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# A scholarly affair: proceedings of the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia 2010 national conference

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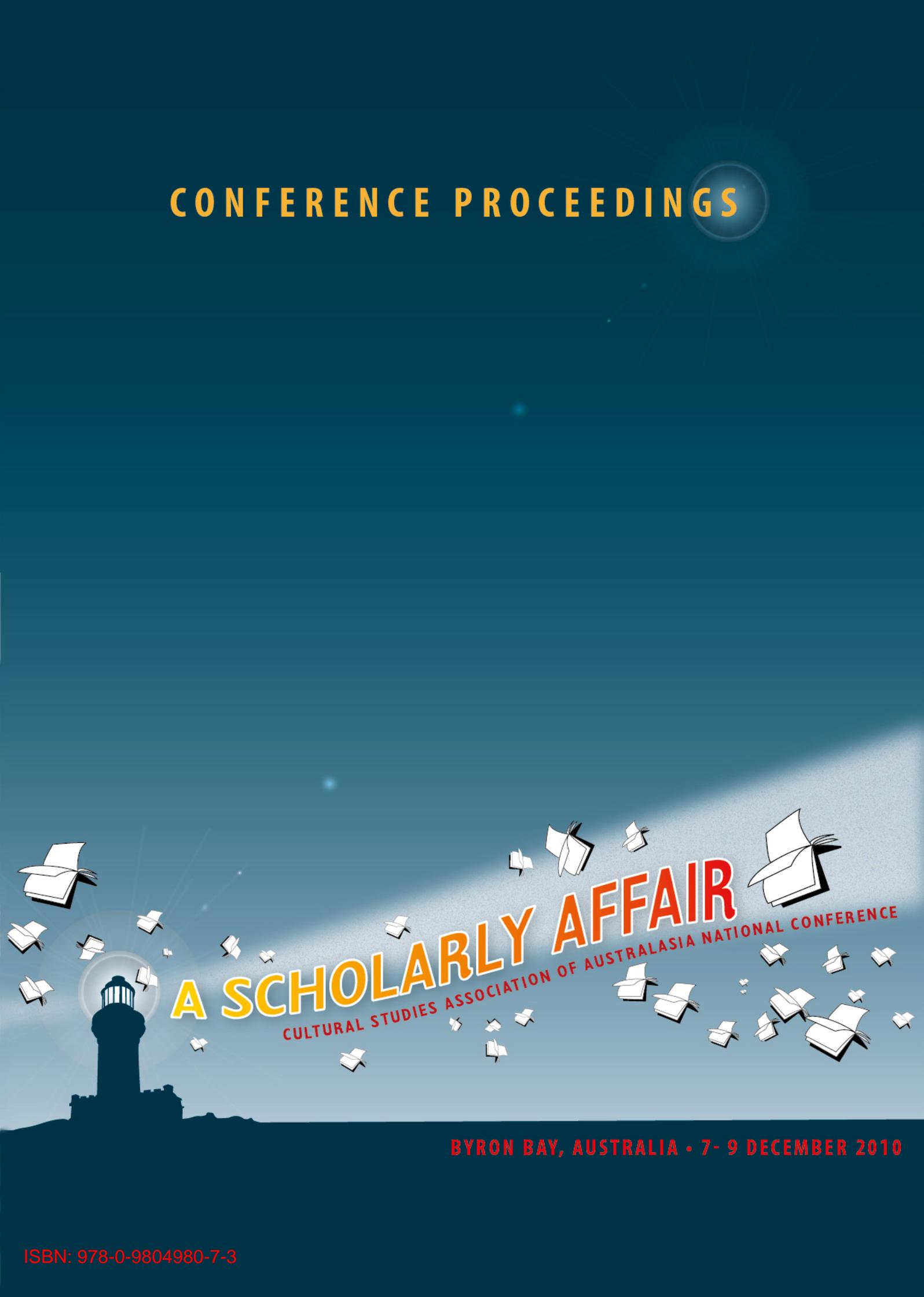
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CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS



**A SCHOLARLY AFFAIR**

CULTURAL STUDIES ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALASIA NATIONAL CONFERENCE

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# A Scholarly Affair

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*All the papers in the A Scholarly Affair: Cultural Studies Association of Australasia 2010 National Conference Proceedings have been blind, peer refereed by members of a panel of national and international experts in Cultural Studies.*



## Introduction

The papers in this *Proceedings* are the result of presentations given at ‘A Scholarly Affair’, the National Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia held at the Byron Bay Community and Cultural Centre, NSW, Australia, from 7 - 9 December 2010. The conference organisers asked participants to focus on the contribution that Cultural Studies makes as an interdisciplinary space for reflexive, critical and empirically based research to the project of higher education, pedagogy and social justice. These proceedings are a product of that call.

Susan Giroux and Norman Denzin have recently argued that the work of the scholar is to subject structures of power, knowledge, and practice to critical scrutiny, what Paul Gilroy has referred to as principled exposure. In contrast, it is salient to recall Toni Morrison’s view that ‘racism is a scholarly affair.’ This inherent tension about what a scholar does - and what is expected of and from them - goes to the heart and relevance of Cultural Studies scholarship. Given the present instrumentalised and corporate university environment with its dominant values of standardisation and emphasis on an audit-based culture - there is a compelling and urgent need to re-imagine the space/place of the contemporary scholar and their role in society. In the age of Obama and Gillard, Cultural Studies, as a discipline that uniquely responds to the pull of the relevant, the imperatives of socially inclusive practices and communities of engagement, needs, as Catherine Burnheim puts it, to go ‘beyond corporatism into the wilds of the knowledge economy’.

