

VICTORIAN HUMANIST

Monthly newsletter of the Humanist Society of Victoria Inc.

April 2011

Volume 50, No. 3

RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION IS DISCRIMINATORY Humanist Society stands up for children

Religious study contested, by Barney Zwartz

[Excerpts from *The Age*, 24 March.]

RELIGIOUS education in state primary schools discriminates against children whose parents opt out, according to a complaint to be laid today at the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission.

The complaint by three parents claims the Education Department segregates children on religious grounds and discriminates by forcing children to opt out rather than specifically opting in if they want religious education. The department also discriminates by denying those who opt out a proper secular alternative, the complaint says.

According to Holding Redlich partner Andrea Tsalamandris, who will lodge the complaint, religious instruction is clearly permitted, "but we object to the way it is taught"...

Most of the religious education in Victorian state primary schools is provided by Access Ministries, a Christian educational agency ... Access chief executive Evonne Paddison said volunteers were carefully trained so they did not try to convert children. "They say, 'This is what Christians believe', not 'This is what you should believe.'"

Backlash as God forced into schools, by Michael Bachelard

[Excerpts from *The Sunday Age*, 27 March.]

THE Victorian Education Department is forcing public primary schools to run Christian education classes taught by volunteers, angering parents and schools that do not want to host them. ... This comes as the Humanist Society of Victoria takes legal action against the department, claiming children who opt out of "special religious instruction" are being discriminated against. ...

Hawthorn West Primary School parent Tim Heasley recently tried to challenge the hosting of Christian classes at the school, telling Education Department senior policy officer Christine Pinto the school should be able to reject religious instruction if it wanted to. He pointed to the state legislation that says religious instruction "may be given". But Ms Pinto told Mr Heasley that his school must continue to offer it.

"The word 'may' used in ... the Education and Training Reform Act ... is interpreted as 'must' to conform with the original intent of the Victorian legislation," she wrote late last year in an e-mail to Mr Heasley. Mr Heasley, a lawyer, said the department's interpretation was insupportable. At a recent school council meeting, he moved to end religious instruction at the school, but the move failed. ...

Access Ministries has 4000 volunteers who teach in two-thirds of Victorian primary schools. Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Baha'i, Greek Orthodox, Hare Krishna and Roman Catholic courses are also accredited, but Access provides 96 per cent of "special religious instruction". ...

The Humanist Society has written to all state primary schools saying they do not have to offer religious instruction. The society has also set up a website, www.religionsinschool.com, to garner views on the issue. □



Print Post Approved PP 335708/00019

NO Monthly Public Lecture in April

29 April, Friday 6pm
Welcome gathering,
beginning of CAHS
Convention. The Tudor,
1101 Whitehorse Rd., Box
Hill

30 April, Saturday 9am to
3pm CAHS AGM.
7pm AHOY presentation
dinner, Dr Leslie Cannold.
The Tudor, Box Hill.

1 May, Sunday 10am to
3.30 pm Convention session
on 'Secular public
schooling; Humanist
outreach.'
The Tudor, Box Hill.



IN THIS ISSUE

Diary Dates	2
Humanist News	3
Qld dad challenges chaplaincy program	4
Humanism – beyond the god question by Roy Speckhardt	4
Dangerous beliefs, zealotry, wisdom and mental health, lecture by Stephen Stuart	5
Education equality	6
Quote from <i>The Beacon</i> Pagan origins of easter	7

Queensland dad challenges chaplaincy program

The Freethinker (Brighton, UK) March 2011

A Queensland father has issued writs in the High Court against the Commonwealth Government and Scripture Union Queensland, alleging the Government has breached the Australian Constitution through its funding of a chaplain at his children's school.

Ron Williams, the father of four children attending a public school in Toowoomba, argues that Commonwealth funding of the school's chaplain breaches sections 54 and 116 of the Constitution.

The chaplain is funded under the National Schools Chaplaincy Program (NSCP), which has provided places for 2,700 chaplains in schools throughout Australia at a cost of many millions of tax dollars.

Ironically, in August 2010, the newly appointed *atheist* Prime Minister of Australia, Julia Gillard pledged a further \$222-million* towards extending the programme to at least 1,000 more Australian schools. This sum was to represent almost one third of Labor's entire education budget of \$704m.

[* Editor's Note: \$222 million is over 3 years.]

Williams argues that the Commonwealth Government failed to follow the proper constitutional requirements in funding the NSCP, and in its agreement with Scripture Union to place a chaplain at his children's school.

Mr Williams also argues that the NSCP requires that those appointed to the public office of school chaplain at his children's school are subject to a religious test. That is, they must be practising Christians, regulated and trained by Scripture Union. This, he says, breaches section 116 of the Constitution which states that "no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public test under the Commonwealth."

The case has sparked fierce debate in Australia – and has served to focus attention on the issue of gay bullying in schools which a number of commentators claim is the result of anti-gay propaganda unleashed among youngsters by fundamentalist Christian chaplains.

One, Chrys Stevenson, recently pointed out that "research studies reveal that one-third of all teenagers who commit suicide are gay. Considering that gay teens only comprise one-tenth of the school population, this means that they are 300 percent more likely to kill themselves than heterosexual youth."

"So to whom do we entrust these vulnerable young people? Evangelistic, fundamentalist Christians."

As Adele Horin wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "Religious institutions remain the last bastion of bigotry. They have resisted the evidence from health and legal professionals that homosexuality is a normal part of

human sexuality. They have instead maintained a hardline interpretation of a few scattered references in the Bible Church leaders should be spreading a message of love and acceptance of gays. Instead they are part of the problem.'

Humanism—Beyond the god question

A number of people ask whether or not humanists are just atheists by another name. Are they? According to our last membership survey, a majority of humanists would also identify as atheists, but that doesn't make the words synonyms. Humanists share a positive philosophy drawing foundational principles of compassion and equality from the empathy we feel for all of humanity and the world in which we live. While our scientific source of knowledge implies atheism or agnosticism, we've had decades to apply this caring and rational philosophy to many areas of life beyond the God question. That's why the American Humanist Association spends so much time on humanist education, philosophical debate, legal activism, legislative advocacy, and media outreach. It's that positive lifestance that calls us to action—to make this world a better place for all.

Roy Speckhardt

Executive Director, American Humanist Association

Genes in Genesis

'I believe that the writers of Genesis had detected the inherent selfishness in human nature that I propose is in our genes, and invented the myth of original sin to account for it. It's an image. I am not acting as an exegete – I don't interpret scripture.'

Christian de Duve, cytologist, Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine (1974). *New Scientist* No. 2801, 26 Feb 2011

Report release

This report of the Australian Human Rights Commission has just been released. When read and digested further its findings will be reported in Humanist publications in more detail.

It is worth noting that, 'Atheist/Rationalist/Humanist groups' have had their views heard through submissions and consultations. Views from these groups are quoted throughout the report.

Download the report at <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/frb/report/index.html>

Dangerous beliefs, zealotry, wisdom and mental health

Member **Stephen Stuart** condenses his public lecture to HSV, given at the Balwyn Library on Thursday 24 February.

Humans by nature strive to make sense of their world, to generalize immediate experience, partly as an aid to memory. And there is a general human compulsion, according to buddhist psychology, to fix the flux of life, generating addictive desires, like the craving for group identity or religion. The ruminative mind spins yarns from which the imaginative and rational faculties fashion beliefs. Beliefs range in kind from expressive attitudes, thru policies for action and rationalizations following action, to opinions and cognitive propositions.

As science progressively reveals the workings of nature, we assume we're getting closer to nature's reality. The muscular christian mountaineer, however, feels the expanded horizon is closer to god's view, bringing him closer to god. These metaphysical interpretations of experience – nature and god – appear to be a matter of upbringing or taste, beyond dispute.

Every belief purports to represent reality, as Sam Harris says. Science has its beliefs, such as working hypotheses, while the belief that the universe is a single objective reality qualifies as being metaphysical, beyond empirical knowledge. Theological beliefs are typically metaphysical. The christian belief in a god acting in the world is expressive and wishful rather than cognitive. Richard Dawkins pretends it's a scientific question and challenges the christians to investigate god's existence objectively. But metaphysical ideas are only ideas, stimulated maybe from outside, living in the mind with no apparent referents outside it and so no empirical truth. Assessing them is like comparing works of art or strategies for living.

Can one justifiably object to someone else's belief? Examine it for the interests it serves beyond the self; if it impinges on other people, would acting upon it infringe their freedom or bring them harm? You don't have to be a believer to raise the question: the outsider's view can be the clearer one.

Socially harmful beliefs

'Every belief', writes Sam Harris, 'is a fount of action *in potentia*.' We cannot say a belief is harmful *in itself* – perish the thought-police! – until it results in something harmful to the believer or others. So-called 'honour killings' have been defended by the perpetrators declaring, 'women taken in adultery should be stoned': that's a harmful belief. When someone's belief *resembles* one that has already done harm, we may say it *looks dangerous*, on analogy with a weapon.

Metaphysical beliefs are often expressed in idiosyncratic terms; faith means different things to different believers. Christopher Hitchens looks at history selectively, blaming many past wrongs on religion and attributing all past merits to human nature. The religious devotee entertains the opposite view: many merits are due to religion, and all wrongs are due to human nature. Nonetheless, the *kamikaze* pilot followed his metaphysical belief to wreak manifest harm.

Responsibility

As with real danger, those who perceive inherent danger in a particular discourse have a collective duty to warn those who don't. Considering religious beliefs that *look dangerous*, we ought to advance a secular alternative and point out to 'people of the book' where their doctrines have unwholesome consequences which concern the whole society. To cultivate awe in the contemplation of almighty god can cripple the young mind with guilt; to rely for social control on the threat of divine wrath stultifies society; the systematic derogation of women leads to their mistreatment.

Zealotry and wisdom

The politically powerful Organization of the Islamic Conference campaigns to reform the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, elevating freedom of religion. Since 2005 the General Assembly of the UN, in Committee, has annually passed a non-binding resolution entitled, 'Combating defamation of religions'. In November 2010 it read,

- Vilification of religions is a serious affront to human dignity ... Emphasizing ... the need ... to ensure respect for all races and religions ...
17. Also urges all States to take all possible measures to promote tolerance and respect for all religions and beliefs and the understanding of their value systems ...
24. Affirms that the Human Rights Council shall promote universal respect for all religious and cultural values ...

The resolution does not make it illegal to criticize religion: but it calls ominously upon member States to legislate against any expression beyond 'constructive and respectful debate of ideas'. The International Humanist & Ethical Union has opposed these motions in the Human Rights Council, on grounds of freedom of expression and democracy. Granting sweeping rights to culture-groups would jeopardize the hard-won democracy that we claim.

It's challenging when Australian muslims are attracted to the cause of militant Islam. Atheists should avoid making vitriolic attacks upon traditional beliefs, which demonize the believers and polarize conflict. Instead we need sensitive secularists to find – that ancient Greek ideal – a *golden mean* between extremes. Constructive dialog between secularists and muslims might follow principles in *Getting to yes: negotiating an agreement without giving in*, by Roger Fisher & William Ury. An important step would be to admit that not every muslim feels it's his or her religious duty to attack the infidel. (Sam Harris came to the opposite conclusion under the misapprehension that their beliefs must be coherent.) The goal of negotiating a way of living together is harm-reduction.

Sam Harris also errs with his claim that even moderate religious faith threatens America's survival, because moderates preach tolerance and won't criticize dangerous 'certainties' in their midst. He falls into the trap, as do Richard Dawkins and the religious extremists, of shouting, who is not with us is against us. Humanists don't confuse moderates with extremists. Better to oppose intolerance directly than oppose tolerance.

Mental health and shared humanity

Pointing out definite harm is more effective than moralizing. As we are social animals, psychological resilience depends considerably on social relations, and mental health becomes a community responsibility. In the national survey of mental health and well-being, conducted by Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2007, those who had had a mental disorder in the preceding twelve months amounted to 20 percent of the population aged 16 and over. That shows neglect of the whole community fabric. Might that neglect be related to the growth of sectarian private schooling? The new educational movement of positive psychology could fortify the young against adolescent depression. Child abuse, including psychological abuse, typically recurs in a cycle which is hard to break. Similarly, immature minds need protection from the deception of religious indoctrination. Adults can survive with contradictory beliefs, but it is 'bad faith' to impose religion on children.

All the problems of the world cry out for people to work together on the basis of shared humanity. More egalitarianism is needed. Where the social environment is poor, there is low social trust, low self-esteem, frequent interpersonal violence and suicide. Public health studies show that societal cohesion is important for individual health, and Scandinavia scores highly. In Australia we see religious adherence dropping and competitive commercial consumption rampant, possibly related to the dwindling of community life. The rebuilding of co-operative communities could

begin from the shared experiences of natural calamities and of prolonged aging. □

Education equality

Anthony Ashbolt's assessment that the major stumbling block on the road to educational equality is state aid to private schools is eloquently summed up in the words of a UNESCO statement of July 1996:

In spite of anything which may be said to the contrary, the advocacy of the separation of church and state is not an anti-religious conspiracy, quite the contrary. This principle is the only one which permits men freely to choose a faith or to reject all faiths while preserving a genuine respect for differing opinions.

In the sphere of education, the principle to be observed is that state schools must be freely open to all and consequently non-denominational. It being clearly understood that within such schools no pupils shall receive teaching which offends his parents opinions or beliefs. Where private schools have been established, if discriminatory practices are to be excluded from the national ideal, public funds can be granted only to public and non-discriminatory services.

(Source: *The Beacon*, Journal of the Melbourne Unitarian Peace Memorial Church. Editorial, March 2011.)

Wanted

Humanists who can relate to six-year-old children

(Well, older kids too.)

If you want to pass your Humanism onto young children please join Dan Kerr and myself to form a Children's Sub-committee.

Possible activities

Parties once or twice per year in the Tresise Centre – one likely later this year (2011) when parents for Fairness in Religion in Schools (FIRIS) meets.

Camp Quest Holiday weekend (search for bunyips, play ghosts, play and sing folk songs, explore nature, practise science, rôle-play typical ethical situations or just be together).

See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camp_Quest, <http://www.camp-quest.org.uk/>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2f10W4Z0-io> and many other Google and YouTube websites.

Dan Kerr, 03 9874 1319

Harry Gardner, 03 9870 8998, 04 0870 8998

Pagan origins of Easter

For most Australians Easter is a long weekend, with a commercial push to purchase and consume chocolate eggs and bunnies. These symbols of fertility and the Easter connection with human sacrifice, as in the supposed death and resurrection of Jesus, link us to much earlier human times.

The symbolic importance of eggs can be traced back to into the mists of human history, for the role they play in many creative myths all over the world. In these myths mountains, animals, trees and even humans emerge from eggs. Sometimes, such mythic eggs appear miraculously, often after women or female deities were said to have laid them.

Although eggs, in rituals or as gifts, have been dyed many colours, by far the most common colour is red. Red eggs feature widely in folk tales and ancient customs. In China the birth of a male child was hailed with red eggs. An old Korean folk tale features a red egg as the actual vehicle as well as the emblem of renewed life as part of a miraculous birth. In France an offering of red eggs was said to guarantee bountiful crops.

It is not surprising that eggs associated with renewed health and life are the colour of blood. Humans have long known that loss of blood often accompanies death. Blood was believed to be the vital life-giving force.

Blood sacrifice, as in war, and blood generally, spreads its significance and images through the legends and history of all lands. Humans have believed from the earliest times in history that the life of their community, the fertility of crops and people, depended on renewed energy supplied by ceremonies involving blood.

For example temples throughout Europe and all round the Mediterranean were places for animal sacrifice. On special days blood ran from the altars in rivers. Likewise in the Americas the Aztecs killed thousands of people, often young and in their prime, to appease their savage God. And from the Aboriginal people of NE Arnhem Land comes a chant used in their turtle increase ceremony:

The long-necked turtle floats
In the blood red sea of the dreaming,
Casting the age-old brown shadow
On the sand below.

In pre-Christian times most pagan religions in the Mediterranean area had a major seasonal day of religious celebration at or following the spring equinox. Cybele, the Phrygian fertility goddess, had a consort, Attis, who was believed to have been born via a virgin birth. Attis was believed to have died and been resurrected each year during the period March 22 to

25. This widely believed myth is an element in spring equinox celebrations.

Wherever Christian worship of Jesus and pagan worship of Attis were active in the same geographical area in ancient times, Christians used to celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus on the same date. As a consequence pagans and Christians used to quarrel bitterly about which of their gods was the true prototype and which the imitation. The idea of the sacrifice of a person of high standing for the sake of the common good is a very ancient belief.

Many religious historians and liberal theologians believe that the death and resurrection legends were first associated with Attis, many centuries before the birth of Jesus. They were simply grafted on to stories of Jesus' life in order to make Christian theology more acceptable to pagans. Others suggest that many of the events in Jesus' life that were recorded in the gospels were lifted from the life of Krishna, the second person of the Hindu Trinity.

Alternatively some ancient Christians had another explanation; they claimed that Satan had created counterfeit deities in advance of the coming of Christ in order to confuse humanity!

It is fairly obvious that in the early centuries of the first millennium, the powerful Roman religious authorities, with the backing of the Roman Empire, simply co-opted the rites and practices of pagan religions, re-labelled them as 'Christian'.

The actual word 'Easter' is considered to be derived from an Anglo-Saxon fertility goddess Eostre (also Eostre or Ostara). Eostre worship appeared to be common in both Western Europe and Britain, and some scholars suggest that Eostre may have been derived from the Goddess of Dawn who is found in various forms many cultures.

The folklore traditions in Germany testify to a traditional Easter festival or Ostarun. According to legend, Eostre the Spring goddess saved a bird, whose wings were frozen from the harsh winter by turning it into a hare. This was a magical hare that laid eggs. In fact Eostre was nearly always accompanied in legend by a hare. This old legend seems the most likely origin of the 'Easter bunny', though we can't dismiss the association of rabbits, as very successful breeders, with fertility.

Humanists are happy to enjoy an Easter break and eat chocolate eggs and rabbits, all in moderation. The Humanist view is that all the stories and myths of our forebears are part of the overall human story. They may not be factually true, but they do contribute to who we are today. By interweaving these with the findings of history, archaeology, anthropology and other science based studies, we are given an enriched understanding of what an amazing path human have travelled.

Rosslyn Ives

To join HSV

Contact the Membership Secretary, Marie Hodgens, E-mail hmhodge@netspace.net.au,

Tel. (03) 9833 4732 or write to HSV, GPO Box 1555, Melbourne Vic 3001.
Annual fees: Individual \$30 [conc. \$20], Couple \$35 [conc. \$25], Ass member [publications only \$20]

Victorian Humanist

Print Post Approved
PP335708/0019

If undeliverable, please return to
Humanist Society of Victoria Inc.
GPO Box 1555, Melbourne VIC 3001



SURFACE

MAIL

POSTAGE
PAID
AUSTRALIA

Humanism proceeds from an assumption *that* man is on his own and this life is all and an assumption *of* responsibility for one's own life and for the life of mankind – an appraisal and an undertaking, two personal decisions. Less that this is never humanism. And this is only a skeleton, a personal frame, but not the person.

H. J. Blackham, *Humanism* 1968.