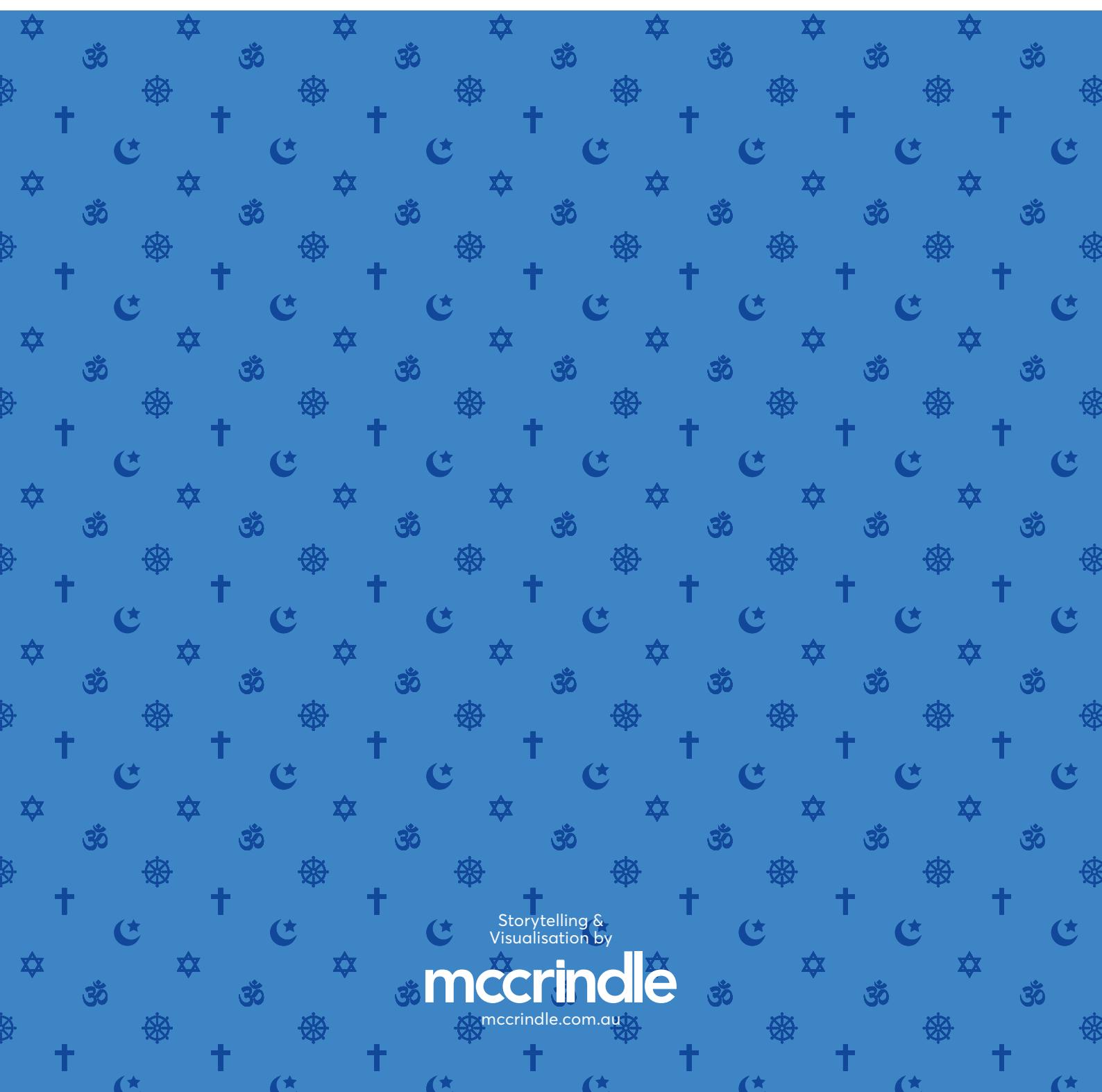


# **How in-faith religious education strengthens social cohesion in multicultural Australia**

**Zehavit Gross and Suzanne D. Rutland**

April, 2019



Storytelling &  
Visualisation by

**mccrindle**

[mccrindle.com.au](http://mccrindle.com.au)



# Table of contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>01</b>
<b>Multiculturalism: thin &amp; thick .....</b>	<b>03</b>
<b>Multicultural education .....</b>	<b>03</b>
<b>Two approaches to religious education .....</b>	<b>04</b>
<b>The need for both SRE/RI and GRE .....</b>	<b>05</b>
<b>Recommended approach for SRE/RI classes .....</b>	<b>08</b>
<b>Better Balanced Futures .....</b>	<b>09</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>About the authors .....</b>	<b>11</b>

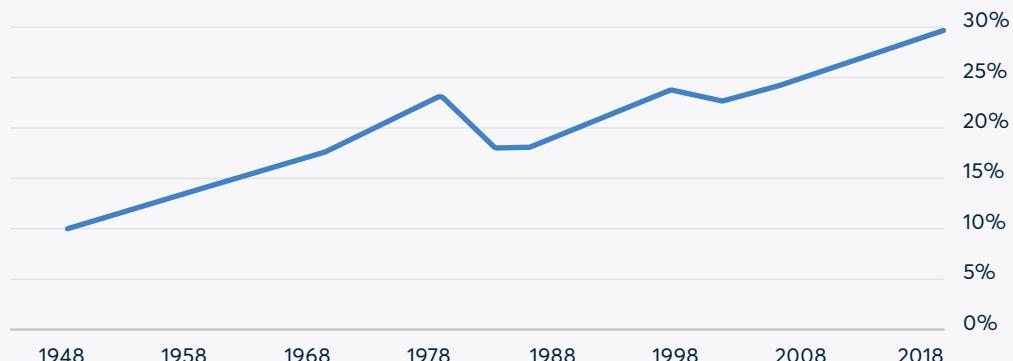
# Introduction

## A multicultural and multi-faith Australia

Australia's population continues to grow and change. This change is occurring through natural increase, but even more through overseas migration. In 2018, there were more than seven million migrants living in Australia with almost one in three Australian residents (29%) born overseas (ABS, 2018).