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All the papers in the *Proceedings* have been blind, peer refereed by members of a panel of national and international experts in Cultural Studies.

The referencing in the *Proceedings* is a mixed referencing system. While some standardisation has been attempted, the inter-disciplinary nature of the conference meant that one referencing system could not suit all writing and topics. For this reason we have chosen a pragmatic path and allowed a range of styles, the key criteria being clarity, consistency and accuracy.

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# Believe or 'burn in hell': The politics of religion pedagogy in Australia, a pilot study

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**Abstract:** Public school religion education raises complex policy responsibilities in plural democracies. In Australia, ambiguous policy intent and contradictory implementations create confusion for parents and educators. The state's desire to encourage access by diverse faith groups defends minimal regulation, but also enables extremism, with children warned they will 'burn in hell if (they) do not believe in Jesus' (ID44). In the context of debate about alternatives, this pilot survey of attitudes identifies significant differences between the teaching philosophy desired by parents and professional educators and the approach taken by volunteer religious instructors.

## Politics, unity and diversity

21st century religion has re-emerged as a social force beyond 20th century secularization. Contemporary global developments (such as transnational labour markets, communication technologies, religious revivalism and mass migration) 'raise important issues about the status of religious law, custom and practice in the context of Western secularism' (Turner 2007, 406). Turner noted that the political contradiction between a nation's desire to maintain homogenous unity, and its economic need for intercultural exchange, produces a 'binary division between insiders and outsiders ... aliens and citizens' (411). Turner argued that 'Globalization has created a system of religions that are competitive and often mutually exclusive' (412). He warned that 'where nationalism becomes caught up with religion ... it makes the creation of an inclusive (secular) community especially difficult to achieve' (Turner 2009, 72).

Australian national identity 'continues to experience tensions between multiculturalism, on the one hand, and a legacy of Anglo privilege and cultural dominance on the other' (Forrest and Dunn 2010, 86). Such tensions are exacerbated by modern media's desire for, and focus on, conflict (Lester, 2011). Lester theorised that the ever-present message of insider-outsider tension creates the belief that accommodating both religious minorities and Christian conservatives in public policy is 'too controversial or impossible practically' (2011, 4). Australian media shows some support for a broad-based study of religions in public schools (Topsfield 2011a; Zwartz 2011). However, adversarial articles dwell on potential conflict (Topsfield 2011b) and over-simplify the issue to one of polemical support for, or objection to, religion in schools. The complexities of 'good and bad' ways to teach religion are rarely dealt with.

Australia's approach to navigating insider-outsider boundaries is reflected in education policy and practice, as school room micro-interactions encapsulate the shift, from a white, Anglo-Celt, Christian society, to a nation of multiple cultures and beliefs. Prime Minister Gillard spoke of the power of education to temper the tension: 'During a time of challenging global trends and demographic shifts ... education policy will play a key role' (Gillard 2010). In education, religion brings sharp focus on the insider-outsider boundary dispute through two different pedagogical approaches: one that excludes religious others and one that embraces them.

This pilot study examines the two approaches and explores connections between these pedagogies and a liberal-authoritarian spectrum of attitudes. It questions whether a single-faith approach to teaching religion harbours authoritarian attitudes, which in turn may foster intolerance.

## Religion, prejudice and education

Australian social research points to the importance of interreligious education as part of the remedy for countering ethnic and religious prejudice (Erebus International 2006; HREOC 2007; Byrne 2009; Bouma and Halafoff 2009). In response to increasing international mobility, the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, signed by all state education ministers and the then Federal minister for both Education and Social Inclusion, Julia Gillard, noted a heightened need for Australian educators to ‘nurture an appreciation of and respect for social, cultural and religious diversity and a sense of global citizenship’ (Education Services Australia 2008, 4). This call for an intercultural approach to religion in education is not new. Similar recommendations to state and federal agencies can be found throughout the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s (Lovat 2002)

Decades on, the most consistent finding of the 2011 Australian Human Rights Commission Report into Freedom of religion and belief in 21st century Australia, is the ‘need for, and benefits of, education about religion... for all schools to develop awareness, familiarity, and respect for difference, from the first year to the final year of a child’s education’ (Bouma, Cahill, Dellal, and Zwartz 2011, 58). As a ‘critical need’, the report highlights ‘education about the religions, spiritualities and worldviews present in and affecting Australia... (as a way to) increase understanding and knowledge and, in so doing, reduce discrimination and prejudice’ (80).

This need increases with the inexorable shifts in Australia’s religious demographics. At the 2006 census (ABS 2006b): 63 percent of Australians indicated that they were Christian; 30 percent had either no religion or did not specify; 2.1 percent were Buddhist and 1.7 percent were Muslim.

Despite increasing religious diversity, Australian research shows widespread ignorance about different religions (Rymarz 2007; Cahill, Bouma, Delal and Leahy, 2004) and frequent religiously-marked racial prejudice, particularly towards Muslims (HREOC 2007; Forrest and Dunn 2007). Australian surveys in recent decades show consistent high levels of intolerance and rejection of cultural diversity (Markus 2010). 40 percent of Australians believe some ethnic and religious groups do not belong in the country though only one in 10 outwardly express racist views (Dunn 2008). Reflecting Turner’s contradictory tension, Forrest and Dunn noted that ‘strong levels of support for cultural diversity co-exist with anti-multicultural attitudes’ (2010, 81)

Forrest and Dunn (2010) found regional differences in racism depending on the degree of cross-cultural contact. They claimed that culturally diverse areas have higher levels of contact and insecurity about cultural difference, and associated this with high levels of racism. Additionally they found that areas of low-level cross-cultural relations showed low racism levels. When considering exclusive attitudes, inter-cultural exposure is not the only influencing factor. Forrest and Dunn concluded that ‘learned attitudes underlie peoples’ actions’ (98), and that uncivil behaviour towards cultural diversity can be changed. As Jackson noted, the connection between education and tolerance depends on pedagogy (2004).

