Religious information poverty in Australian state schools

Introduction
Information poverty is understood as the absence of vital information necessary for personal or collective development, often due to a lack of information technology or infrastructure, but also caused in many circumstances by an effective censorship of information due to political or cultural factors. This paper explores the idea of religious information poverty in Australian state schools and suggests some reasons for its existence. A selected synthesis of theoretical and anecdotal data is presented to support the suggestion that religious information poverty is detrimental to student development and effective participation in the global information society. Implications are drawn for professional stakeholders, including politicians, school administrators, school teachers, and teacher librarians.

Political and historical background
The Australian school system is compulsory for children between 6 and 15 years of age. Schools can be state (government) or private (non-government) and operate within the legal frameworks determined by separate State Government Education Acts. Over 90% of private schools have a religious affiliation, while state schools are said to provide a secular education (ABS 2006).

State Education Acts have, in varying ways, made provision for the teaching of religious education (RE) in state schools (see Appendix 1 for a list of URLs to access State Education Acts). Some Acts make a distinction between special religious education (SRE) and general religious education (GRE). SRE is normally provided by visiting clergy, or their representatives, and is based on the distinctive religious doctrines of the churches and institutions with which they are affiliated. GRE is taught by regular school teachers in a secular manner, meaning that they may teach about religion (traditionally Christianity) in a non-sectarian way that reflects the reality of its influence in our society and others (Witham 2001; Paton 2003).

The chaplaincy system has proven very popular in state schools, with many chaplains teaching SRE as well as providing pastoral care and counselling (Venning 2005; Clements 2005; Pohlmann & Russell 2005).

There has been continuous public debate about the place of RE in state schools. For example, the South Australian State Government’s attempt to resolve the differences between opposing sides of the debate in that state resulted in the removal of RE from the school curriculum in the early 1970s, and its re-instatement in a different form, as
a result of public concern, in 1973 (Rayner, Hawkins & Lush 2005). The rising prominence of multiculturalism, pluralism, and secularism in the second half of the 20th Century continued to fuel the RE debate, with many secular teachers and parents claiming that religion has no place in state schools (Crotty & O’Donoghue 2003; Burstall 2000).

This paper will argue that, regardless of the legal provisions for RE in state schools, and current RE activity, children in state schools are suffering from religious information poverty, resulting in a fragmentary education and a lack of effective preparation for participation in the global information society.

**Religious information poverty and the information society**

Australian state schools pride themselves in preparing students for citizenry in the global information society (Lee 1998), however the provisions made for the teaching of world religions in Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) curricula (for example Queensland School Curriculum Council 2000, p. 24) have resulted in curriculum resources that contain fragmented and shallow religious data from an external historical perspective, rather than a deeper understanding of the coherence of the internal information found within the religions themselves, and a lack of understanding of religion’s influence on other curriculum areas (see for example Mackay et al. 2002 or Easton et al. 2003-2004)1. The resulting lack of curriculum-based information on coherent religious beliefs and experiences and their wide-reaching influence on our society and others (as opposed to fragmented historical data) has resulted, as will be discussed below, in a general religious illiteracy in students and religious information poverty in state school education.

Information scientist John Feather (2004, p. 136) writes, “The relationship between the information rich and the information poor is the central political dilemma of the information society”. However, Feather’s discussion of information poverty revolves around the lack of effective technological infrastructures in under-developed and developing countries. His treatment of information poverty in Western societies does not adequately explain the existence of the phenomenon in nations such as Australia, except for reductionist platitudes such as a general “lack of interest” in readily available information (p. 133). William Wresch (1996), also an information scientist, interestingly states that institutions and education can control, restrict, or limit information for self-serving interests, and here, I believe, is a starting point for the discovery of why religious information poverty exists in Australian state schools.

Religion has recently played a key role in major international crises, yet the average Australian state school student is unable to distinguish between the Buddha and an ayatollah (Crotty & O’Donoghue 2003). ‘Jesus Christ’ is known more as a profanity among students than as the name of the Son of God (Zwartz 2003). A recent survey of teenagers in a major Australian city revealed that they were generally unaware of the significance of Good Friday or the name of the man who betrayed Jesus (Atkinson

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1 These SOSE resources were accessed at The University of Queensland Library in the Curriculum Resources collection and were published by well-known Australian educational imprints Longman and Jacaranda respectively.
The current “in-question” asked by students in RE is “Who made God?” compared with the question some years ago, “What colour were Adam and Eve?” (Paton 2003, p. 65). These anecdotal evidences reveal that children have suffered a loss of religious literacy, as well as any idea of a transcendent God.