Australia's cultural diversity means we are increasingly a multi-faith society. An increasingly diverse overseas-born population is bringing about a change in Australia's religious landscape.

**Percentage of overseas-born (Australia, 1948-2018)**



Source: ABS, Migration Australia, 2017-18

**Top five countries of birth for net overseas migrants (2018)**

Source: ABS, Migration Australia, 2017-18



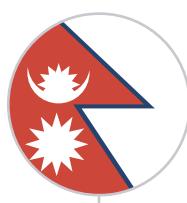
India

**22%**



China

**18%**



Nepal

**8%**



Phillipines

**5%**



Malaysia

**4%**

**Major religions in these countries:**

Source: CIA, The World Factbook, 2019



Hinduism

**80%**



Folk religions

**22%**



Hinduism

**81%**



Roman Catholicism

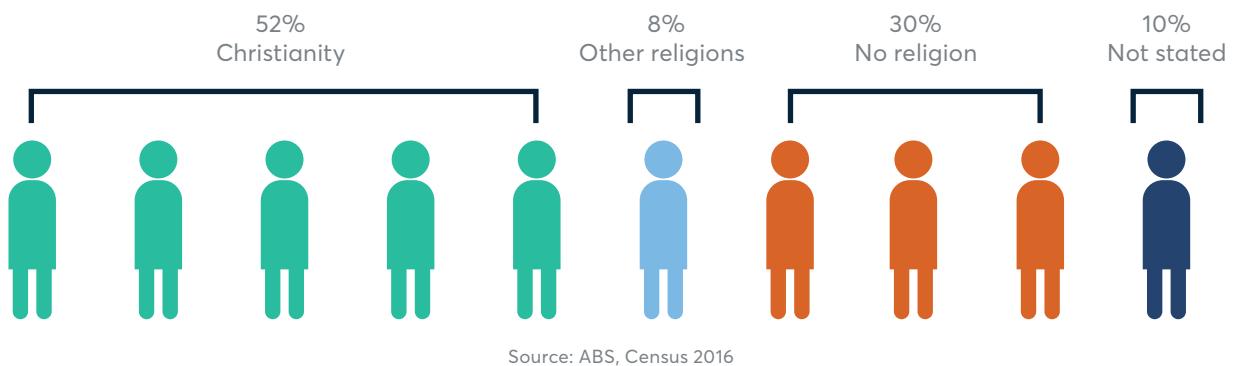
**81%**



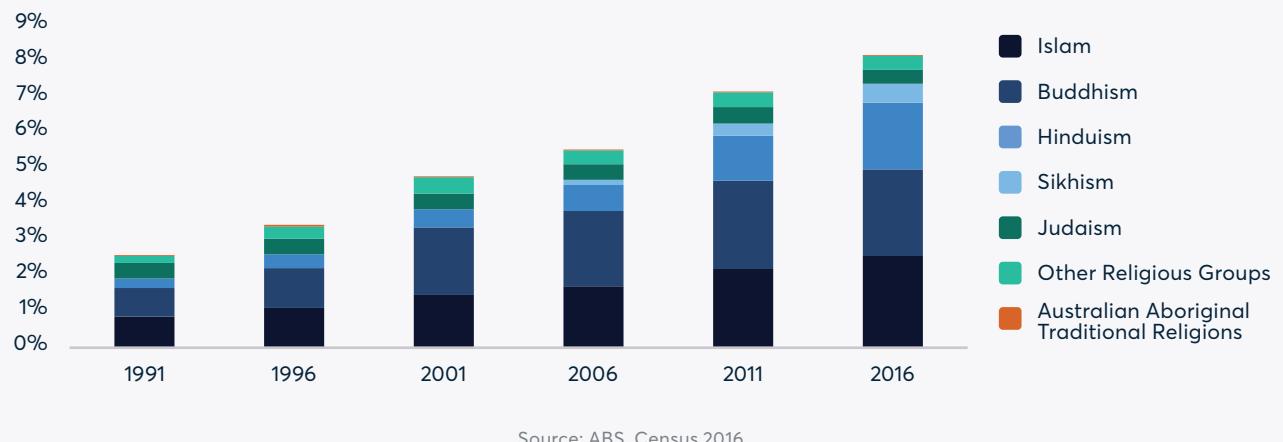
Islam

**61%**

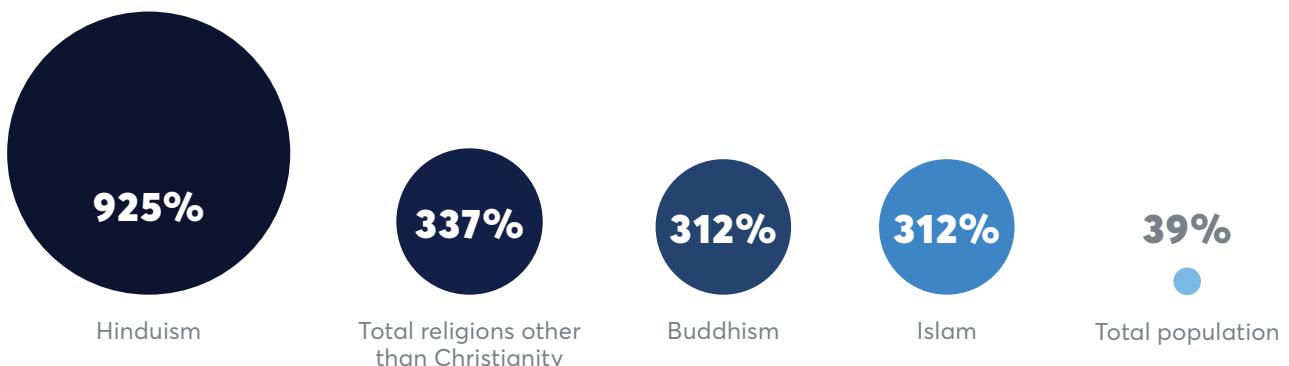
## Religious affiliation in Australia



## Increase in religions other than Christianity



## Australia's growing religious diversity (increase since 1991)



## Religion and security

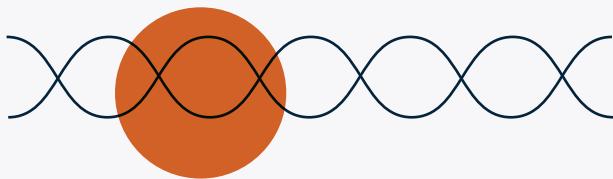
While secularisation has increased in both the national and international spheres, there has also been an increase in fundamentalism within religious beliefs. Events such as the fall of the Soviet Union and September 11 are reminders that religion is still a major actor in the twenty-first century.

This presents new challenges for the relationship between the state and religion, and emphasizes the need to revisit the role of religious education within government schools (Gross & Rutland, 2015).

# Multiculturalism: thin & thick

Multiculturalism was adopted by Australia's Whitlam and Fraser governments in the 1970's as an approach to policy that supports newcomers to maintain cultural ties with their home country (Maxwell et al, 2012). The policy aims to build social cohesion.