## Religion pedagogies

Theorists distinguish between faith-forming instruction or learning into a religion (which teaches the doctrine and practices of a single tradition and encourages the student to become an insider), and multi-tradition education learning about religions, as an outsider (Grimmit 2000). These approaches are considered oppositional due to vastly different emphases on the role of the learner. They are often described as ‘religious instruction’ - RI, and ‘religion education’ - RE. McInerney & McInerney (2002) and Dewey (1938) argued that instruction implies an answer-focused, teacher-centred and top-down approach, where passive learners are spoon fed approved information, while education places the learner at the centre of a bottom-up process which values the art of questioning (in Bradford 2008). Education sees the learner as active protagonist and critical decision maker.

In Australia, different states, institutions and individuals use varying nomenclature. New South Wales (NSW) policy uses the terms: ‘Special Religious Education’ (SRE) - to describe weekly instruction by faith volunteers; and ‘General Religious Education’ (GRE) - to describe social science education, taught by professionals. SRE is more correctly understood to be instruction into a single-faith, so I refer to it as ‘RI’.

Before conducting the attitudes survey, I reviewed various state policy documents and interviewed practicing and retiring teachers, principals, religious community leaders, RI volunteers and parents. Given Australia’s social tensions, the following questions were explored: Do RI volunteers include or exclude the religious other? Do children get conflicting messages from professional educators and RI volunteers? Do current policy and practice support historic Christian dominance and ongoing privilege? Following is a summary of the policy context and common practices.

## Religion in Australian schools – more learning into than learning about

The state-based but nationally similar policies emphasize faith formation (RI) over the academic study of religions (RE). In NSW, General Religious Education (GRE) is a poorly supported subject area (NSWDET 2008) and receives about one-sixth of the class time given to RI. In practice, GRE receives minimal curriculum attention, and usually only in grades 3 and 4. The Department also acknowledges ‘limited flow through’ of GRE into the senior stages (NSWDET 2008, Q.20). It appears that learning about religions is not a priority in NSW public schools at any age. In contrast, RI begins in kindergarten, with a dedicated weekly timeslot of up to one hour

In NSW, as in most other states, parents must specify at enrolment either a faith denomination or ‘no religion’, and select from available weekly RI classes, commonly called ‘scripture’. Some metropolitan schools offer a wide choice of traditions; in other regions, options are limited to ‘Christianity’ or ‘non-scripture’. About 90 percent of authorised RI providers in NSW are Christian (NSWDET 2010). Against policy, a few schools have only the Christian option, with no opt-out provision. In some NSW schools (and in Victoria as policy), if parents do not formally opt out, the default is Christian (usually non-denominational Protestant). In some schools, formal opt-out, in writing, is a yearly requirement.

For many children, scripture is their first experience of cultural segregation. Students not attending are supposed to be separated, but this does not always occur. Often, opt-out ‘non-scripture’ children simply go to the back of the class to read or do homework, while the religious volunteer passes out treats and colouring sheets to others.

Most states legislate against positive opt-out alternatives. In some NSW schools, 80 percent of children opt out of RI (Longstaff, 2010), and are usually placed in limited supervision, age-combined groups. A hotly debated amendment to the NSW Education Act allowed the teaching of secular ethics as an RI alternative for the first time in 2011 (NSW Parliament 2010), overturning more than a century of Church primacy in the ostensibly secular system. Prior to this amendment, the policy prohibited activities which might compete with RI such as 'lessons in ethics, values, civics or general religious education' (NSWDET 2002, 3). In one Sydney school, activities such as knitting, playing chess or drawing were also banned (Russell 2011). In another school, opt-out children were told by the principal that they would be 'better off going back to their scripture class' (NSWDET 2011, 1).

The NSW ethics program will reach only 57 of the state's 2200 public schools in 2011. However, several Christian Church leaders have vowed to challenge the amendment. Other states have yet to enable a positive non-religious option despite repeated requests from Humanist organisations.

State agencies do not monitor RI curriculum or delivery. Instead, they authorise providers to develop and deliver RI without interference. NSW policy notes that 'Schools are not responsible for and should not disseminate... (RI) lesson content' (NSWDET 2002, 4). Trained teachers are only allowed to attend 'with the agreement of the (RI volunteer) teacher' (4), and complaints (of inefficiency or distortion of doctrine) are referred back to the religious bodies who endorse the volunteers. The NSWDET does not collect or analyse or complaints centrally. The policy appears to write out government accountability, with RI administration effectively outside departmental jurisdiction.

One NSWDET complaint illustrates the policy in practice. In 2010, a parent complained about racial vilification in RI. Their nine-year-old's class was told that 'God gets angry at men who marry foreign women' (NSWDET 2011, 1). The child's mother is of Hindu, Indian heritage. Lesson notes for the children included the story of Ahab, which stated that: 'foreign nations' have 'disgusting customs'; and that worshipping 'false' or 'foreign' gods (other than 'the God of Israel') is 'unmitigated evil' and a 'sin' worse than 'both adultery and murder' (Christian Education Publications 2010, 9-26). During the class, a Bangladeshi girl was asked to role-play the idolater Jezebel, who led Ahab to sin and punishment of death. Children's notes included the details that 'prostitutes washed themselves in (Ahab's) blood ... and dogs licked Ahab's blood off the ground, just as the lord had warned' (Christian Education Publications 2010, 26). This curriculum is widely used in schools across the country

Responding to the complaint, the NSWDET defended RI policy on the grounds that it 'separates church and state', and reiterated that: 'the Department has no say over the content of scripture classes' (Elliot in NSWDET 2011, 1). The provider, Anglican Youthworks, argued that: 'Whether you like it or not, whether it's brutal or not, it's in the Bible' (Webb in NSWDET 2011, 2).

