to demonstrate the importance and value of religious belief. Given that Australia is largely a Christian society, his book focuses on Christianity, but his message relates to all religious beliefs. Sheridan also points out that the loss of belief in God does not stop people from believing, but that their belief can include "a whole miscellany of ideologies and esoteric cults", and can also lead to polarisation within society with "sudden outburst of hysterical sentiments" (p. N/A). While Sheridan is a controversial commentator, he does raise issues which are challenging in contemporary society.

We have seen this in the increasing fundamentalism within religious belief, so that in fact, the opposite of secularisation has happened for some sectors of society. Events such as the fall of the Soviet Union where every effort was made to suppress religion but did not succeed and the current leadership has moved strongly in the direction of religious Christianity; the strengthening of fundamentalist religious beliefs and policies in Iran, Turkey and elsewhere; the attacks on 9/11; and the growth of religious evangelism in the United States with the election of Donald Trump all show that religion is still a major actor in the twenty-first century. We have seen a growing trend of terrorism in the name of God, which utilises modern technology to promote anti-modern agendas (Huntington 1996), and Australia has not been immune to these developments. This has blurred the dichotomous categories of traditionalism and modernity, and shows that multiple religious discourses have emerged with both negative and positive facets.

1.2.2 Multiple Religious Discourses

Australia's development as a multi-faith society is a recent phenomenon. In the 2016 census figures, around 52% of the population identified as Christian. The newer faith traditions, such as the Hindus, Buddhists and Baha'i, are growing in size as is the Muslim population in Australia.

As mentioned above, we live in a social context in which there are multiple agendas, discourses and interests continuously interacting with each other and with existing social patterns. Multiple voices of many groups are being heard in the current era. As a result, approaches to social processes in education, which may have been appropriate in past eras, are no longer relevant and new ways are being explored to deal with the challenges of the twenty-first century. When considering the concept of SRE/RI, educators are faced with multiple agendas and a plethora of interests, motivations, tensions and conflicts: what does being religious mean and how important is it to maintain religious beliefs, of whichever form, within our current society? This is the crucial question in terms of SRE/RI (Gross and Rutland 2015).

Traditional religious approaches, for example within Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have rejected pluralism and have tended to be absolutist. Modernity has challenged this approach. SN Eisenstadt (2000) was the first sociologist to argue that modernity is not a simple, coherent unity, but contains many facets and interpretations:

> Modernity liberates individuals from the constraining bonds of tradition generating a multiplicity of options that give rise to choice and pluralism. Yet at the same time modernity imposes certain forms of discipline, uniformity, rationalization and social control that counters individual liberation. (p. 5)

This multiplicity is intertwined with Bauman's (2000) notion of fluid modernity, which implies that our life is characterised by constant change and endemic uncertainty in which we have to be flexible. Modern life is fluid as opposed to the firm and solid life of the past. These challenges have been magnified in 2020 with the onset of the viral illness of COVID19 which has become a global threat, resulting in millions being affected and creating an even greater sense of change and uncertainty.

A key characteristic of fluid modernity is individuation, where each individual constructs, confirms, and maintains her identity according to her choice, desires, and tendencies. Twenge (2009) has demonstrated that the major generational and psychological shift is to a focus on the individual (the "me generation"), rather than on broader social needs (p. 399). Clearly these developments are very relevant for contemporary Australian society and are particularly problematic for religious education in general and SRE/RI in particular because religion tends to focus on the community rather than the individual. Religion in general is traditionally community-based; a key religious value is that community needs should take precedence over individual needs. This focus on community is seen in the charitable works conducted by Australian churches, with the Catholic Church in Australia being the second biggest deliverer of social services after the government (Sheridan 2018). This is one

of the major challenges of contemporary society, because of the destructive element of focusing on the individual, rather than the community.

The school is a major social actor that facilitates the journey into modernity through its crucial role in the formation of the moral development of its students. Therefore, given these negative trends with the declining influence of religion and its focus on community, the Australian government needs to recognise the importance of maintaining religion in the public space in general, and in our school system through SRE/RI in particular.

1.3 Secularisation and the Decline in Affiliation to a Specific Faith Community

There is a substantial literature on the theory of secularisation. In this section we shall only give a broad outline to some of the major developments in the theory of secularisation, since this is beyond the scope of this study and deserves a separate study. The focus of this book relates to religious education, but a brief overview helps to position this research within the broader Australian societal context.