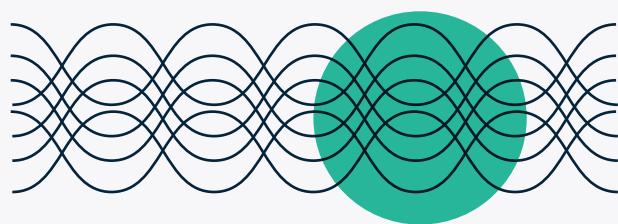
At the time, these policies focused mainly on ethnic diversity rather than religious diversity (thin multiculturalism).



## Thin multiculturalism:

generalised moral discourse which ignores unique aspects of culture and religion (Walzer, 1994).

Given Australia's changing religious landscape, the focus of multiculturalism needs to be broadened to include religious differences. The most effective approach to multiculturalism is one that acknowledges the unique values to each human group (thick multiculturalism). This is also important when thinking about education in schools.



## Thick multiculturalism:

acknowledges the moral, ethical and religious values which are unique to each human group (Greenberg, 2004).

# Multicultural education

Within the context of a multicultural and democratic education policy, children belonging to different religious groups should have the opportunity to receive education in line with their own religion (Franken, 2017).

The goal of teaching students how to live harmoniously with others in a contemporary and diverse society is a pillar of modern education. Multicultural education is a key instrument in achieving this. Banks' model provides a framework of what multicultural education could look like in the classroom.

## Banks' model for multicultural education (Banks, 1993)



### Content integration

teachers use **information from a variety of cultures** and groups to illustrate concepts



### Knowledge construction process

classroom **exploration of assumptions** and stereotypes of minorities



### Prejudice reduction

facilitating **cross-cultural activities** for students to cultivate positive attitudes towards different religious and ethnic groups



