



VICTORIAN HUMANIST

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Remodeling religion in schools. II

Humanists and other secularists are reminded to pay attention to the case against the Education Department, to be heard before the Victorian Civil & Administrative Tribunal, commencing 1 March. Already the Department has been persuaded to remove some regulatory impediments to the fair treatment of non-religious children.

HSV took part in a multifaith roundtable, on 16 November, which broached the subject of possibilities for learning about religions and ethics in the Australian Curriculum. *Religious instruction*, or the teaching of what to believe and how to worship, was not on the agenda. After the talks reported previously (*VH* December 2011), discussion devolved to the groups around the tables.

I was assigned to the table with the following people.

- Gary Bouma, emeritus professor of sociology at Monash University, UNESCO chair in inter-religious and intercultural relations – Asia Pacific.
- Joan Daw, World Council of Religions for Peace, Yarra Institute for Religion & Social Policy.
- Eeqbal Hassim, intercultural education consultant (www.drhassim.com).
- Marion Maddox, director of Centre for Research on Social Inclusion, Macquarie University (www.crsi.mq.edu.au).
- Vijai Singhal, director of Hindu Council of Australia (www.hinducouncil.com.au).
- Darren Taylor, scribe for ACARA (www.acara.edu.au/curriculum.html).

Bouma said that the great diversity within Australian society should be made known and appreciated, and that the various prevailing beliefs were relevant to citizenship studies. I countered that teaching, at the level of middle childhood, ought to concentrate on what was common amongst the faith and non-faith communities. The idea that commonality should take precedence over differentiation was supported only by Singhal – possibly because the Hindu community had factions enough. Bouma went on to assert that the ‘universal values’ beloved of Humanism had no power to motivate; on the other hand, he himself was eager to learn how a Hindu person like Singhal looked at the world. The good professor seemed to me to be engrossed in his own adult need rather than the children’s.

Daw said that story-telling was a great way for young people to understand religion; it meant talking about active beliefs, rather than formal ones, ‘from the inside’. Hassim’s concern was that the resources for teaching religions and ethics should be generated and discussed by parents, and posted on the web with guidance for teachers on how to use them.

Hassim summed up our deliberations as (i) citizenship education requires the discussion of religions in Australia; (ii) commonality is to be emphasized in early years, differences later; (iii) Aboriginal spirituality is to be communicated in cross-curriculum fashion, and (iv) a variety of new resources is needed, plus teacher training.

John Russell’s table reported constructively (i) that ethics and religion should not be mixed; (ii) that religious and non-religious outlooks be

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HSV Monthly
Public Lecture

THURSDAY
23 February

7.30 for 8 pm

Meeting Room
Balwyn Library

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

Kelvin Thomson
(MHR), on
*‘The Humanist case
for population
reform’*

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Remodeling religion in schools. II

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included alike in general religious education, under the neutral term, 'world-views'; (iii) that world-views be taught in the subject of civics and citizenship and also thru the general capability of intercultural understanding, and (iv) that every student should take the pledge of citizenship, before leaving school, as proposed by the minister for social inclusion (Tanya Plibersek; *The Age*, 28/9/11).

Summaries from the three other tables added more points. Citizenship education should include ethics by considering the question of our responsibilities towards one another. Religious diversity should receive special treatment in years nine and ten. Respectful dialogs between different faiths would demonstrate the search for meaning and also exemplify social inclusion. The general capability of critical thinking was mentioned only in passing.

The meeting wound up with the announcement that ACARA would convene a national forum in order to produce a 'shape paper' on religions and ethics. Then a library of teaching resources would be assembled and managed by Education Services Australia on its website, www.esa.edu.au.

Australian Secular Lobby

I went along to a public meeting called by the Australian Secular Lobby (being mainly Hugh Wilson and Ron Williams), on the evening of 16 November to publicise two things. The first was a critical analysis of the expanded National School Chaplaincy Program, announced in September; the second was a DVD documentary on the landmark constitutional case of 1948 about religious instruction (RI) in USA.

The Sydney Greens MP John Kaye sponsored and chaired the meeting. Ron Williams examined the federal Chaplaincy Program, since minister Peter Garrett's announcement on 7/9/11 that school communities would be permitted to choose between a chaplain and a secular welfare officer (cp. *VH* October, page 7). I for one took that as a step forwards. But when the guidelines appeared for the new National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program, the 'secular' reference was low-key, the former word 'religious' was changed to 'spiritual', and both chaplains and welfare workers were given the same duties and code of conduct. Both streams were permitted to perform religious rites such as school prayers. Both streams could be supplied by an accredited religious provider such as Scripture Union Queensland. So the apparent liberalization was actually a step backwards. (See www.australiansecularlobby.com/issues.html.)