According to the secularisation theory, which emerged in the late 1960s with the writings of Peter Berger, traditional religious belief and practice would disappear in the face of modernity, and secularisation would prevail. This process began with the period of the Reformation, which promoted the concepts of rationality and individualism. These forces, together with the concept of freedom of religion and belief, completely changed the role of religion in society. Bruce (1996) argues that "individualism threatened the communal basis of religious belief and behaviour, while rationality removed many of the purposes of religion and rendered many of its beliefs implausible" (p. 230). This was a slow and complex process, which took place over four centuries and was also connected to the rise of the nation-state where the Church no longer had the same power and control (Davie 2000). With the emergence of democratic political structures and a focus on egalitarianism in the modern world, people have freedom of religion, but also the freedom not to be religious (Davie 2000). This has resulted in the shift to a secular lifestyle, particularly in the Western World. This has further undermined the power of religious institutions.

José Casanova (1994), another scholar who addresses the secularisation theory, has proposed a more complex approach. He has delineated three different areas relating to the theory: firstly, secularisation which separates secular spheres from religious institutions and norms; secondly, the decline in religious beliefs; and thirdly, religion being marginalised to the private sphere. Davie (2000) posits that this categorisation allows for a more accurate analysis of religion in different parts of the world.

With the turn of the twenty-first century, two scholars, Richard Dawkins (2006) and Christopher Hitchens (2007), wrote books which are highly critical of institutionalised religion. Dawkins is a Professor of Evolutionary Biology, who is a well-known

public intellectual and has written widely on issues relating to science and philosophy. In his book, *The God Delusion*, Dawkins argues strongly for the secular case as a "staunch" atheist. As he explains in his preface, he chose the title for his book because the definition of delusion is "a persistent false belief in the face of strong, contradictory evidence" (p. 5). Dawkins' aim in his book is to dispel the God myth and instil pride in being an atheist by raising "consciousness to the fact that to be an atheist is a realistic aspiration, and a brave and splendid one" (p. 1) and to ensure that "religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down" (p. 5). He argues that the "vice" of religion is due to "childhood indoctrination" (p. 6) and in the subsequent chapters he sets out to explain why religion is so harmful to society, focusing on the irrationality of religious belief; the absurdity of creationism; difficulties due to religious opposition to homosexuality and abortion; and the problems of fundamentalism, which he claims is fostered by non-fundamentalist religion "by teaching children, from their earliest years, that unquestioning faith is a virtue" (p. 286). He complains about the privileging of religion in otherwise secular societies, and quotes from an article he wrote for the *New Statesman* that while religious advocates are not required to explain the rational basis of their beliefs "the rest of us are expected to defend our prejudices. But ask a religious person to justify their faith and you infringe 'religious liberty'" (p. 23). As such, in a highly readable text, he seeks to deconstruct religion and to highlight all the problems of the traditional biblical texts and the belief in a personal God.

In his book *God Is Not Great: How Religions Poisons Everything*, journalist Christopher Hitchens (2007), also argues that religion is harmful to society and advocates for secularism. In his introductory chapter, he outlines his main reasons for rejecting religion:

> There are four irreducible objections to religious faith: that it wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos; that because of this original error it manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism; that it is both the result and the cause of dangerous sexual repression; and that it is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking. (p. 4)

In the subsequent chapters he outlines the violence and death that have resulted from religious conflicts, discredits the major religious texts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and then deals with his other strong objections to religion. As with Dawkins, he sees religion as a man-made construct built on the indoctrination of children, which he argues is a form of child-abuse.

The arguments for the secularist theory and the negative effects of religious beliefs have also been taken up strongly within the field of educational theory, with many scholars arguing against special religious education. Particularly since the beginning of the twenty-first century secular scholars have argued about the irrationality of religion and the dangers of fundamentalism and religious education, and against special religious education whether in faith schools or government schools. For example, Hand (2003) published an article arguing for the abolition of faith-based schools because he claimed that all in-faith religious education is indoctrination. In response to critical articles by Siegel (2004), who supported his conclusions but disagreed with his process, and Short (2003) and Groothuis (2004) both of whom

rejected his basic arguments and conclusions, he published a further article by Hand (2004). Again he focused on the statement that "no religious proposition is supported by rationally decisive evidence… Religious beliefs do not qualify as knowledge precisely because the evidence in support of them is not sufficient to settle the question of their truth or falsity for rational people" (pp. 344–345). Hand adds to the charge that religious education is indoctrination of children, which he claims does injury to children because it interferes "with their minds in the most serious way possible" and "prevents them from thinking rationally about their lives" (p. 352). These views are supported by both Dawkins (2006) and Hitchens (2007) in their arguments that religion is not rational.