### Equity pedagogy

efforts to improve the **academic achievements** of disadvantaged groups



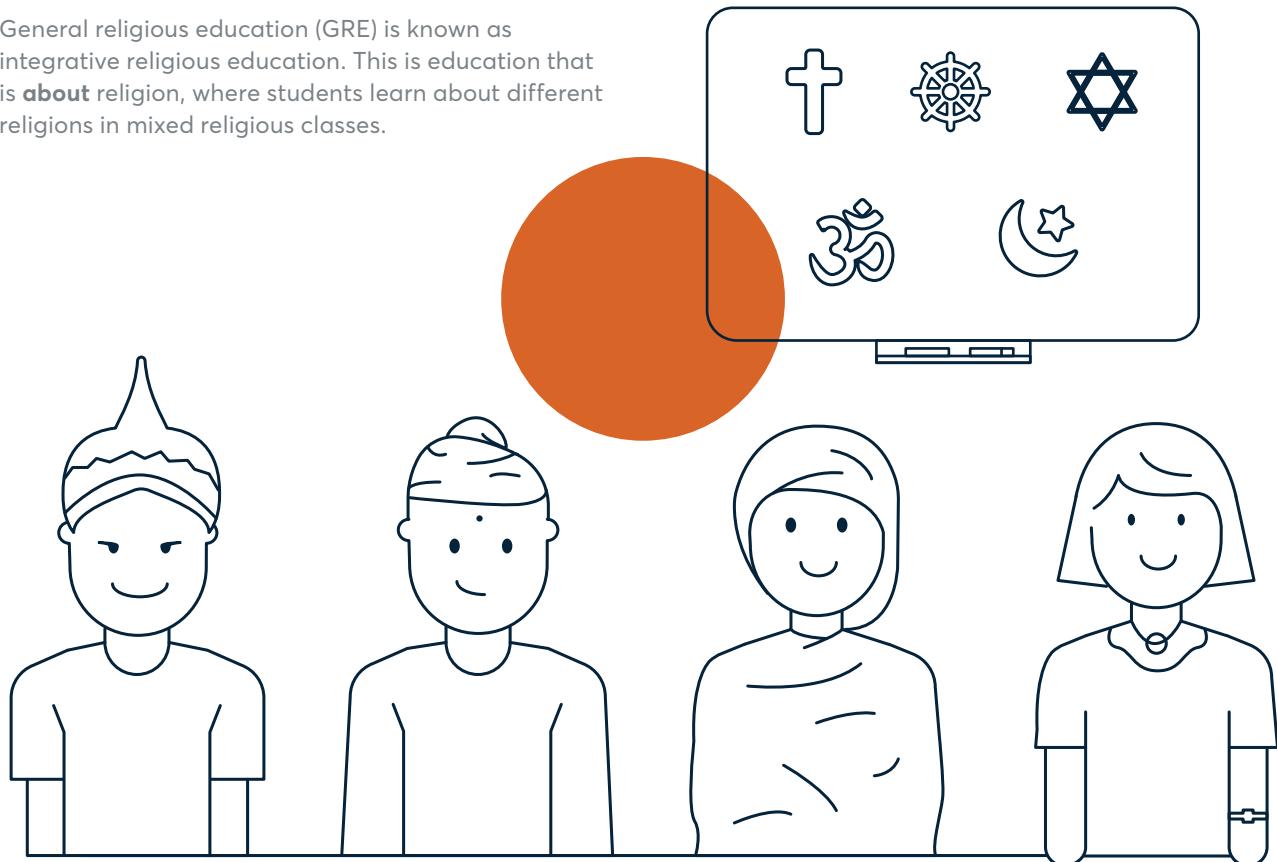
### Empowering school culture and social structure

teachers have the **same expectations** of all students, regardless of religious or ethnic group

# Two approaches to religious education

## General religious education (GRE)

General religious education (GRE) is known as integrative religious education. This is education that is **about** religion, where students learn about different religions in mixed religious classes.



## In-faith education (SRE/RI)

In-faith education is **for** religion where students have the opportunity to explore their own faith, spirituality and heritage. This type of education has different names in different states.

In QLD, TAS, NT and SA it is called Religious Instruction (RI). In NSW, WA and the ACT it is called Special Religious Education (SRE) and in VIC it is Special Religious Instruction (SRI).



# The need for both SRE/RI and GRE

SRE/RI acknowledges a child's need for belief and spirituality and provides an opportunity for students to experience this.

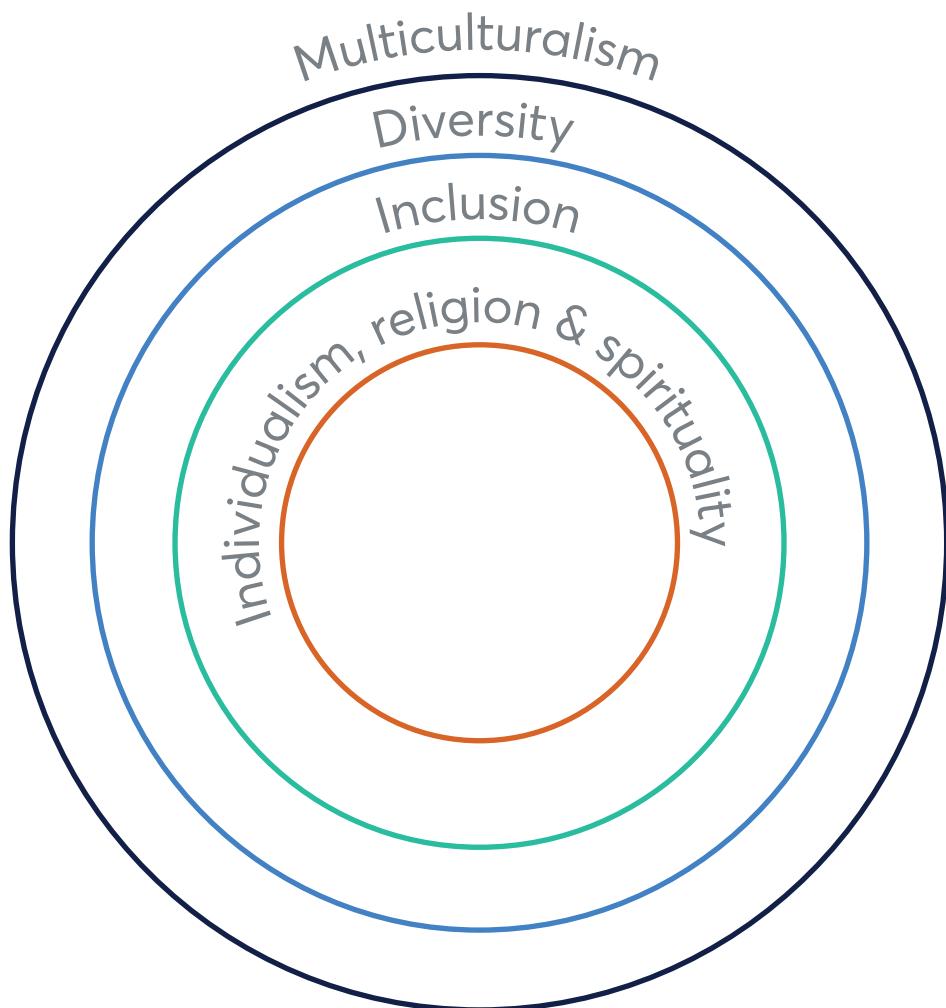
GRE cannot provide children with faith or spirituality as this would appear to promote a particular religion (Alberts, 2010). GRE can, however, promote social cohesion through teaching about other religious traditions.