There are a number of reasons for this disintegration of religious knowledge, among them the rise of postmodern relativism and new age thinking that became prominent during the 1990s. Affluence, combined with the “graphics revolution” has produced a hedonistic, yet disillusioned, youth culture (Hill 1999, p. 18). Although young people have expressed an interest in the spiritual, they have not generally sought answers from religious institutions (Pohlmann & Russell 2005). State schools have failed to acknowledge the influence of religion on various subjects. Education professor Brian Hill (2006) has implied an academic dishonesty by Australian state schools in regard to the absence of Christianity in the History curriculum, and the lack of teaching on the religious pluralism that is currently impacting on Australian society. Economic rationalism has become the basis for choosing curricula, as demonstrated by the focus on teaching fragmented facts, figures, and skills to prepare students for further education, at the cost of a holistic education that appeals to the whole child within a higher framework of meaning (Hill 2006).

It can be argued that Christianity has provided, whether explicitly or implicitly, the traditional higher framework of meaning in Australia’s state schools. The term ‘secular’ in the various Education Acts was originally understood as a synonym for “common Christianity” (Hill & Hill 2005, p. 49). Many schools, however, have misinterpreted the term to marginalise, and even exclude, religion from their curricula (Hill 2005b; Witham 2001). In the 1970s, state schools saw themselves as value neutral and religion was considered to be a private concern (Hill & Hill 2005; Hill 2005b; Witham 2001). These ideas were in line with the popular understanding of the separation of church and state in Australia. However, there are problems with this line of thinking, which are summarised beautifully by Mary Forayter (1982, p. 8), a Queensland teacher librarian: “the neutrality essential in pleasing everyone pleased no one”.

John Patrick (2005) suggests that people who espouse value neutrality effectively suppress freedom of speech and presuppose that metaphysical truth is unimportant. Truth becomes subservient to subjective self-indulgence. On the issue of the separation of church and state, Siebren Miedema (2000) points out that separation of church and state in the Netherlands was meant to fortify national identity and to keep sectarian interests, such as religion, to the private sphere. However, in Miedema’s view, globalisation has reduced the importance of national identities and increased interaction between cultures. Miedema therefore recommends the return of RE to state schools to prepare children for encounters with religious others. This is not evangelism, in the sense of encouraging students to believe in a particular belief system, but recognition that religions and religious beliefs have an impact on economics, politics, and cultures.

It has been said that Australian state schools generally operated according to the principle of value neutrality throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Hill & Hill 2005). However, growing family dysfunctionality, the increasing rate of youth suicide, and escalating youth disillusionment attracted political interest in what could be done to
stem the tide of social disintegration among youth. In the 1980s, values education in
state schools became a topic of conversation in political circles. Various reports
ensued from State Governments in the 1990s, culminating in the Federal
Government’s Values education for Australian schooling initiative in 2005, which
allocated almost A$40 million dollars to promote a values framework in which
schools were encouraged to initiate values projects and forums (Hill & Hill 2005).
Nonetheless, values education frameworks and projects have achieved little more than
create lists of generic values. Hill (2005b, p. 12) has identified two problems with
this approach:

1. The creation of a “supermarket syndrome”, whereby students choose the
values they like, but not the ones they do not agree with; and
2. “The gap between knowing and doing”. This is the problem of how to move
students beyond a mere intellectual endorsement of values to the adoption of
values in their lives.

What is lacking in much values education is the context of the higher frameworks
(religions or world-views) from which values are derived. A higher framework of
meaning integrates values within the coherent structure of its belief system, providing
students with a better understanding of the motivations behind taught values (Hill
2005b). All curriculum subjects are based on certain paradigms and “truth-claims”
(as discussed in Hill 2004, pp. 61-64) and require students to learn the ideas and
applications flowing from those claims. Students should likewise be made aware of
the paradigms from which values flow. Teachers can facilitate this by disclosing from
which belief system values originate, whether from Christianity, Islam, Buddhism,
Hinduism, Baha’ism, or some other religion or world-view, and enabling students to
critically interact with each system and the values derived from it (Crotty &
O’Donoghue 2003). The Federal Government’s emphasis on teaching generic values
outside the context of the higher frameworks has contributed to religious information
poverty in state schools.

Another important theory to help explain religious information poverty is
insider/outside theory (Chatman 1996). According to this theory, only insiders (in
this case secular educationalists) “can truly understand the social and information
worlds of other insiders” (p. 195), and doubt the relevance and value of information
coming from outsiders (religious people or institutions). Put another way, insiders
protect their worldview from contamination by outsiders, and eventually cease to be
receptive to outside information. This self-protection leads to information poverty
and therefore an “impoverished life-world” for the insider community (p. 197).
Information poverty in this scenario may also be caused by insider ignorance or the
lack of importance endowed upon certain information, which may be considered vital
by outsiders.