I had thought that the American separation of church and State kept RI out of public schools since the time of Jefferson: but no. In fact RI was pervasive in such schools until as late as 1948, when humanist Vashti McCollum (1912–2006) appealed to the Supreme Court which struck down RI as being unconstitutional. The Court, led by liberal justice Hugo Black, decided that the First Amendment required government to assume a position of strict neutrality between belief and unbelief. PBS has produced an inspiring documentary covering the whole case, *The Lord is Not on Trial Here*, which the Secular Lobby wants aired on Australian television.

Reason Australia

The final meeting for that day, 16 November, was of office-bearers and staff of the newly founded, national freethought organization, to establish a bank account. With chairperson Meredith Doig, I as treasurer was pleased to meet the finance manager Tom Hsu and the secular affairs director Anthony Englund on their home turf in Sydney. We all rocked down to a police station where the officer on night duty witnessed our declarations on numerous bank forms. We agreed that all four would get advance E-mail consultation on any withdrawal, to be authorized electronically by any two.

The position of Reason Australia upholding secular education may be read on www.reasonaustralia.org/policies.
Stephen Stuart, president

Judgment of Solomon

Admirable neutrality was shown in a recent Family Court case involving religious upbringing, where a six-year-old girl in West Australia was the bone of contention between her separated parents. The mother, a recent convert to christianity, petitioned the court to permit her daughter to be baptized against the wishes of the non-religious father. The mother claimed that the child would 'fit in' better at the christian school she attended if she were baptized. The father did not object to the school but held that baptizing and therefore indoctrinating the child into a particular faith before she could decide for herself was a bad move.

Acting Magistrate Kaeser used his judicial discretion to rule, on 28 March 2011, as follows. '(91) ... In my view, it is not necessary for [the child] to be baptised in order to "fit in". ... (94) I consider that it is not necessary for [the child] to be baptised at this early stage. Given the conflict between the parents on this issue, and given her tender age, this process can be safely left to a later date.' The mother appealed against the ruling, but a judge dismissed her appeal, on 9 December 2011, and ordered costs against her.

It is good to see that the state did not presume this young person below the age of discretion to be a christian merely on account of the christian home in which she lived.

Source: Coombe & Stone, 2011 FamCAFC 232, Family Court of Australia.

Central Victorian Atheists

Third Wednesday of each month
Upstairs @ The Albion Hotel

41 Mollison Street, Kyneton. Ph 5422 2066

2012 Dates: 15/2, 21/3, 18/4, 16/5, 20/6, 18/7, 15/8, 19/9,
17/10, 21/11, 19/12

Time: 6:30 for 7:00 Meals & drinks available at bar.

Join with fellow atheists, rationalists, agnostics, humanists, secularists, sceptics and other free-thinkers in an evening of godless discussion and irreverent speculation. All like-minded people welcome.

For further information, contact Ian Robinson on 0407 24 00 24 or gurdies@australiaonline.net.au

Erratum

The sampling error of the religious communities survey was wrongly estimated in *VH* December, page 3, as Dr John Perkins has pointed out. The sample size was 1,094, not the population, and the derived percentages had standard error no greater than 1.5%.

How do our State primary schools do religion?

HSV Public Lecture by Teresa Puszka, HSV member, at Balwyn Library on 24 November 2011

Report by Jennie Stuart

Teresa has two children attending primary school, Alexander now aged 8 and Eleanor aged 6. She herself went to Catholic schools, but lost her belief in god as a teenager and a few years later decided that she was an atheist. When considering schools for her children she turned away from the religiosity of the Catholic curriculum and chose a local State school instead.

When she enrolled Alexander she was surprised to find religious education (RE) as an option on the enrolment form, and assumed that a State school, being secular,¹ would be teaching comparative religion, that is about different faiths and their cultural contexts. She also assumed that the class would be taken by one of the teachers. After paying the \$6 course fee she was dismayed when Alexander came home with pictures of Mary, Joseph and Jesus and chocolate eggs at Easter time. On discussing the situation with his class teacher she learnt that RE was not given by Alexander's teacher, who was not even present in the classroom during the lesson. In the eyes of the teacher the classes were fairly benign, dealing with Christian-based concepts, feelings and emotions. Teresa was not happy that Christianity was the only religion being offered and that someone whom she did not know was discussing feelings and emotions with her son.