Problems of extremist teaching are not isolated to the Christian traditions, with various state education departments and minority faith peak bodies recording inappropriate representation. In any case, the complaints mechanism appears to offer little redress. RI providers of various faiths, motivated by good intentions and delivering potentially beneficial programs, find it increasingly difficult to defend the current system.

## Christian proselytising privilege

The arm's length policy enables state support for Christian privilege. In Victoria, the Education Department sponsors Christian Access Ministry (with four year funding of \$2 million). Access provides 96 percent of Victorian RI and are the default provider for those do not opt out. They define their role as 'converting' children in a 'cross cultural mission', since, 'without Jesus, our students are lost' (Pattison 2008, 8-12). The Department does not provide financial aid to minority faiths or secular groups. Access describes the policy environment as a 'God-given open door to children', with schools seen as 'the greatest mission field ... for disciple-making' (Paddison, 2008, 6). An Anglican chaplain from a Victorian private school commented that: 'The state school classroom is not the place for conversion or proselytising, and while Access Ministries would claim that's not what they do, I'm afraid that is their default position' (Noone 2011, 3)

Christianity advantage is also apparent in NSW. For example, the NSWDET produces a worship booklet for Education Week which invites children to: 'learn more about your Son Jesus as we read the Bible' (NSWDET 2010a). In 2010, a NSW public school permitted a Christian group to build a room on school grounds for religious instruction. Against state policies, the group opposes homosexuality, supports creationism and teaches intelligent design. Ignoring the conflict of interest, the \$40,000 gift was approved by the NSWDET (Gilmore, 2010). This Christian emphasis raises questions for parents and educators regarding policy intent.

## Research in religious diversity and education

Despite calls for inclusive religion education, Australian public schooling favours segregated instruction, using untrained volunteers, in a mechanism lacking accountability, with limited opt-out provisions.

In contrast, standards for government school RE in the UK, Europe, Canada, Indonesia and parts of Africa draw on the Toledo Guiding Principles (OSCE/ODIHR 2007). These principles aim to direct RE policy to: encourage dialogue between traditions; provide positive opt-out arrangements; and enable the state to ensure professionalism in teaching. In addition, research into religion pedagogy and its social effects has been given a high priority in the UK, Europe and Canada in the past few decades. The international trend is for children to 'develop the ability to live with difference... at the earliest possible age' (Schweitzer 2009, 41)

Hull speculated that single-faith instruction increases inter-religious intolerance because it provides no bridge to understanding other beliefs and 'does not expand the cognitive horizons of the student'. At the same time, criticism of the multi-tradition approach includes the concern that while it may 'help break down the stereotypes of the religious traditions' (Hull 2001, 2) it has tended to be either overly descriptive (too clinical and full of facts) and thus trivializing the 'spirit' in spirituality (Burn & Hart 1988), or, contrarily, over-emphasizing similarity of spiritual experience, thus illegitimately homogenising critical differences between faiths (Barnes 2009)

Australia and New Zealand both use a single-faith access system, but research on its outcomes is non-existent. Bradford's (2008) study on Victorian approaches highlighted variations in the understanding of educators, parents and religious volunteers, partly because of the RI program's covert nature, but also due to the lack of RE implementation. Few participants in her survey were aware of any difference between 'religious instruction' and 'religious

education'. Despite a distinction in policy, some parents and volunteers assumed that both RI and RE referred to Christian catechism. Bradford argued that RI in government schools forms part of a hidden curriculum since it does not have an explicit curriculum space and since it resides within an ambiguously understood 'secular' policy environment. Her study highlighted the controversial and emotive nature of the subject, with some respondents resembling 'a sleeping volcano' (30).

Bradford noted that arguments in support of RI generally relied on implied values education, rather than religious reasoning. She said that by understating its religious component, RI hides its essential nature and that: 'The education system appears to nest a dysfunction by having a whole curriculum aiming for high level thinking and, on the other hand, a [non-critical] religious instruction program' (Bradford 2008, 12). Countering this, Gross and Rutland (2010) argued that RI provides a safe space for children of minority faiths, in contexts that are increasingly hostile. Lovat et al (2010) argued that such hostility could be addressed through values education.

The potential to increase education about religions for all children, and the importance of this, particularly for those in privileged groups, has not been explored in Australia. Religion is not a distinct area of the new national curriculum. Representatives of the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) stress the Authority's limited mandate, and that implementation of the new curriculum will conform to state Departments' requirements (ACARA 2011). Meanwhile, segregated, Christian-centric instruction continues.

## Politics as religion pedagogy

Fundamentalist religiosity has been linked to prejudice and right-wing authoritarianism by Allport (1950), Altemeyer (1996), Duck and Hunsberger (1999); Rowat and Franklin (2004) and Brint and Abrutyn (2010). What is less understood is the manifestation of these links in classroom practice. Mavor, Louis and Laythe emphasised the complexity of authoritarianism as a construct, and the importance of further efforts towards 'understanding the paradoxical relationships between religiosity, prejudice and social conflict' (2011, 41). Farnen and Meleon (2000) found that a teacher's ideology may influence both pedagogy and student attitudes. Jackson also linked pedagogy to ideology, with RI favoured by conservative nationalists, who 'promote the association of morality, religion and citizenship (with) ... cultural and national identity... by arguing that Christian indoctrination is an educationally valid approach' (2004, 2).