A combination of both SRE/RI and GRE, therefore, can help students to cultivate an understanding of themselves and their own religion, as well as an understanding of others. This can help to multiculturalise schools.

## Spirituality and establishing identity

An individual's exploration of their own spirituality through contemplation of 'the sacred' is shown to be an integral part of human psychology (Pargament, 2007). Based on this understanding, spirituality enables the individual to establish their own identity (Gross, 2009). Spirituality is what makes humans different from animals. It acknowledges that humans are diverse and that there is a need to respect human differences.

In the context of religious education, spirituality helps students understand their own identity as well as providing greater understanding of and appreciation for diversity. The exclusion of spirituality from religious education in state schools, as advocated by some supporters of integrative religious education, represents a backward step for multiculturalism.



## **Religious education in a multicultural environment**

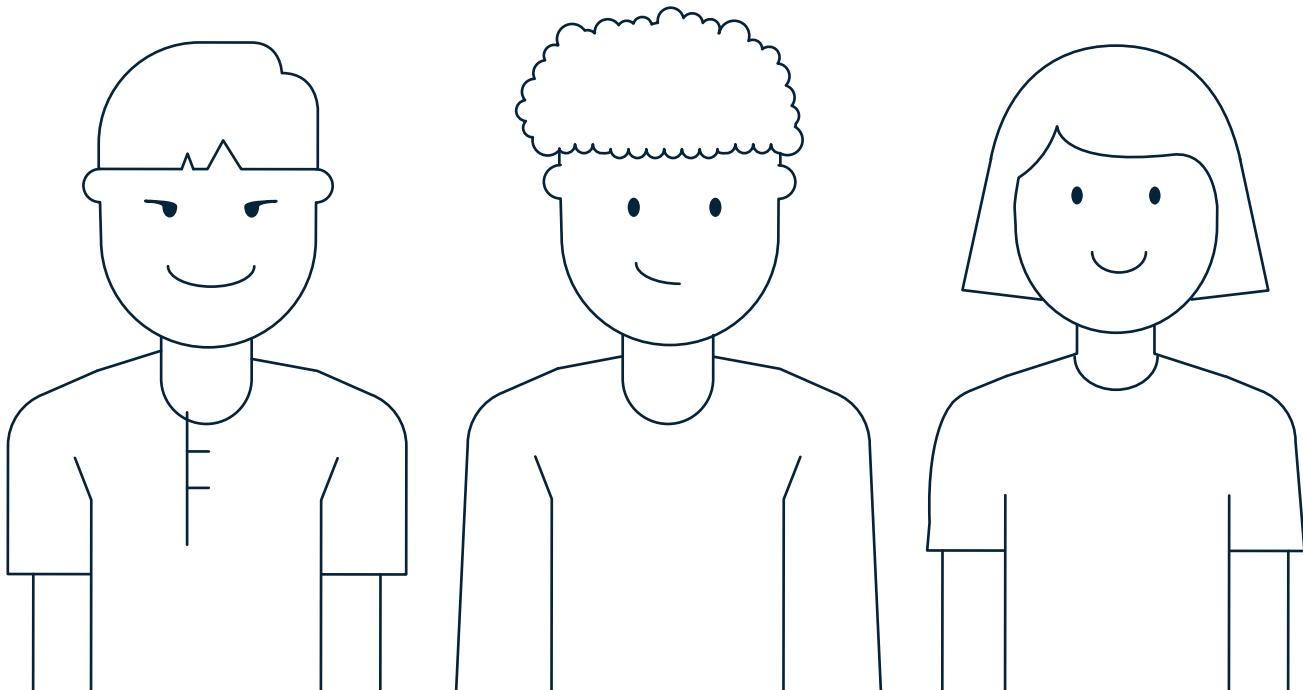
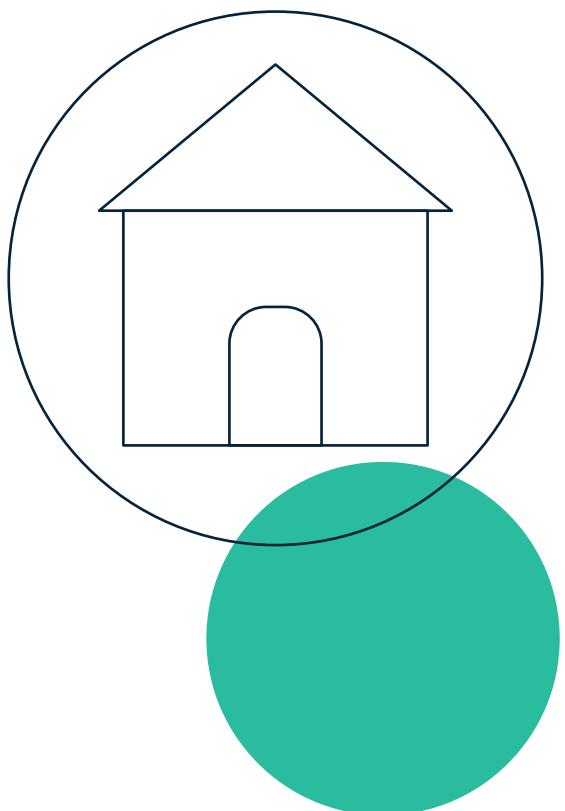
Government schools, which include students from different religious groups, provide an environment where students of different backgrounds study together. Through the use of multicultural education, GRE can help to reduce stereotyping and discrimination as students learn about other religions in an integrated environment.