She went to the school office to enquire further and was given a brochure about ACCESS ministries². Only then did she discover that the RE classes were given by ACCESS ministries, who also decided on the curriculum content, not the Education Department. She learnt that the content was solely about Christian beliefs, that the classes were unsupervised and that they were taken by volunteers from the church, despite the fact that the brochure stated they were given by 'CRE (Christian religious education) teachers accredited through ACCESS ministries'.

At the end of the year she allowed Alexander to attend the Christmas service, mainly because all of the other prep children were going and she did not want him to feel left out. However, another parent reported that the chaplain had told the children that they wanted to have a Jesus kind of Christmas, not a Santa kind of Christmas, because Santa only loves you if you are good, but Jesus loves you whether you are good or bad.

The next year Teresa did not pay the \$6 RE fee and assumed that Alexander would not be doing the course in grade one. When he came home with more coloured-in drawings from the RE class, she was told that she needed to write a formal letter to the school, requesting him to be withdrawn. Of even greater concern was the nature of the drawing which depicted emotions, the child having to colour in 'good' emotions, such as happiness and kindness, and leave 'bad' emotions, such as anger and nastiness, blank. Teresa objected strongly to this approach, as in her view emotions are what make us human, and are neither good nor bad; rather it is how we deal with them that is important.

In grade two once again she did not pay the \$6 fee and assumed that he would not be doing RE, as she had written an opt-out letter to the school the previous year. Not so. She

discovered that she needed to write a fresh letter each year about the issue.

Therefore, when Alexander entered grade three, Teresa pro-actively wrote to the school. As the class parent representative she also sent an e-mail to the 60 or so parents of the other third-graders, explaining how the RE opt-out system worked if they wished to utilise it. She received ten replies from grateful parents who had not realised that they needed to take formal steps to withdraw their child from RE, and one terse e-mail of complaint about her correspondence.

The next day she was called in to see the Principal, who informed her that she should confine herself to grade three social matters and leave religious issues aside, as there was a court case pending. Even so, the Principal expressed surprise that RE was being taught in Victoria, comparing it adversely to Canberra, where she had worked previously. In Teresa's experience the teachers and other staff who had children attending the school themselves all expressed concern about the content of the RE classes and the fact that the classes were given by volunteers. They had all withdrawn their children from RE but none wanted to formally complain, for fear of upsetting the Education Department and compromising their jobs.

Nonetheless despite arranging for Alexander to opt out of RE he was still exposed to the class, silently reading at his desk while the lesson went on around him in the same room. Mid-year, Teresa was asked to run a cooking class for some grade three students and subsequently realised that her charges were the students who had opted out of RE (nine students out of twenty-five in Alexander's class). Subsequently Alexander has been allowed to read in another room during RE and Eleanor to play in a separate part of the prep room. A more constructive alternative would be even better, but it is definitely preferable to listening to a creationist diatribe.

It was around this time that the Education Department altered its guidelines to ensure that children who do not attend religious education classes 'are appropriately supervised by teachers in positive, independent learning, such as self-study, including revision, or other activities, for example, community service, peer mentoring, participation in clubs or instruction in areas outside the core curriculum'. These revised guidelines will theoretically allow ethics to be taught as an alternative, as happens in NSW.

The Age, 13 May 2011, quoted Yvonne Paddison, CEO of ACCESS ministries, as saying, in 2008, 'We need to go and make disciples. What really matters is seizing the god-given opportunity we have to reach kids in schools. Without Jesus our students are lost.' A flurry of rebuttals from ACCESS ministries followed this article, but in Teresa's experience the charge that ACCESS volunteers proselytise is justified.

In conclusion, Teresa summed up her dissatisfaction with the current RE arrangement: that the course content is not appraised as the volunteers are unsupervised, and that the children are given religious ideas promoted as facts. If religion is to be taught in government schools she would prefer that the course encompass comparative religions, including no-religion as a world-view, that it be given by qualified teachers from within the Education Department and that the system be opt-in rather than an opt-out, so that children don't feel singled out.

Endnotes

1. In 1872 the Victorian Government *Education Act* guaranteed free, compulsory and secular education for all children. The *Education (Religious Instruction) Act 1950* allowed religious instruction within government schools on a voluntary basis.

2. ACCESS ministries – an ecumenically supported organisation which provides about 94% of special religious education in Victorian state schools. The Catholic Education Office and the United Jewish Education Board are also providers. The World Conference of Religions for Peace (a UN affiliated NGO) accredits instructors in other faiths such as Buddhism, Sikhism, Baha'i, Hinduism and Orthodox Christianity.