In this vein, Law (2007, 23) argued that the most 'vital' dispute regarding approaches to religion pedagogy lay not between believers and atheists, but between 'Liberals on the left' and 'Authoritarians on the right' (original capitalization). Law found 'a sliding scale between the liberal and authoritarian extremes' (2), locating most approaches between these positions. The approaches tend to differ on: single versus plural settings; literal versus metaphorical scriptural interpretations; top-down and centralized versus bottom-up and distributed authority; and collective versus individual moral responsibility.

Law noted that both ends of the scale can be problematic. Extreme liberalism can become confused with relativism and distort into 'politically correct twaddle of a rather noxious sort' (2007, 89). On the other hand, he argued that stopping pupils from being exposed to different points of view on the grounds that it would 'only confuse' (29), was 'essentially manipulative' (31). Following Kymlicka's (1989) case for socially grounded liberalism, Law argued that the critical thinking emphasis of liberal RE is the best defence against the dangers

of both authoritarian ‘thought control’ (Law 2007, 101) and a too-liberal ‘flabby... non-judgmentalism’ (97).

Law noted that a major liberal-authoritarian difference is the location of responsibility for choice. He argued that critical, liberal RE ‘insists that people make up their own minds about morality... it confront(s) young people with the responsibility to think for themselves about right and wrong’... (and) involves making sure citizens have the skills they need to discharge that responsibility properly’ (2007, 1-2). This approach involves acknowledging a functional similarity for religious traditions, while also respecting their significant theological differences. Jackson (2004) argued that liberal RE providers prefer a plural setting, to enable the recognition of those differences. Such settings are not generally supported by authoritarian teachers, who prefer to deliver understanding of others through the lens of a ‘home tradition’ (Byrne 2011).

Not all single-faith RI takes an exclusivist approach. Jackson (2004) noted that pedagogies can emphasise a single-faith tradition while recognizing plurality. Critical RI, for example, teaches respect for others by honouring human dignity despite religious differences, particularly regarding truth claims (Barnes 2009). However, a single tradition approach usually emphasises either: exclusion (that only one way is right); or hierarchy (that one way is definitely best).

Single-faith RI stresses the importance of submission to a single religious authority and external consensus for moral decisions. It aims to encourage faith understanding by immersion. This may enable religious insight that is not possible via rational analysis. The approach builds on Aristotle’s argument that understanding comes from experience. By being a Jew, perhaps a student may come to understand Judaism. The United Kingdom’s Chief Rabbi expressed the authoritarian view that religious experience requires a degree of submission, which ‘presupposes obedience, discipline, and self control... (and that) before we can properly criticize a (religious) practice, we need to set foot within it’ (Sacks 1997, 176-177 cited in Law 2007, 143). This approach grounds children in a particular system where moral authority generally resides within religious texts. A more literal interpretation of scripture is common.

According to Inglehart & Welzel’s world values analysis, liberals emphasize choice and diversity, and teach independence and ‘flexible forms of spirituality’, while authoritarians emphasize conformity and unity, and teach obedience and ‘institutionally fixed forms of dogmatic religion’ (2005, 31). Commenting on this ideological spectrum, Altermeyer (1996) found that liberalism depends on a willingness to sympathize with, and include strangers, while authoritarianism involves an excluding fear of others. Altermeyer claimed that authoritarian approaches are preferred by the politically privileged

Liberal RE has its detractors. Barnes & Wright (2006) argued that liberal RE does not respect a student’s right to hold doctrinally supported illiberal views, particularly regarding homosexuality or abortion. In addition, l’Anson (2010) and Barnes (2001) argued that liberal RE sometimes claims a neutrality which is difficult to defend, that it over emphasizes secular ideology and Protestant theology. Barnes implied that pluralism minimises theological differences by ‘attempting to press on pupils... the principle that all religions are equal... [thus failing to]... inculcate true respect for difference’ (2009, 616). Perhaps he confuses equity with sameness. The plural principle emerges from the shared humanity beneath religious differences. By its nature (plural meaning many), it recognises (and encourages students to

respect) tradition differences, but demands fair and equitable treatment of individuals despite those differences.

Another argument against liberal RE is that it claims a self-evident good, that it is 'over-positive' in asserting its potential social impact, but dismissive of its potential to confuse those students who desire certainty (Barnes 2009). In Australian public schools, where liberal RE is limited, and volunteer RI is neither monitored nor researched, any evidence is difficult to find. This pilot study offers a first step towards examining the relationship between Australian religion pedagogies and community attitudes towards religious diversity.

## Method

A mixed methods survey explored educators' attitudes about teaching religions and beliefs as part of a study into links between educators' attitudes and pedagogies and children's attitudes to religious difference. Following is a report on the adult survey.

### *Sample*

Participants were drawn from a population-based survey of adults (Year 1 teachers, Year 1 parents, school principals and Year 1 RI volunteers). Sixteen schools were invited, four from each of four locations: the regional towns of Ballina and Coffs Harbour and the Sydney suburbs of Baulkham Hills and Camden. This selection enabled two urban regions (one of high diversity and cross-cultural contact – Baulkham Hills, and one of low diversity – Camden) and two rural regions (one of high diversity and cross-cultural contact – Coffs Harbour and one of low diversity - Ballina)

Ballina is largely Anglo-Celtic, with few non-Christian religions. Coffs Harbour is 10 percent (mostly Indian-born) Sikh, has two Sikh temples and elected its first Sikh Councillor to local government in 2007. One local bank uses Punjabi language advertising and one surveyed school has signs in English and Punjabi. Stories in the local newspaper show a high level of cross-cultural contact.