### **Providing a safe place to explore deeper questions**

Segregated religious education classes can provide a safe place for children from different religious backgrounds to discuss topics affecting their own religious group. In line with Department of Education policies dealing with "Controversial Issues in Schools", known by different names in each state and territory, students have a safe place to share their feelings and ideas when a tragic incident dominates the media.

Removing in-faith education from government schools detracts from the government's multicultural aims by denying students a crucial avenue to explore their own religious identity and heritage. In a post-truth era, without a safe place to explore their own religious identity, students are exposed to 'fake news'.

It is important, however, for both students and parents to be given the option to opt out of religious education by providing an ethics class as an alternative. These options are important for social justice and human rights.

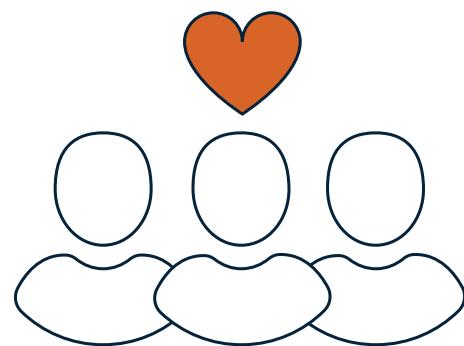


## Combining SRE/RI & GRE strengthens social cohesion

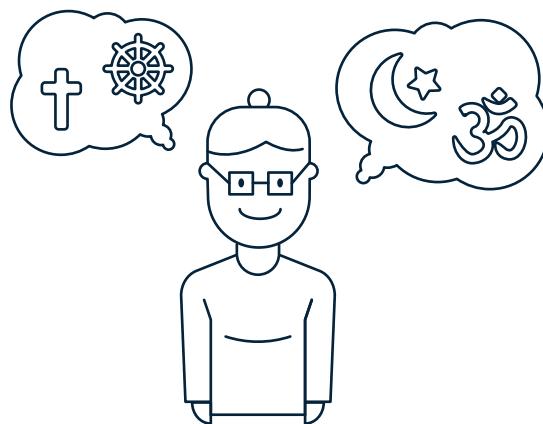
According to Schweitzer (2007) Cooperative Religious Education incorporates these two frameworks:

- ① Children have a safe place to explore their own identity and learn from a teacher of their own religion through SRE/RI. Religious education can draw on the aspects of compassion and universalism, present in all major faith traditions, to further promote peace and tolerance.
- ② Children have the opportunity to interact with children of different religious backgrounds. This promotes open dialogue between those of other cultures and religions through GRE.

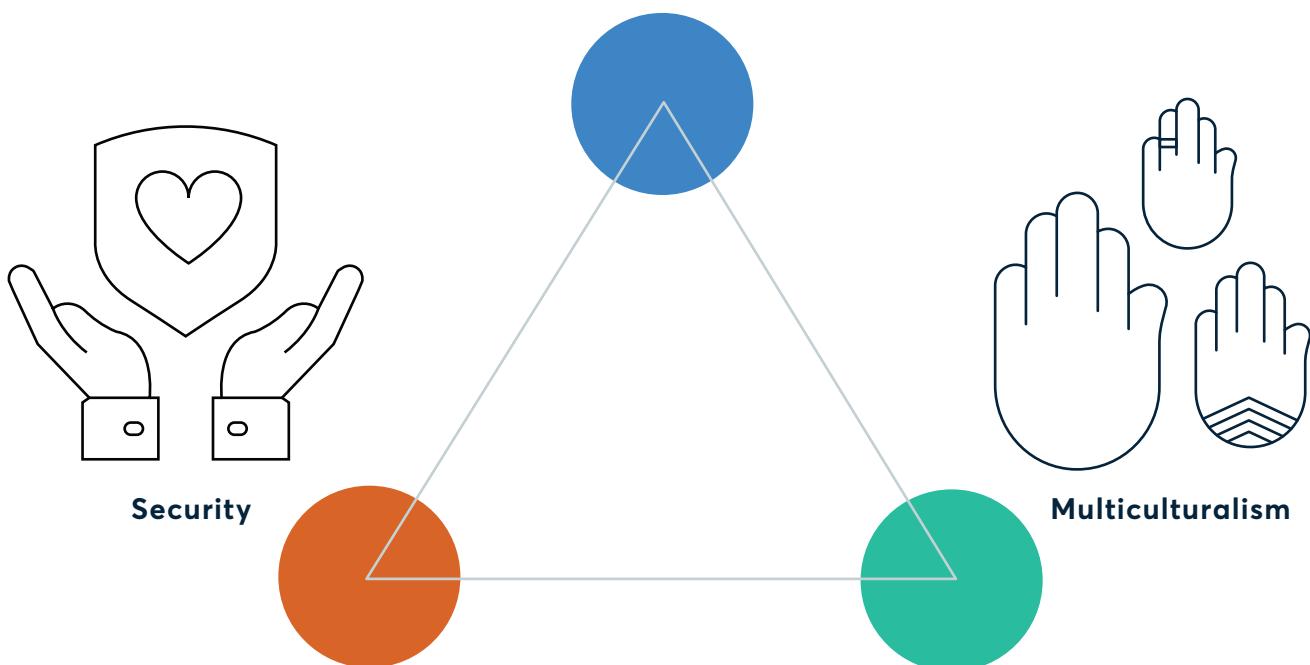
In simultaneously providing students with a safe place to explore their own religious identity and a multicultural environment in which to understand others, Cooperative Religious Education in government schools provides a strong basis for thick multiculturalism.