Let us adopt a village of the Untouchables (Dalits)

The caste system in India excludes the Untouchables from human society. Now referred to as the Dalits (the crushed ones), they are deprived of basic human rights and usually live in extreme poverty.

The origins of untouchability stem from religious ideas of purity which pervaded social systems in various countries. This most pernicious form of discrimination by descent afflicts nearly 250 million people worldwide, most of them in India. Illiteracy and superstitions make Dalits prey to charlatans, black magic and slavery.

The first World Conference on Untouchability was held in Conway Hall, London, on 9 and 10 June 2009 under the aegis of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). Attended by politicians, academics and grass-roots leaders, this ground-breaking conference issued a number of declarations and proposed specific measures to deal with this entrenched evil, among them a request that IHEU initiate the creation of a global secular alliance against untouchability and introduce support programs based on Humanist principles of justice and equity.¹

The International Director of IHEU, Babu Gogineni, organised a program of service delivery to selected villages of 1,000 to 2,000 Dalits in India. This provides teachers of literacy and basic knowledge, health professionals to replace the witch doctors and it supplies tools for cottage industries such as sewing machines. This creates a circuit-breaker in the cycle of their disadvantage and empowers them to fight for their human rights.

The program is designed to run for three years to achieve its objectives. Now, just half-way through, remarkable results are seen in the three villages 'adopted' (financed) by Dutch and French Humanist Societies. New community leaders and a new way of life are emerging in the villages; charlatans, tricksters and predators are exposed as such. The village young joined the volunteer Humanists in a 7,000-strong rally to fight witchcraft and black magic. Now other villages are asking for help.²

The cost is \$4,000 a year or \$12,000 to adopt a Dalit village for its three-year program. (More information on www.iheu.org/dalitfaq.)

Would it not be gratifying if we, the Humanists of this well-to-do country, could raise \$12,000 to lift a whole village of Untouchables out of their terrible quagmire?

CAHS is raising funds, now nearing \$3,000. We seek ideas on fund-raising activities and, of course, donations (send to CAHS).

Please respond, dear member.

Halina Strnad

1. *International Humanist News*, August 2009: pp. 5–8.

2. *Ibid*, May 2011: pp. 20–23.

Letter

Food sovereignty

I note the following from 'Food for all?' in December *VH*, page 1, 'Even enough food can be produced for 12 billion, but uneven distribution has 1 billion undernourished and 2 billion experience food insecurity.'

Therefore it is not food shortages at all. It is the population density on earth that is too big. It is the proliferation of people that causes cities of millions, that causes uneven distribution of food, too many people queuing for jobs, unemployed and never employable. We have too many people on earth that kill feed and water, space and space and living in harmony.

The tolerable population density is one-and-a-half to two billion, to live generously together, not seven billion.

Send all those who believe in god and similar ideas to heaven and leave all of us living in reality alone. It may be a better world!!!

Gerhard Weissmann, SA.

Members in print

(*The Age*, 27 Dec 2011)

No to religion

CARDINAL George Pell says in his "Christmyth" message that 'the blessings of prosperity, peace and a good climate' are taken for granted.

It is Cardinal Pell who takes for granted that decent Australians will ignore the crimes of Catholic clergy and that the media can be bullied. He takes for granted that people are scientifically ignorant and he can delude them with the promise of a supernatural eternal life.

Religion should get out of "Christmyth" and let Australians enjoy it without being made to feel guilty and undeserving.

Andrew Rawlings, Blackburn

(*The Age* (Melbourne), 25 January 2012)

Education inequality – bridging the divide

A FORMER student from a disadvantaged school in Corio wished she could have met students from Geelong Grammar when she was in year 12 — "Wrong side of the tracks in Geelong makes all the difference for children's futures"

(*The Saturday Age*, 21 January).

When I was a school psychologist, I arranged exchanges between local schools, rich with poor, country and town, public and private. A teacher and about six students would spend a day in another school's classroom, then report back to their own classes. It was terrific, but it needed someone like me to arrange these exchanges.

Ideas about organisation and curricula were exchanged and the children's comments were illuminating. For example, from a Collingwood boy about private school students: "Why do those boys speak as if they have something in their mouths?"

With schools' segregation increasing, such exchanges are needed more than ever. Schools with bullying need to know about schools which do not have this problem. Religious exchange is essential. Rich children need to know about the poverty of other schools.

Valerie Yule, Mount Waverley