



# VICTORIAN HUMANIST

Monthly newsletter of the Humanist Society of Victoria Inc.  
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## Principal world-views with ethics

This Society has been striving to get Humanistic ideas into State schools for six years now. Back in 1973 HSV proposed to the Russell Committee on Religious Education that volunteer religious instruction be abolished and replaced with professionally taught ethics and comparative religion. The *Education & Training Reform Act 2006* at last enabled State schools to teach general religious education (GRE), but it has yet to bear fruit. At some stage the modern world must be acknowledged by including non-‘religious’ world-views such as Humanism. We are concerned that control of the curriculum should stay in (secular) educational, not religious hands. While influential groups jostle in the current climate of school reform, Humanists would do well to tread warily. Your Committee would value your feedback as our policy develops.

The Religions, Ethics & Education Network Australia (REENA) was formed by religious educators (see Anna Halafoff, *AH* No. 103, Spring 2011), and this year HSV joined it by invitation. We agreed about the need for professional teaching of GRE, without partisanship, as cultural history. They favoured the Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools ([www.osce.org/node/27217](http://www.osce.org/node/27217)), which emphasize freedom of religion or belief (R or B) as a universal right.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18 says,

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

So there’s a freedom to hold one’s R or B and to manifest it. It’s the person, not the R or B, that is protected from adverse discrimination. Humanists are protected under the first clause of Article 18, but we might take issue with some of the rest.

What is ‘belief’? The word is absurdly vague. To distinguish it from a whimsical belief or a mad belief (e.g. that one is above the law), it must be something like ‘conscientious belief’. If we substitute the more general term ‘world-view’, it trumps ‘religion’, as far as belief goes. But the clause goes on to confer a freedom ‘to manifest’. Why should your R or B or world-view be freer to manifest than, say, your private collection of pornography is? Manifestations should be free among consenting adults, and in the case of children being taught, we expect informed consent from their guardians. On the other hand, a black ban on manifestations would be a wower law.

So Toledo stands for teaching children about religion and conscientious beliefs, in a human-rights framework (the rights of the believers, at least, if not of the children). Atheists would surely want to add another purpose, wishing not to validate all religions but to invalidate them. That suggests a sociological framework, bringing to bear sceptical or critical thinking. As

(Continued on page 4)

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THURSDAY  
24 November

7.15 for 7.45pm  
A G M

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8.30 pm  
HSV Monthly  
Public Lecture

Teresa Puszka (HSV):  
**‘How do our State  
primary schools  
do religion?’**

Meeting Room  
Balwyn Library

336 Whitehorse Rd, Balwyn  
(*Melway* map ref. 46 E8)

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## Principal world-views with ethics (Continued from page 1)

David Miller is fond of saying, if the power relations in an early council of the christian church had been slightly different, we would today have a totally different set of cultural paradigms. (A ‘butterfly effect’ of memes!) The generation brought up with the comparative religions of *The Golden Bough*, by James George Frazer (12 volumes, 1890–1915), was happily emancipated from the mystique of religion.

We consider there is a particular need for guidance, in the primary years, in how to think about ethical questions rather than answers. In Humanist Applied Ethics with volunteer tutors, children can begin to learn that values and purpose are the rewards of deliberative action, and that they themselves can be good without god. We approve of a draft course on Ethical Behaviour which was prepared this year by The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) for the national school curriculum; it was properly secular in tone. (See September *VH*.)

REENA’s statement of principles  
([www.reena.org.au](http://www.reena.org.au)) avers,

all REENA members are committed to working together with [ACARA] to ensure that studies about religions and ethics are adequately developed – *in consultation with religious and humanist educators and scholars* – and provided within the new National Curriculum. ACARA has welcomed our offer of assistance and there is every indication, that studies of diverse religions and ethics will be included throughout the entire new National Curriculum, where appropriate. [Emphasis added.]

Here we sense a danger of *combining* religion with ethics. We regard ethics as free of religion and imagine them as separate subjects, both of them being elective since parents have the prior stake in such matters. But we fear that’s not going to happen. REENA appears to favour the system in Quebec, where an ‘ethics and religious culture’ curriculum is compulsory. Its academic goals are to instil the three competencies of reflecting on ethical questions, understanding the ‘phenomenon’ of religion, and engaging in dialog. That sounds fine, if the teachers maintain secular neutrality. We’re not sure whether the method of the community of inquiry (see [museumvictoria.com.au/education/community-of-inquiry](http://museumvictoria.com.au/education/community-of-inquiry)), which is well suited to ethics and philosophy-in-schools, would be appropriate to GRE. We may have to compromise our ideals.