The increasing violent fundamentalism since September 11, in 2001, has led to further concerns being expressed about religious fundamentalism. In her book, *Unsafe Gods* (2014), Lynn Davies argues in support of a secular approach in education for security and safety reasons, including taking a critical approach to the holy texts. She believes that traditional, institutionalised religion has led to fundamentalist violence and as such has negative ramifications for contemporary society.

As part of these radical changes there has been a significant decline in organised religion across the Western world and also in Australia, especially since Dawkins and Hitchens published their books advocating a secular agenda. Over the last decade, there has been a dramatic increase in the percentage of Australians nominating "no religion" on the census, with almost one in three Australians (32%) not identifying with any religion (McCrindle 2017; Bouma and Halafoff 2017). The percentage of non-believers has increased with the younger generations, who are also more likely to change their religious beliefs from those of their family.

The decline of belief in Christianity is very clear, with almost two thirds of the generation born between the interwar period and World War II (1925–1945) believing in Christianity, compared with the current generation where less than a half of the population are believing Christians (Fig. 1.1).

In 2017, the research firm, McCrindle, undertook a study of faith and belief in Australia. They used a mixed method approach, with a quantitative national survey
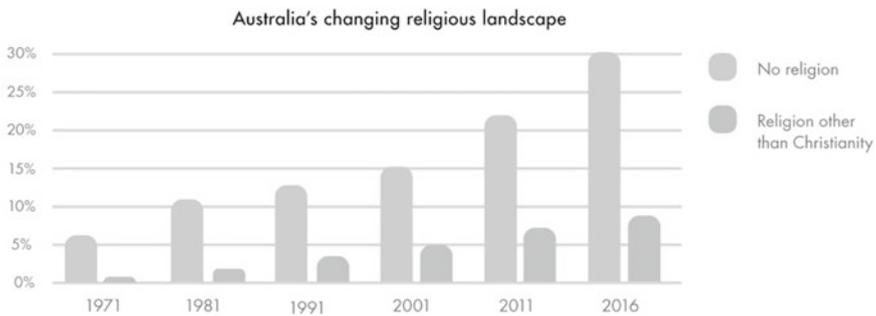
Fig. 1.1 Graph indicating Australia's changing religious landscape from 2017 census, McCrindle 2018 (*Source* ABS)

of 1,024 Australians, and three focus groups encompassing a total of 26 interviewees who did not identify as Christians. In their survey, the question on religion was tightened to "What religion do you **currently** practise or identify with?" They also provided an option for participants to indicate if they were "spiritual but not religious." They found that 45% identified with Christianity with a further 14% identifying as spiritual but not religious, making a total of 59% (p. 7). This compared with the 2011 census findings of 61% identifying as Christians.

As the graph above illustrates, while religions other than Christianity have been gradually increasing their proportion of the population, Christianity has been decreasing from 61% in 2011 to 52% in 2016. There has been a particularly steep increase in the "nones" between 2001 and 2016 with the numbers describing themselves as "no religion" doubling from 15% in 2001 to 22.5% in 2011 to 30% in 2016. These figures reflect significant social changes within Australian society in the twenty-first century. It is possible that there is some under-numeration because some small Christian groups instruct their members not to answer the question on religion, so that the true figure for Christians may be 55% not 52%. Demographers of the Jewish community also argue that there is significant under-numeration. However, when analysing the figures according to age, the decline is even more obvious.

It is important to note that whilst the number of believers is declining, there is still a substantial number of Australians who have some form of religious belief, even if they are not active participants in that faith's religious practices, such as attending church. Thus, as the McCrindle Report argues, "religion in Australia is not dead" (p. 11), but it certainly is being challenged in Australia. We analyse these trends in more detail in our chapter dealing with religious identity.