Baulkham Hills, in Sydney's 'Bible Belt', is home to the nation's largest Pentecostal mega-church. Its public schools have the highest number of non-Christian options in public schools, indicating significant religious diversity. Camden, in Sydney's south-west, is 82 percent Australian-born and largely Anglo-Celtic. Both Sydney regions' city councils controversially rejected Muslim developments – in Baulkham Hills, a mosque and in Camden, a Muslim school. These areas have higher than average numbers of census respondents nominating a religious affiliation (ABS 2006a). They were selected to compare with regions of lower religious identity salience

Potential participants were invited to complete a paper survey distributed by the school. Of 800 sent surveys, approximately 550 were distributed<sup>1</sup> and 123 were returned from 13 schools. See Tables 1 and 2.

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<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to know the exact number of surveys distributed since some schools did not survey all year 1 classes, and one did not distribute to parents.

| <b>Role</b>  | <b>Frequency</b> |
|--------------|------------------|
| Parent       | 67               |
| Principal    | 17               |
| Teacher      | 18               |
| RI Volunteer | 21               |
| missing      | -                |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>123</b>       |

**Table 1.** Sample composition – educational role

| <b>Region</b>  | <b>Frequency</b> |
|----------------|------------------|
| Ballina        | 24               |
| Coffs Harbour  | 12               |
| Baulkham Hills | 54               |
| Camden         | 30               |
| Ballina        | 3                |
| <b>TOTAL</b>   | <b>123</b>       |

**Table 2.** Sample composition – regional location

Responses generally reflect census religion data (ABS 2006b). 83 respondents were Christian and 26 not religious. Minority faiths included: 5 Hindu, 4 Buddhist, 1 Muslim, 1 Jain, 1 ‘spiritual’, and 2 ‘not stated’. 99 respondents were females and 22 males.

All RI volunteers were Christian, more Catholic than Anglican, reflecting census figures (ABS 2006b). RI volunteers ranged in age from under 30 to over 60, but the majority fell within the 46-60 age group and only 2 were male. They included representatives from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, though most identified as Anglo-Celt or ‘white Australian’, and 90 per cent believed Australia to be a ‘Christian nation’ (compared to an average of 40 per cent in the other roles surveyed). They were represented in all participating schools, with the majority from Baulkham Hills.

### *Limitations*

In busy schools, voluntary paperwork gets a low priority. Other reasons for the low response rate became apparent during the study. Only two schools promoted the survey. In some regions, religious officials asked RI volunteers not to participate. RI is a controversial, highly politicised topic in Australia. One principal said he would be surprised if any surveys would be returned, describing scripture as: ‘too hot to handle... it’s just a no-go zone that no one

wants to really look at'. Another said they had: 'just defused a knife edge argument' (between parents and RI volunteers about the inclusion of non-religious children in scripture classes)... 'The Buddhist teacher didn't want non-Buddhist students because they couldn't meditate. The Jewish teachers didn't want non-Jews'. Another explained that: 'Messing with scripture is like throwing a lit cigarette near petrol... it might fizzle out or it might explode'.

### *Measures - Teaching Beliefs Attitudes Index*

The Teaching Beliefs Attitudes Index (TBAI) assessed liberal-authoritarian approaches to religion teaching. 'Beliefs' covered both religious and non-religious beliefs. The 16 survey items contained expressions of liberal and authoritarian attitudes which were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The survey also contained open-ended opportunities for respondents to make statements which were analysed for significant themes.

## Results

The Teaching Beliefs Attitudes Index generated a Cronbach alpha of 0.85<sup>2</sup> (N=123) and a mean of 3.58 (SD=0.66). See Table 3.

The statements showing the highest correlation were that: Children should learn about religion only from a teacher who shares their parent's faith or belief system'; and 'Young children should learn about religion only with peers of their own faith or belief system, not in combined groups with different beliefs' (TBAI-15 and 13). This highlights the possibility of a position on segregation as a predictor of ideological stance

The survey item which resulted in the largest deviation from the mean was that: 'Moral and religious authority resides only in God, God's word and representatives' (TBAI-2). Another item showing wide variance was that: 'Schools should not host talks by atheists or humanists about non-religious beliefs' (TBAI-7). These statements reflect essential differences between the stances - the validity of sources of authority and openness to alternative perspectives.

### *Variation in attitudes – role, region and religion*

To determine whether attitudes differed with educational role, regional location and religious orientation, one-way between-groups comparisons<sup>3</sup> were conducted. Comparisons between role groups revealed that RI volunteers were significantly more authoritarian in their approach (TBAI Mean=2.9, SD = 0.62) compared to parents (M=3.74, SD=0.63, p=0.001), principals (M= 3.76, SD=0.50, p= 0.001) and teachers (M=3.57, SD=0.53, p=0.006). Respondents from Coffs Harbour showed more liberal views (TBAI M=4.15, SD = 0.59) than those from Baulkham Hills (M=3.36, SD=0.68, p=0.001) and Camden (M=3.46, SD=0.60, p=0.012). Baulkham Hills also differed significantly from Ballina (M=3.85, SD=0.45, p=0.011).

72 percent of RI volunteers thought children should be taught the Bible as fact, as opposed to 15 percent of parents and 3 percent of professional educators (TBAI-3). 77 percent of RI volunteers thought children should not learn ethical concepts and values from various traditions, as opposed to 8 percent of parents and 16 percent of professional educators (TBAI-14). 85 percent of parents (and 22 percent of RI volunteers) want educators to teach children

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<sup>2</sup> This level of internal consistency indicates that the TBAI provides a consistent measure of the underlying liberal-authoritarian constructs.

<sup>3</sup> ANOVA with post hoc tests (Tukeys HSD). Levene's tests for homogeneity (p>0.05) indicated that sample variances are not random but relate to specific variables.

that they have a free choice whether or not to believe in God (TBAI-12) though only 66 percent of educators see this as part of their job. The lack of respondents from minority religions meant that scores could not be compared across individual faith groups.

| Item   | *Reliability correlation | Mean | SD   | **Y % |
|--|--------------------------|------|------|-------|
| 1. When it comes to religion and moral beliefs, each individual SHOULD make up their own mind.   | 0.44                     | 4.43 | 0.90 | 91.6  |
| 2. Moral and religious authority resides ONLY in God, God's words and God's representatives.   | 0.63                     | 3.40 | 1.41 | 29.4  |
| 3. Young children SHOULD be taught that the scriptures are divine words or historical facts and thus accepted without too much questioning                               | 0.64                     | 3.70 | 1.24 | 21.8  |
| 4. Young children SHOULD be taught that scriptures are guiding stories but encouraged to think critically and independently about what truths the stories might contain. | 0.42                     | 3.88 | 1.22 | 80.7  |
| 5. Parents' rights to educate their children in their own religion/beliefs ARE more important than the right of the child to learn about different world views.          | 0.52                     | 3.30 | 1.19 | 28.6  |
| 6. Encouraging a child to make up their own mind on religious or moral matters IS too risky.   | 0.53                     | 3.60 | 1.19 | 25.2  |
| 7. Schools SHOULD NOT host talks by atheists or humanists about non-religious beliefs.   | 0.67                     | 3.15 | 1.38 | 38.7  |
| 8. Schools SHOULD host talks by representatives of different religions and take children to observe collective worship of different faiths.                              | 0.56                     | 3.42 | 1.27 | 58    |
| 9. A nation's institutions SHOULD favour the majority religion of its society  | 0.25                     | 3.44 | 1.23 | 28.6  |
| 10. A nation's educational institutions SHOULD teach about any religion or belief system if it makes up a significant component of its population.                       | 0.24                     | 3.07 | 1.15 | 47.1  |
| 11. Young children SHOULD be encouraged and taught HOW to critically question and think independently about religions and non-religious beliefs.                         | 0.54                     | 3.97 | .99  | 78.2  |
| 12. Teachers SHOULD tell children that they have free choice whether to believe in God (or not).   | 0.64                     | 3.61 | 1.27 | 62.2  |
| 13. Young children SHOULD learn about religion only with peers of their own faith or belief system, not in combined groups with different beliefs.                       | 0.72                     | 3.50 | 1.24 | 25.2  |
| 14. Young children SHOULD learn ethical concepts and values from various religious and non-religious traditions of the world.  | 0.70                     | 3.85 | 1.15 | 80.7  |
| 15. Children SHOULD learn about religion only from a teacher who shares their parent's faith or belief system.   | 0.76                     | 3.50 | 1.26 | 23.5  |
| 16. Children SHOULD learn about different religions from a teacher trained in religious and non-religious diversity.   | 0.53                     | 3.54 | 1.08 | 60.5  |

**Table 3.** Teaching Beliefs Attitudes Index

\* Correlations showed minimal impact of removing any item, so all 16 were included in analyses.

\*\* Y% = percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree showed wide variance and so were not a focus of the analyses.

## *Qualitative findings*

Open-ended statements generally supported the quantitative findings, with liberal views accompanying higher TBAI scores and authoritarian views accompanying lower scores.

Liberal statements (and the TBAI mean for the respondent) included: 'Children should be educated about the belief systems of different religions to promote understanding and allow them to decide' (ID15-OS6, M = 4.63); 'Scripture should be taught as belief, not fact' (ID42-OS6, M = 4.25); and 'Public schools should teach tolerance, not blind faith' (ID43-OS16, M = 4.88). Authoritarian statements (and TBAI mean) included: 'It would be better if there was total attendance at scripture by all students' (ID94-OS10, M = 2.19); 'Children should believe in what their parents follow' (ID116-OS8, M = 1.56); 'Australians will only be free when we submit and follow our saviour, Jesus' (ID39-OS18, M = 3.31); and 'Other religions should keep it to themselves... It worries me that other faiths come to our school' (ID14-OS6 and 12, M = 2.38).

Demographics were mixed at both ends of the spectrum. The ten most liberal respondents (TBAI mean range from 4.88 to 4.75) included 4 males and 6 females, all in the 31-45 age range, with 6 being non-religious and 4 religious (2 Christian and 2 Buddhist). 3 were from Coffs Harbour, 3 from Ballina, 2 from Baulkham Hills and 1 from Camden. Eight identified as Anglo-Celt Australian and one as European. One was a school principal, all others were parents.

The ten most authoritarian respondents (TBAI mean range from 1.56 to 2.56) were female. Six were from the 31-45 age group, 3 from the 46-60 age group and one was over 60. Eight were from Baulkham Hills and two were from Camden, 9 identified as Christian and one as non-religious. Three identified as Asian, 3 as Anglo-Celt Australian, 2 as European and 1 as Middle-Eastern. Six were RI volunteers, 4 were parents.

Analysis of open statements revealed that 69 percent of respondents (including some RI volunteers) support a multi-tradition approach. This was not dependent on religious affiliation or TBAI score. Indicative statements included: 'It would be beneficial if they had teachers trained in delivering all the faiths' (ID63-OS6, M = 4.56); 'Religion should be about them all so an informed opinion can be made' (ID12-OS5, M = 4.63); and 'There should be equal representation' (ID56-OS6, M = 2.56). One Principal noted that: 'We only have Christian scripture but our school has a 35% Punjabi Sikh enrolment. It's ridiculous. We need an option for world religions and beliefs' (ID43-OS6, M = 4.88).