Stephen Stuart, president

## Representations to public bodies

To Mr John Searle, the new Chairman of the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, we wrote about the following concerns:

- Recent changes to existing laws violate sections of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Australia is a signatory.
- Your organisation’s loss of power to initiate your own investigations is a retrograde step in curbing systemic discrimination.
- Exemptions given to faith-based organisations deny equal opportunity and foster dangerous prejudices against individuals. The Equal Opportunity Act is designed to inhibit such prejudices.
- We support positive discrimination towards people with disabilities and the needy. The recent exemptions represent the most negative type of discrimination. It is a regressive step in civil life and in accepted social norms. Research shows such discrimination is linked to poor health, high rates of depression and suicides.
- Prior to implementation, the issue of anti-discrimination exemptions should have been publicly discussed. As citizens we feel deprived of our right to participate and be consulted on legislative changes that affect the quality of our community and our daily life.
- We hope that your organisation will be able to deal with these social injustices.

Halina Strnad

## Letter

### Naturalistic ethics

I really like Jean Brown’s approach to ethics in the October *VH*. It comes from the central realization that humans are social mammals that need to balance reason and emotion. We know how body affects mood, which affects judgment and somehow produces intuition. The promptings of intuition can be neither lightly dismissed nor uncritically accepted; they have to be weighed and tested. But there are some moral intuitions that are practically universal.

The discovery of the mirror neuron system is highly suggestive of the emergence of empathy and caring behaviour in our evolution. The philosophical expression of selfishness is solipsism, an idea which Bertrand Russell observed was psychologically impossible to believe (*Human Knowledge, its Scope and Limits*, 1948). I think these are indications that morality is natural.

Stephen Stuart, Balwyn

Q: Why is an elephant big, gray and wrinkled?

A: Because if he was small, white and round, it’d be an aspirin.

## *Has empathy died?*

HSV Public Lecture by Pamela Curr, Campaigns Co-ordinator, Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, at Balwyn Library, 22 September 2011

Report by Jennie Stuart

To be a refugee today is to be among the wretched and dispossessed, not wanted anywhere. No nation may take the high moral ground about the treatment of refugees, despite the avowal of 'never again' after the Second World War which gave birth to many international human rights agreements, including the United Nations Convention on Refugees (1951).

Pamela described how, on a recent visit to a refugee centre on the Italian island of Lampedusa, she witnessed the arrival of a boat carrying eight Eritrean refugees. Forty had set out but most had died from thirst during the journey across the Mediterranean. Several boats had passed them but none had responded to their plea for drinking water.

Pamela said we have created a crisis out of nothing in Australia, given that asylum-seekers count for only 0.2% of the overall population at present. The largest contingent comes from Iran, but there are also many Afghans and Iraqis as well as 600 people who are considered stateless, such as people from minority groups in Bangladesh, Burma and Kuwait.

Recently about two thousand people were released from detention and are now living quietly in the community. Although their circumstances are far from ideal, given they are not allowed to work, their health has improved markedly, particularly their mental health. However, of the roughly six thousand people who are in detention at present, there are 1,591 people who have been recognised as refugees, but who won't be released until they have had security clearance from ASIO and the Department of Immigration. It is currently a lengthy process and may well be part of a strategy of deterrence. It involves checking whether the person has a history as a war criminal, for example. But, some of the information on which the decision is based is questionable. For example, in cases of Sri Lankan refugees who had been Tamil Tigers, Pamela pointed out that young men of 14 or 15 years of age were routinely press-ganged into the army, and that every family was expected to contribute a son. There are also 30 people in detention who have been formally recognised as refugees but who have been deemed to be security risks. They are unable to appeal against the decision, however, as no reasons or explanations have been given to them.

Between 2001 and 2009 Australia accepted 451 refugees from the camps in Indonesia. Pamela said that when she talks to people in those camps they tell her that they are very fearful about embarking on the boat journey to Australia with people smugglers, but are

worried that as long as they stay in Indonesia their children will not be able to go to school, and they will have no substantial prospect of being resettled. Pamela proposed an annual quota of 500 refugees from the transitory camps as part of our overall refugee program, believing that this would help 'stop the boats'.

There is heightened awareness and reaction within the community to asylum-seekers who arrive by boat, compared with the 50 – 60,000 people already living in the community, whose visas have expired and who have thereby breached our immigration laws. Mandatory detention is currently costing \$2 billion per year. The service is expensive, as much of it is remote or off-shore. Staffing is in the hands of a UK-based company. Many of the guards are English or South African, who work long hours for high wages. Conditions within detention centres are punitive, although they improved after Cornelia Rau, a mentally ill air hostess, was found to have been unlawfully detained and inadequately treated, in 2004. Even so, Australia still has the harshest detention program of any developed country.

The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre provides support and advocacy for asylum-seekers. Social change occurs as a result of community action, Pamela believes, and she urged everyone to write to politicians, including the Prime Minister and the Minister for Immigration, on this matter. Recently the House of Representatives passed legislation covering Complementary Protection. If passed by the Senate, this will allow asylum-seekers who have been affected by blood feuds or honour killings in their country of origin, yet are not strictly refugees within the terms of the UN Refugee Convention, to be considered favourably.

When first elected in 2007 the Labor Government took a more humane approach to this matter, giving asylum-seekers the right to work and closing down off-shore processing centres. However, despite the fact that on-shore processing has been adopted as official ALP policy, the Gillard government is once again expanding off-shore facilities and programs.

Asked what she would do if she had the power to change the situation, Pamela said, without hesitation, that she would abandon mandatory detention, ensure that processing was speedy and fair and rule out off-shore processing.

### Receive your *VH* by E-mail

If you wish to receive your *VH* (except in months when mailed with *AH*) by E-mail, please advise Stephen Stuart [snstuart@msn.com](mailto:snstuart@msn.com).

The members' E-mail list that is being compiled will also be used to advise members of coming HSV and related activities.

## Lobbying state politicians

May I alert members and supporters to the opportunity we have to lobby our Victorian MPs on a worthwhile issue, namely, to protest against the indoctrination of schoolchildren into the unprovable theological doctrines of the Christian and other religions in the name of, and being paid for by, the state?

As a result of such indoctrination our children are growing up either to distrust adults when they learn the truth about these doctrines or to continue to practise them on their own children if they, themselves, are unable to accept the truth.

All chance to enjoy comradeship in a humanist environment and to serve their fellow creatures in need is destroyed forever in cynicism. At best, most of today's children will grow up to be acquisitive citizens who assent to the tyrannical decisions by our Australian Government, which has been so captured by the wealth of global businesses that essential human values are lost, as our poor are persecuted here and other countries are invaded by our army to secure our companies' profits.

Yet we can easily take a simple stand and phone our MPs and make an appointment to tell them about HSV's policy to change the Education Act as set out on <http://www.victorianhumanist.com/draft-letter-to-mps-on-religious-instruction-in-state-schools/> (if needed refresh). Don't forget to phone me first at 03 9870 8998 or 04 0870 8998, to get me to come with you.

Two hundred years ago English people took the opportunity successfully to lobby their MPs to destroy the vile trade in human beings, who were kidnapped from Africa for profits in America. Now we have such an opportunity to destroy the indoctrination of trusting little minds which are being trained in the interest of profits throughout the businesses of the world. P.S. MPs names and addresses can be obtained at <http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/members> or by phoning me. Harry Gardner

## Humanist charity in action

I have been running a small charity for about 10 years to help a group of Liberian refugees living in a camp in Buduburam, Ghana, due to the civil war in Liberia, which lasted some 12 years.

Buduburam has one remarkable asset – an email café in the camp – otherwise there were many problems. Sewage in the streets, poor school facilities, the houses (we would call them huts) were seriously overcrowded and they had to pay for the water supply, by the bucket, which came in trucks.

They sent me an E-mail, telling me about these problems, and I noted that they had started a school with the help of a Scholarship Fund supported by a few Liberian businessmen living in Accra 50 miles away. I made a contribution to the Fund and checked the web pages being run by many church charities to find that all that they said about their condition was true.

I made an appeal to Humanists in South Australia and then at Conventions. Donations were sent at the beginning of each term. Donations were not limited to money. Their Peace Program received a boost when I found the Conflict Resolution Network (Sydney) run by Stella Cornelius (now deceased, but the CRN continues). I printed out and posted their programs, which are available without charge on the web. Two young teachers took this course on a circuit of several church schools in Buduburam. I also introduced them to 'Books for Africa', an American organisation which delivers books by the container load. Far too expensive for Australia Post!

With help from America, Germany and us, they made considerable progress over the years. While our contribution was small and has reduced in recent years, still we have been consistent where others have dropped out. They expanded from an elementary school to running courses for adults, computer courses, Ladies sewing courses and beauty courses etc.

You can read their May 2011 report, also earlier reports on my web page,

<http://www.users.on.net/rmc/Return> to Liberia.

In organising this charity I have been able to arrange that it involves the least amount of work possible. I have never suggested that it should be controlled by a committee. This means meetings, minutes, arguments etc. So it is a one-man show. (But donations to Liberia are always marked 'from Australian Humanists'.) I investigated the possibility of becoming a charity with tax deductibility etc. But the requirements of the tax department are not easy and involve costs. The process has to be gone through every year. So I bank all donations in a business account which does not pay interest and therefore pays no tax, I have an ABN number and simple return is made each year. While I cannot offer tax deductibility I guarantee that all of your donation arrives in Liberia because I pay the Telex Fee of \$30.00.

To make a donation all you have to do is write out your cheque in the name of 'Liberian Refugees Scholarship Fund' and post to R. M. Clifford, 120 Goodman Road, Elizabeth South, SA, 5112. A more detailed explanation of making a payment with alternatives can be found at

<http://www.users.on.net/rmc/helpliberiankids.htm>

Dick Clifford

## Question for an ethicist

Although I'm happy in my current job, having recently received a promotion (I'm the new Thane of Cawdor), that's not enough for my wife who is eager for me to get ahead. I'm not saying I lack ambition, but I am reluctant to do what it takes to climb higher – the long hours, the bloody murders. And yet, don't I have a special obligation to consider my wife's desires? We are, after all, a family.

Macbeth, Scotland