These two types of religious education play a key role in dismantling stereotypes and strengthening social cohesion. In this way, government schools offering SRE/RI and GRE are the ideal setting for children to develop an understanding of peace and tolerance.



**Religious Education**



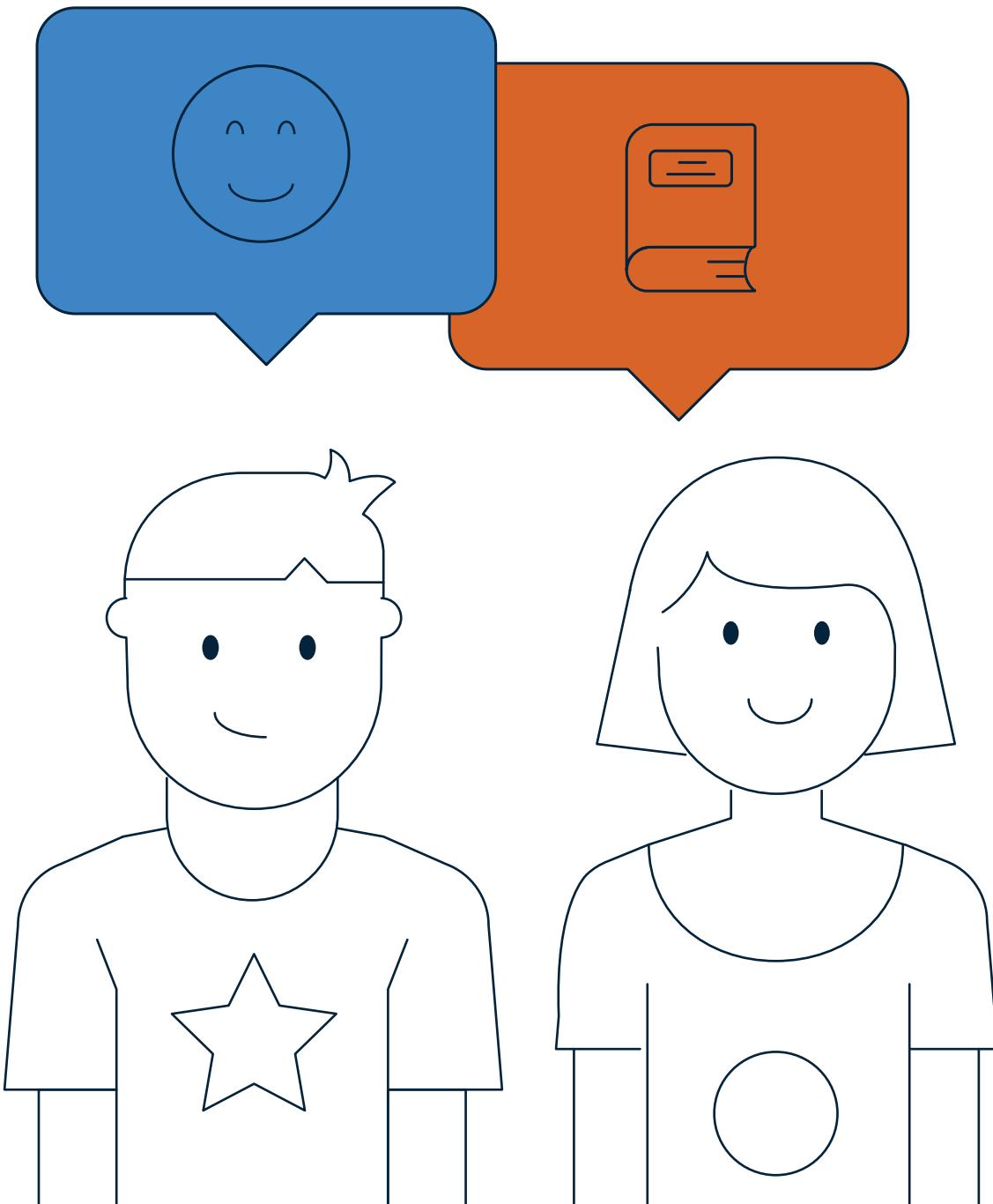
# Recommended approach for SRE/RI classes

It is important that in-faith religious education should avoid taking a dogmatic approach to teaching. Instead, both teachers and students are encouraged to ask critical questions and be self-reflective (Baidhawy, 2007; Gross 2010; Gross & Rutland, 2018).

This approach can be achieved through experiential and informal teaching and learning techniques such as storytelling, role play and case method teaching (Wang, 2013; Gross & Rutland, 2017).

Students should be exposed to a variety of religious approaches to ethical dilemmas within their specific faith community (Swanson, 2010). This provides students with the opportunity to reflect on their values and beliefs in contemporary society while considering moral challenges and deep questions.

Because in-faith religious education is provided by religious education teachers from private religious schools, synagogues, churches, mosques and temples, this connects what is taught in the classroom to the wider religious community in Australia (Gross & Rutland, 2018, 2015). This further strengthens social cohesion in Australia.