Reassessing the role, importance and value of SRE against this background of rapid societal change and the emergence of diverse populations is of central importance. Religious beliefs, including the non-Christian faiths that are growing in size in Australia, can contribute to societal well-being and it is important to maintain some confessional teaching within the public space of our schools in New South Wales for those parents and children who wish to maintain their religious beliefs and practices (Norman 2019). Opposition to religion and the increasing secularisation of contemporary society has led a polarisation where there is, on the one hand, radical atheism, and on the other hand, emerging religious fundamentalism, and this is seen across the religious faiths as will be discussed in the next section.

1.4   Growing Religious Diversity in Australia

With the end of the White Australia policy, immigration, first from Asia and more recently from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), has resulted in greater religious diversity in Australia. As a result, Australian society is becoming an increasingly multi-faith society. In the 2016 census figures, around 52% of the population identified as Christian and another 10% not stating their religious identity (Fig. 1.2).

Religious affliation in Australia

Fig. 1.2 Diagram of the religious spread from the 2016 Australian census, McCrindle 2018 (*Source* ABS, Census 2016)

The newer faith traditions and faiths, such as the Hindus, Buddhists and Bahá'í, are growing in size as is the Muslim population in Australia (Gross and Rutland 2018).

With their increase in size, we have included the smaller, non-Christian faiths in our study, because together they now represent around 10% of Australia's population and are increasing not only numerically but also proportionately (Figs. 1.3 and 1.4)
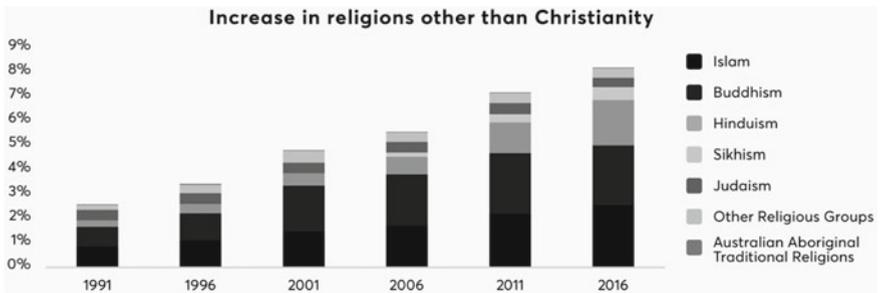

Fig. 1.3 Diagram of the increase of the minority religions, showing in particular the significant increase of Muslims from 1.6% in 1991 to 5% in 2016 (*Source* ABS, Census 2016)
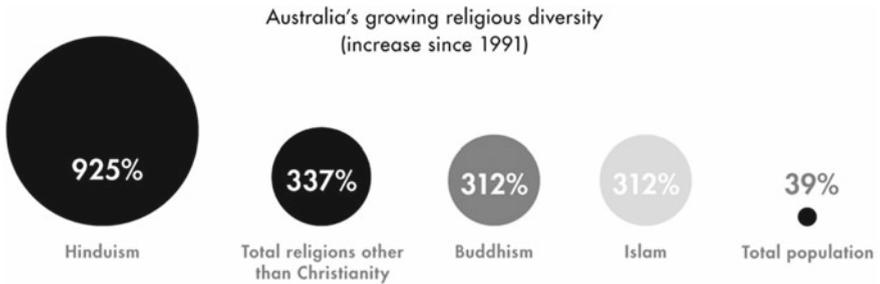

Fig. 1.4 Schemata indicating the increase in each of the religions other than Christianity and Judaism since 1991 (*Source* ABS)

due to current migration trends and a tendency to have larger families than established Australian citizens.

The concept of increasing secularisation has been challenged and the concept of "a massive secularisation of international and national politics seems to be far away" (Skeie 2006, p. 19). The theory assumed that religion and traditional values would vanish with the progress of time and the advance of modernity, and this would pave the way to a stronger emphasis on, and prioritisation of, humanistic values. Whilst we have seen increasing secularisation on the one hand, we have seen increasing fundamentalism within religious belief on the other hand. So, in fact, the opposite to secularisation has happened in some sectors of society.

As in Europe, for many of the newcomers, "religious identification takes on a unique status in supporting their efforts to establish their identity as minorities" (Mitchell 2005, p. 414). As a result, in-faith religious education which fosters a reflective and dialogical approach can play a key role in the social integration of the different religious groups in Australia.