Some respondents (from all role groups) perceived RI as exclusively Christian. Responses to the open ended statement: 'Some people think that Australia is a Christian nation' included: 'Scripture refers only to God's word as revealed in the Bible' (ID94-OS6); and 'No other religions are represented at our school. I feel glad about this. There is no other true God' (ID39-OS5, 6). At times, this exclusivism displayed ignorance of other faiths. From a school offering only Catholic, Protestant or non-scripture, came the comment: 'We have all the different faiths' (ID116-OS5). One parent regarded the Easter hat parade as a 'non-Christian alternative' (ID39-OS9).

One school had 50 percent of children opt out of RI. This creates a logistical issue which schools respond to in different ways. Twenty percent of parents perceived some pressure to enrol in a religious option to avoid large, minimally supervised and unproductive non-scripture groups. At one school, some parents believed that: 'There is no non-scripture available' (ID15-OS6), or that: 'Bahai is used for the non-religious students' (ID75-OS4).

Some children felt banishment: ‘My child feels left out since she is placed in the naughty room’ (ID4-OS1). Some schools ignore policy instructions to separate non-religious students from RI classes. On the other hand, one parent claimed that: ‘Even non-scripture children are segregated into those with some spirituality and those with no defined affiliation, it’s preposterous’ (ID13-OS6).

Many respondents expressed confused and contradictory understanding about: the available RI options; the nature of RI outcomes; the presence of trained teachers; and class sizes. In some schools, teachers were encouraged to attend RI to manage behaviour, in others, teachers were not permitted. One principal argued that: ‘there is no way to know what values are being taught’ (ID43-OS13). There was a notable desire for parents to receive more information on policy and practice.

### *Positives and problems for minorities*

For many minority faith communities, RI is a socially including activity offering rare access into the education of their children. It can enable a safe space for children to gain a deeper understanding of their religious and cultural heritage. 70 percent of all respondents felt that RI delivered important lessons in values. One school newsletter noted that scripture validates cultural minorities and ‘educates the whole school community’. RI volunteers appreciated the opportunity for representation and raised the importance of children learning from an exemplar. However, one community leader reflected that his faith community had tried to deliver scripture but was discouraged by school co-coordinators and by a lack of translation assistance from the NSWDET.

## Discussion

Allport (1954) emphasized that positive contact with the ‘other’ reduces prejudice. This was borne out by more liberal attitudes in Coffs Harbour, where Sikhs have a strong community identity. This challenges Forrest and Dunn’s idea that high levels of cultural contact are linked to insecurity and exclusive attitudes. The positive approach taken by the Coffs Harbour community may temper exclusion tendencies.

Authoritarian views appear to be associated with intolerance. The Sydney regions’ higher tendency to declare religious affiliation and their more authoritarian views suggest that identity salience may affect perspectives on religious diversity and pedagogy. Extreme views displayed elements of Christian-nationalism. One participant commented that: ‘Bowling down to minority cultural groups denies our culture was built on Christian Values... These new migrants have come into OUR culture (their emphasis), not the other way around’ (ID56-OS18, M = 2.56). However, some respondents with low TBAI scores included statements supportive of multiculturalism, such as: ‘We should accept people for who they are because Australia is multicultural’ (ID116-OS17, M = 1.56). This confirms Turner’s, and Forrest and Dunn’s, simultaneous but contradictory views on diversity.

RI’s lack of professional standards appears to put some RI content at odds with formal curriculum. One teacher said that: ‘the children were told we would burn in hell if we did not believe in Jesus’ (ID44-OS18). In addition, some regional volunteers distributed a ‘Creation For Kids’ (Grigg 2007) kit to dozens of schools, promoting a literal understanding of the Bible. The kit teaches that the earth is only 6000 years old and that: ‘Genesis is neither a fairy story, nor poetry, nor a parable ...it is a reliable record of what actually happened’ (7). It derides atheism and evolution and quotes Bible references to show that ‘man and dinosaurs

once lived together' (27). This finding highlights Law's (2007) concern about the use of extremist tactics

Law (2007) argued that a critical approach to religion education brings lasting benefits for a plural democracy - that it immunizes against the manipulations of both extreme liberalism and dogmatic authoritarianism. Internationally, governments are engaging with RE because of its social implications. Australia's RI policies appear at once inspired (by encouraging access of minority faith communities) and yet limited (by excluding non-religious alternatives, by not addressing structural inequities for minority faiths and by not ensuring professional teaching standards).

## Conclusion

This study explored insider-outsider tension in the context of Australian RI. Results support the hypothesis that the 'learning into' approach is associated with intolerant attitudes. Findings suggest that Australian public school parents and professional educators support a more inclusive approach to religion than is currently delivered, but that government bodies distance themselves from religion education and its social implications, leaving teachers in uncertain territory. The study does not measure outcomes of liberal RE against authoritarian RI, but suggests that research into children's attitudinal outcomes may be an important next step. Sample size limitations make it difficult to draw other conclusions.

I have also tried to advance the understanding of the policy context and common RI practices in Australian public schools. Ambiguous applications of the secular principle contribute to variant practices, discrimination against some beliefs, and instances of fundamentalist doctrine. Australia's national goal of 'values-based education... [in which] respect for diversity is paramount' (DEST, 2005), is ill-served by a policy which effectively protects Christian privilege and removes state accountability. In light of international trends in the teaching of religions and ethics, and, considering Australia's continuing religiously based racism, a rebalancing, from instruction to education, appears overdue.

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