# Better Balanced Futures

Better Balanced Futures is an organisation involving all different faiths working together to retain religious education in schools. This organisation represents a strengthening of multi/interculturalism which can assist in the social integration of Australia's religiously diverse society. Better Balanced Futures is a grassroots, bottom-up organisation and can therefore be impactful in implementing change.

Better Balanced Futures was created as an important response to the opposition towards in-faith religious education. The fact that leading faith groups have joined the organisation and are keen to work to improve their curriculum and teaching is clear evidence of the importance and value attributed to these classes by all faith groups.

The importance and support of this organisation was clearly demonstrated at the Celebration of SRE in New South Wales, which was organised and held at Parliament House in November 2018. This event was supported by leading faith groups, seen visually in the colourful dress of many of the Eastern religious groups, reflecting the multi-faith nature of Australian society.



# Bibliography

Albert, E. 2019. *Religion in China*, Council on Foreign Relations, last viewed 8 April 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/religion-china>.

Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019. 3412.0 *Migration, Australia*, 2017-18.

Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing*, 2016.

Baidhawy, Z. 2007. Building harmony and peace through multiculturalist theology-based religious education: an alternative for contemporary Indonesia, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 29(1), 15-30, DOI: 10.1080/01416200601037478.

Banks, J. A. 1993. Multicultural education: historical development, dimensions and practice, *Review of Research in Education*, 19, 3-49.

Central Intelligence Agency. 2019. *The World Factbook*, USA.gov, last viewed 26 April 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook>.

Franken, L. 2017. Coping with diversity in Religious Education: an overview, *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 38(1): 105-120, DOI: 10.1080/13617672.2016.1270504.

Greenberg, I. 2004. *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: the New Encounter Between Judaism, and Christianity*. Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society.

Gross, Z. 2010. Reflective teaching as a path to religious meaning-making and growth. *Religious Education*, 105(3), 265-282.

Gross, Z. 2009. A quest for the realm of spirituality. In M. de Souza, L. J. Francis, J. O'Higgins-Norman, & D. G. Scott (Eds.), *International handbook of education for spirituality, care and wellbeing*, 563-579, Netherlands: Springer.

Gross, Z. & Rutland, S. D. 2018. *Study of SRE and its value for Contemporary Society*. Sydney: Better Balanced Futures.

Gross, Z & Rutland, S. D. 2017. Experiential learning and values education at a school youth camp: Maintaining Jewish culture and heritage, *International Review of Education*, 63(1).

Gross, Z. & Rutland, S. D. 2015. Creating a safe place: SRE teaching as an act of security and identity formation in government schools in Australia. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 38(1), 30-46, DOI: 10.1080/01416200.2015.1025699.

Gross, Z. & Rutland, S. D. 2014. Combatting antisemitism in the school playground: An Australian case study. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 48(3), 309-330.

Maxwell, B., Waddington, D. I., McDonough, K., Cormier, A-A., & Schwimmer, M. 2012. Interculturalism, Multiculturalism, and State Funding and Regulations of Religious Conservative Schools, *Educational Theory*, 262(4): 42447.7-

Pargament, K. I. 2007. *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understandings and Addressing the Sacred*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Schweitzer, F. 2007. Religious individualization: new challenges to education for tolerance, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 29(1), 89-100, DOI: 10.1080/01416200601037551.

Swanson, D.M. 2010. Value in shadows: A critical contribution to values education in our times. In T. Lovat, R. Toomey & N. Clement (Eds.), *International research handbook on values education and student wellbeing*, 137-152. New York: Springer.

Wang, C-H. 2013. Fostering critical religious thinking in multicultural education for teacher education, *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 34(2): 152-164, DOI: 10.1080/13617672.2013.802127.

Walzer, M. 1994. *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

# About the authors



## **Professor Zehavit Gross**

Professor Zehavit Gross is Associate Professor, Head of the graduate program of Management and Development in Informal Education Systems in the School of Education, and the UNESCO Chair in Education for Human Values, Tolerance and Peace, Bar-Ilan University, Israel. She is also the Honorary Research Associate in the Department of Hebrew, Biblical & Jewish Studies at the University of Sydney. Her main area of specialisation is socialisation processes (religious, secular, feminine and civic) among adolescents. Her latest publication is *Migrants And Comparative Education: Call To Re/engagement* (Brill/Sense 2019). She is the president of the Israeli Society of Comparative Education (ICES) and recently received the Good Work Award (2017) from the Association of Moral Education (AME) for an outstanding research project with practical implications to moral education.



## **Professor Emerita Suzanne D. Rutland OAM**

Suzanne D. Rutland (MA (Hons) PhD, Dip Ed, OAM) is Professor Emerita in the Department of Hebrew, Biblical & Jewish Studies, University of Sydney. Her main area of specialisation is Australian Jewish history, with a focus on Australia, the Holocaust, Israel and Jewish education. Her latest publication is a chapter in *The End of 1942: A Turning Point in WWII and in the Comprehension of the Final Solution?* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2018). Her books are *The Jews in Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), and co-author with Sam Lipski, '*Let My People Go': The Untold Story of Australia and Soviet Jews, 1959-1989* (2015), which was co-winner of the 2016 Australian Prime Minister's Literary Awards, Australian History. In 2008 she received the Medal of the Order of Australia for services to Higher Jewish Education and interfaith dialogue. She is a member of the Australian delegation for the International Holocaust Rememberance Alliance (IHRA).





[www.betterbalancedfutures.org.au](http://www.betterbalancedfutures.org.au)