The re-emergence of religion in the public sphere creates new challenges in terms of the relationship between the state and religion. It is a complex issue that involves many different layers. In the light of these developments, the role of religious education within the state system needs to be revisited and new approaches found to meet this educational challenge. This is important in terms of countering antisocial behaviour and fostering better interethnic relations. Indeed, Gearon (2012) has argued that "one of the implications of this has been the 'securitization of religion in education', where religion in education is put not simply to political but security issues" (p. 164). Furthermore, it is important in terms of countering antisocial behaviour and fostering prosocial interethnic relations (Fig. 1.5).

In addition, global immigration has increased religious diversity creating significant demographic changes, and this includes Australia. So, with this increasing religious diversity and the emergence of religion as a security issue (Gearon 2015), "religious education needs to remain on the agenda of state-funded education" (Sakaranaho 2018, p. 112). Wang (2013) also argues that "educators should recognise religious diversity as a cultural phenomenon in society" (p. 152).

Australia is not unique in needing to recognise that religion and religious education is a public issue which needs to be managed, despite the number of Australians who identify themselves as "no religion" or "nones" (Bouma and Halafoff 2017). This has become a global issue, with different approaches and solutions being trialled. Thus, the key questions for the government to consider in terms of multiculturalism are:

1. Should the state provide religious education in schools or should this be left to the religious communities?
2. Should religious education be a confessional, in-faith approach (as with SRE/RI) or should it be more general religious education offered in a secular fashion with a focus on ethics and philosophy?
3. Who should be involved in organising religious education—only the states or should religious authorities also have a role to play?
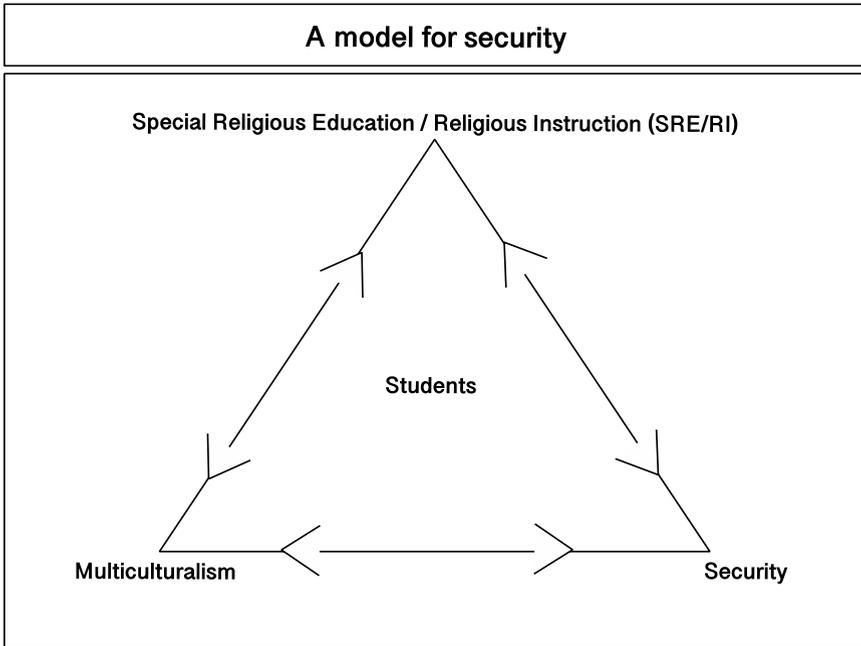
Fig. 1.5 Diagram indicating the relationship between SRE/RI, multiculturalism and security

Whilst religious freedom is recognised as a key right within a democracy, there is a great deal of debate within Australia about the questions listed above. This book argues that Australian multicultural society will be the poorer with the exclusion of religious education from the public sphere, that students need to be grounded in their own religious faith and identity, and that a partnership is needed in religious education, rather than a top-down approach. Such a partnership between the state and religious communities allows for a shared responsibility, producing more effective results.