Johannes Britz (2004, p. 193) argues for “the right of access to information and the
fair distribution of information”. Britz argues that people cannot reap the potential
benefits deriving from information, without equitable access to it. Applied to
religious education, this implies that children should have right of access to religious
information, in which they are afforded the dignity to make choices regarding their
development. State schools should provide an educational environment where right
of access to religious information, as with any other subject, is ensured. The “right

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**Implications for professional stakeholders**

The alleviation of religious information poverty in Australian state schools has implications for several professional stakeholders:

**Politicians**

State Education Departments need to re-affirm the original intention of the word ‘secular’ within Education Acts as signifying an impartial teaching of religion, to counteract the perception by many principals and teachers that the term requires the exclusion of religion from curricula (Hill & Hill 2005). Hill (2004, pp. 139-140) refers to this stance as “exclusive neutrality”, part of a “hidden curriculum” in which religion is irrelevant and unimportant. Exclusive neutrality does not support a rounded education that provides students with the knowledge needed to successfully interact with culturally diverse others in the information society.

Federal and State Governments need to address the ambiguity and ineffectiveness of current values education frameworks, and expand them to incorporate the higher frameworks of meaning, including religions, from which values are derived (Hill 2005a).

**State schools**

State schools should provide a holistic education that takes religious education seriously (Miedema 2000). Schools should realise that teaching religion is a matter of cultural heritage and a reflection of social reality (Hill 1999). SOSE syllabi usually specify some kind of learning outcome for religion along the lines that “students investigate how religions and spiritual beliefs contribute to Australia’s diverse cultures” (Queensland School Curriculum Council 2000, p. 24). Greater compliance with SOSE syllabi could be achieved by teaching coherent and complete religious beliefs and how they influence “Australia’s diverse cultures”, as opposed to fragmented, unrelated historical knowledge. Schools do more than teach knowledge or catalogue information – they also play a significant role in character formation, and religion contributes significantly to that role by offering answers to metaphysical questions (Patrick 2005). The place and influence of religion in all areas of the curriculum should also be considered (Hill 2006).

**School teachers**

State school teachers need to be aware that they are allowed to teach about religious beliefs and values as a part of the regular teaching program, where religion has had an impact on a subject (Hill 2006). For example, studying Shakespeare or George Eliot is nonsensical without a certain level of biblical literacy. Almost every war in history has been fought within a religious context (Maguire 2006). Religion has also played a key role in Australian history, politics, education, and the legal system (Madigan 2006). In light of this, some consider religious literacy to be as important as English
literacy or numerical literacy as it provides essential knowledge that facilitates a deeper understanding of other curriculum areas (Crotty & O’Donoghue 2003).

**Teacher librarians**
Teacher librarians can support general religious education by acquiring and facilitating access to appropriate religious information resources (Appendix 2 lists some useful print and electronic religious resources for students and teachers). The acquisition of SOSE resources should favour those containing coherent explanations of religious beliefs, as opposed to mere historical data. Many of the library’s current curriculum resources, such as English or History books, will also contain information of a religious nature, and the librarian can make use of these to assist teachers and students with subject-specific religious information queries. The teacher librarian will sometimes be a member of the school’s curriculum committee, and this implies that she will need to be aware of the wide-ranging application of religion to the curriculum, and to acknowledge that her support may be required for general religious education at both primary and secondary levels, or for a Religious Studies elective that may be offered at secondary level. The teacher librarian should also keep RE in mind when evaluating potential resources from regular suppliers (Forayter 1982; A vision for school libraries in Canada 2003).

**Conclusion**
The Australian state school system prides itself in preparing citizens for the global information society, yet its children are graduating from state high schools without a coherent religious literacy, revealing religious information poverty in their education. This limits their understanding of their own cultural heritage and diminishes effective communication with cultural others. The state school system needs to acknowledge the inherent limitations of the postmodern secular framework within which it operates, and incorporate the teaching of religious literacy in curricula. Politicians should facilitate the incorporation of religions and worldviews into values education frameworks. Teacher librarians should support religious education with the provision of appropriate resources. The endorsement of these proposals will better prepare students to interact with the diverse beliefs and values of the global information society and to live, work and pursue further study in a culturally diverse world.
References

ABC – see Australian Broadcasting Corporation

ABS – see Australian Bureau of Statistics


Appendix 1: URLs for State Education Acts

New South Wales

Victoria

Queensland

South Australia

Western Australia
http://www.slp.wa.gov.au/statutes/swans.nsf/5d62daee56e9e4b348256ebd0012c422/d89db1f180675367482569c90023f774/$FILE/School%20Education%20Act%201999.PDF

Northern Territory

Australian Capital Territory

Tasmania

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1 Current at 30 October 2006.
Appendix 2: Print and electronic religious education resources appropriate for Australian state school libraries


One of the more affordable and quality online reference suites is *Oxford Reference Online Premium*, which contains several religious reference resources, including:

- *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*
- *The Oxford Guide to People and Places of the Bible*
- *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*
- *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*
- *A Concise Companion to the Jewish Religion*
- *A Dictionary of Buddhism*

Many RE teacher/student resources, textbooks, workbooks, and multi-media resources are published annually in Australia, and a title keyword search for *religious education* or *SOSE* will return hundreds of results for all age levels on the *Global Books in Print* database or the *Libraries Australia* catalogue.