As Valk and Tosun (2016) have argued:

> Exploring one's beliefs and values (one's worldviews) requires a journey into one's "inner territory" – into one's heart, soul and mind (*Knowing Self*). But… *Knowing Self* requires *Knowing Others*, imperative in an increasingly global world. (p. 105)

The concept of worldview education has been discussed in recent scholarship due to the changing religious profile, with the increasing numbers defining themselves as "nones" as shown in Fig. 1.1. Van der Kooij et al. (2017) have defined worldview education as having three main characteristics: firstly, combining religious and secular views because of the changing religious landscape, meaning that it is more inclusive; secondly, being "organised" in that it draws on a tradition of texts; and thirdly, as dealing with existential questions relating to issues such as the meaning of life (pp. 172–173).

The issues relating to General Religious Education (GRE) and Worldview Education relate to contemporary debates on these broader concepts which involve "learning about" and "learning from" (Jackson 2014; Valk and Tosun 2016; Van der Kooij et al. 2017; Halafoff and Bouma 2019), but the focus of our research has been Special Religious Education/Instruction (SRE/RI), which is different from the GRE/Worldview approaches. We posit that while both approaches are necessary since religion is still a major player in the contemporary world, this book examines SRE/RI. We seek to investigate the advantages and challenges of the voluntary system SRE/RI within government schools in Australia through a qualitative research study as discussed in the next section.

1.5   Methodology

This book has developed from a previous research project carried out from 2009 to 2015 within Jewish SRE/SRI and the current, broader project, which has included six main faith communities in eastern Australia, operating across Bronfenbrenner's ecological system, as discussed in this section.

1.5.1   Background

The research for this book emerged from a previous ethnographic study which used grounded theory methodology, a qualitative research method that aims to investigate systematic social processes existing within human relations and actions (Strauss and Corbin 1997). This study was conducted between 2009 and 2015 in the two major Jewish centres—Melbourne, Victoria and Sydney, New South Wales—and included the triangulation of interviews with all key stakeholders (principals, teachers, students and parents); class observations; and analysis of major curricula documents and information on the relevant websites (Gross and Rutland 2014, 2015). We found that SRE provided a "safe place" for Jewish children because of playground antisemitism, that the students loved to come to these classes and that they added positive value to the Jewish children's government school education. At the same time, beginning in 2010, we participated in the deliberations of the Religion, Ethics and Education Network of Australia (REENA) relating to the debate about the value of SRE and we were dissenting voices in the final "Statement of Principles" which was published in 2013 (https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/4483185/reena-statement-of-principles-and-actions-religion-ethics-and-) as discussed in Chapter 3.

Based on this research, the resultant publications and our participation in REENA, we were invited in June 2018 by the newly established, multi-faith group, Better Balanced Futures (BBF), then active in New South Wales and currently developing a national profile, to write a report for the New South Wales government on the value of SRE, to be presented to the New South Wales Premier, Gladys Berejiklian.

Over the subsequent five months we worked on an extensive literature research on all the key issues relating to both SRE and GRE (World Views RE) on which we based the report presented to the premier. We also spoke at a major event held at Parliament House in November 2018 in Sydney, together with then Minister of Education, Rob Stokes, and Shadow Minister Jihad Dib. This function was attended by representatives of all the major faith groups in New South Wales with around 500 participants, illustrating the importance attached to the maintenance of SRE in the state. We were also invited to the northern state of Queensland and met in its capital, Brisbane, with representatives of the major faiths, when we presented our research findings, as well as key bureaucrats from Queensland's Department of Education. This led to our being invited to be external assessors for their major review of Religious Instruction (RI) curricula and the establishment of clear guidelines for the teaching of SRI. SRE/RI has been maintained in both these states but as discussed in Chapter 3, Victoria ceased offering SRI in curriculum time after 2015.

Building on that experience, BBF then invited us to write a second research report on the advantages of SRE/RI for the federal minister of multiculturalism. This report was presented as well to the New South Wales Minister of Multiculturalism at Parliament House in May 2019. This presentation was attended by the key leadership of the different faith communities. The meeting took place shortly after the mass shooting attack at the mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, by Brenton Tarrant, who grew up in the town of Grafton in northern New South Wales. The Bishop of Grafton participated in the intense discussion as to how to combat such fundamentalist extremism and the role of religious education in combatting such prejudice. Our report stressed the importance of a combination of SRE and GRE in what is termed "cooperative education" (Schweitzer 2007; Schweitzer and Boschki 2004) to foster social cohesion in multicultural and multi-faith Australia.

In both our original research into Jewish RE and then this broader study we form an insider/outsider team. Research has shown that "the researcher's background inevitably affects every aspect of the research, from research questions to conduct of data collection to analysis. But it is the participants' voices we seek, their meaning we must discover" (Court and Abbas 2013, p. 481). In our case, Suzanne Rutland was the insider researcher who was born and grew up in Australia and has first-hand knowledge of attending SRE classes, or as is colloquially known as "scripture classes", and of the nuances of the local education scene. Zehavit Gross grew up in Israel and so is the outsider researcher. However, we both share commonality with our European Jewish origins, with family Holocaust backgrounds, religious orthodox beliefs and at the same time a broad, liberal perspective which includes a desire for gender equality, inclusiveness and recognition of the intrinsic worth of all religious beliefs and the importance interfaith dialogue. Working together, we have become close friends and understand "what each of us brings to the table and how we complement each other" (Court and Abbas 2013, p. 484). Rutland is an historian and brings an historical perspective to our research and Gross has an international reputation in the field of religious education, its theory and practice. Our joint perceptions are like seeing an object with binoculars—the two of us are able together to magnify an issue and this enables a better understanding of the situation

than if we were working by ourselves. Flores posits that "the insider/outsider debate is also consistent with 'emic' versus 'etic' perspectives where the 'insider' researcher is better positioned to develop theory from the ground up (emic), rather than from an 'outsider' top-down approach of applying theory to qualitative data (etic)" (Flores 2018, p. 3), but in our case our experience is not as binary. Our positionality is much more fluid and fits more in the constructivist understanding of the insider/outsider debate.

Based on the research documents utilising an extensive research literature search that we wrote for the New South Wales government in 2018 and 2019, we decided to broaden our initial study of Jewish SRE for this book to include six major faith groups in Australia: Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews and the Baha'i faith. We again used grounded theory methodology and drew on material from oral interviews including all six faith communities, as well as meetings with political and religious leaders and key stakeholders in the various faith communities during an intensive visit in August 2019, which included all four eastern states: New South Wales, where we again had a major presentation in Parliament House, Sydney, with the Minister and Shadow Minister for Education speaking; Brisbane, Queensland; Hobart and Launceston, Tasmania; and Melbourne, Victoria. The interviews and meetings enabled us to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and advantages of SRE/RI, as discussed in the next section.

1.5.2 Research Population and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory

The research population for this study drew on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) multi-sustained ecological theory, which was inspired by both Vygotsky's theories that child development can be analysed either within a limited or broader context of the environment in which it occurs. The environment is impacted by a number of micro, macro, meso and exo systems and these, in turn, have a significant impact on the child's world, values and education. Our interviewee population is illustrated in Fig. 1.6, which draws on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory.

The immediate (micro) environment includes the nuclear or extended family, the peer group and their relationships such as parent–teacher relationship, parent and peer group, nuclear family and extended family. The experiences of the child in the immediate family, the religious community, youth group and place of worship (Gross 2013; Waghid and Davis 2014) have a far-reaching impact on the child's religious beliefs and values (Francis 2005), especially when combined with the education that their parents want to give them and the values they impart, as discussed in Chapter 4. In regard to this ecological level, our interviews included graduates of SRE/RI classes, and some of the teachers who were also parents.

In addition, there is the impact on values development of the wider political and social (macro) context, which can also have far-reaching influences on the shaping
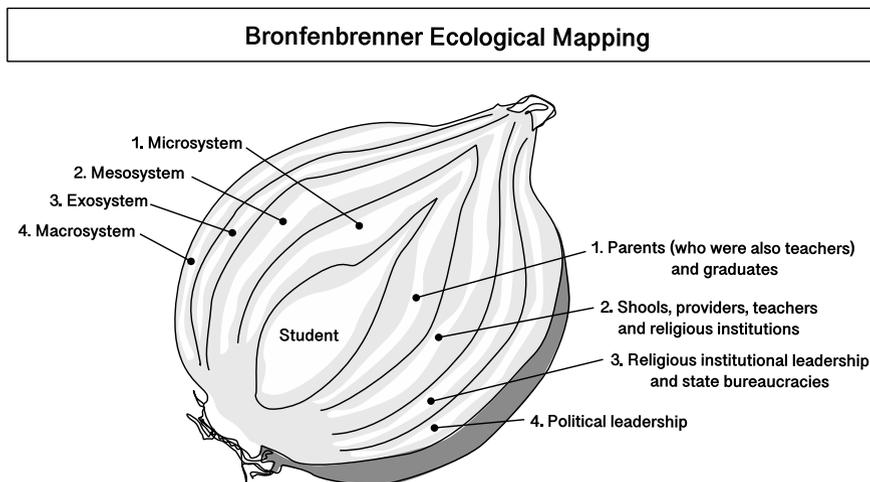
Fig. 1.6 Diagram of SRE/RI and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory

of the student's religious identity, values, and religious education within which the child grows. In relation to this ecological level, we met with key politicians in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria, in the latter two states in focus groups and in the former also on a one-on-one basis with the newly elected Opposition Leader of the Labor Party, Jodi Mackay and with a key member of the state's Department of Education.

As well, the mesosystem, namely the relationship between the connections in the immediate environment and the existing institutions, such as schools and SRE/RI providers, the residential area, and the exosystem, in terms of the community and religious institutions, can be seen to have a far-reaching impact on religious identity, values and education. This level was included in terms of the interviews, both individual and focus groups; formal meetings with individuals and groups; and informal meetings, with two dinners organised by the Muslim leadership in Sydney, one consisting of representatives from the Abrahamic faiths and the second with a key Muslim personality and a former police commissioner who was very involved with the faith communities; an informal lunch meeting with Christian leaders in Hobart and dinner with the rabbi of Tasmania in Launceston. These social meetings provided the opportunity for informal and in-depth interviews and focus group discussions which enabled us to gain a deeper insight into the broader meso- and exosystems in terms of the Australian religious communities and their institutions. As such, these informal social meetings were a research technique organised by BBF and ourselves. The restaurants where these meetings took place became research sites which helped to validate our findings and increase our understanding of this complicated and challenging issue. They created a synergy between the researchers and the field of research.

As well, we were interviewed on public radio in Brisbane (Austin 2018; Prater 2019) and Sydney (O'Doherty 2018), articles were published in the general press and this created significant debate within the community (Bennett 2018; Caldwell 2018; Rinaudo 2018; Sandeman 2018; and Sheehan 2019). After our radio interview in August 2019 in Brisbane with Vision Radio, the Queensland Parents for Secular State Schools created a petition for the Queensland state parliament against the SRI program. In a Facebook post encouraging people to sign the petition, they wrote:

> We've previously posted a radio interview they did with Steve Austin on ABC radio which was pretty eye-opening for the anorexia and body harming (sic) are because of a decline in faith, and for the barely concealed disdain for those who don't have a religious faith.
>
> Well, here's another interview, except this one's on Christian radio 20Twenty and they are even less guarded about their dim view of the lives of those who don't have religious beliefs; Non-religious people have meaningless lives, apparently.
>
> And the way they go on about how important religion is to have in schools you'd be forgiven for thinking that non-religious students simply don't exist, or at least are not worthy of consideration.

To support their argument, they quoted from the critique of Professor Marion Maddox, whose book we discuss in Chapter 3. She stated:

> The claims made about the need for values education have little connection to the actually existing Christian SRE programs that I examined (see my previous analysis of ACCESS Ministries curriculum). Both the explicit and hidden curriculum in Christian SRE programs that I and my research assistant Cathy Byrne examined proved to embody values significantly at odds with the principles of inclusion, toleration and value for everyone that underlie public schooling. (Facebook Post 2019, August 27)

This petition in which they advocated for a worldview religious education program and requested a Queensland parliamentary review of RI was submitted to the parliament on September 15, 2019, with 4198 signatures (https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/work-of-assembly/petitions/petition-details?id=3145). In Victoria, a newspaper article by well-known religious scholars, Anna Halafoff and Gary Bouma, highlighted the Queensland debate and also argued in support of GRE/World Views education, criticising our arguments in support of SRE/RI, without specific reference to our research (Halafoff and Bouma 2019). However, neither the Queensland petitioners nor the other advocates for GRE/World Views acknowledged the fact that we argued in our report on multiculturalism for a combination of GRE and SRE, which we shall elaborate on in Chapter 7. These community debates were part of the research field, fitting into Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory at both the macro and exo-levels (Norman 2019).

1.5.3   Tools

We prepared a semi-structured, open ended questionnaire with the following questions being approved by the human ethics procedure of the University of Sydney: