



VICTORIAN HUMANIST

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The real battle over religious education

This is intended as a response to the opinion piece by Barney Zwartz titled, 'Why Christianity should be taught, properly, in our schools' (*The Age*, 11/04/2011). (See end of article for web reference.)

Introduction

The issue of religious education has probably always been a matter of controversy as far as Humanists are concerned. The recent bringing of complaints to the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission has only served to bring the matter to public attention once again.

I was interested to see the matter discussed by Barney Zwartz, religion editor at *The Age*, and after reading his opinion piece I was compelled to offer a response from my perspective as an advocate of secularism in political matters.

Zwartz's view on religious education

Zwartz expresses the view that the current system of religious education, provided mainly by Access Ministries, is 'no longer adequate', and that instead we need 'a formal course taught by trained teachers, introducing students to the various religions and non-religious ethical theories but advocating none'. This strikes me as an entirely reasonable proposition – in fact, a rather familiar one, since it is essentially what secularists have been arguing for.

This recommendation is taken from the 'Fairness in Religions in School' website, which is critical of Special Religious Instruction:

We need to educate our children about the full range of religions that matter to us, and respect the basic point that families have a fundamental right in how their children are religiously educated but that this should be outside of the normal school curriculum. Ultimately schools should teach about religion, not instruct children in religion.

Going back further, the Humanist Society of Victoria (HSV) made a submission to the 'Russell Report' in 1973, which was supposed to consider alternatives to Religious Instruction as it existed then. Part IV of the HSV's submission sets out "Guidelines for Ethics and Comparative Religion". These guidelines propose exposure to a variety of religious institutions, practices and beliefs, as well as ethics, civics and politics. In paragraph 16 of that same submission, the authors stated:

[W]e define the subject "Ethics and Comparative Religion" as "the factual inter-comparison of various religious and moral philosophies without implying the superiority of any one philosophy".

Sound familiar, Mr Zwartz?

Continued on page 6

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HSV Monthly Public
Lecture
THURSDAY
26 MAY

7.30 for 8.00 pm

Meeting Room
Balwyn Library

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

Michael Bachelard (*The Age*), on

**'Religious cults
and
Humanism.'**

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SUBMISSION REPORT

To the federal review for funding for schooling we made the following main points.

- Humanists consider equity in educational opportunities as a matter of great importance and congratulate the government on inquiring into equity between public and private school systems.
- We deplore the fact that there exists large disparity in educational outcomes and the lack of balance in school funding.
- In a majority of cases the quality of educational outcomes is in direct proportion to the available funding. While two-thirds of students attend government schools, twice as much funding was provided to non-government schools in 2007–2008.
- Students with educational difficulties are found disproportionately in public schools. It seems that the Australian government has passed this problem to State and Territory governments whilst maintaining privilege for the private school sector.
- We see the benefit of parents, families, not-for-profit organisations supporting schools. We oppose commercial involvement in school activities.
- We would strongly favour a national school funding system that is needs-based, equitable and aimed at high outcomes for all rather than the present State and Territory departments' multiple budget and sets of standards.
- If a world-class education for all Australians is the government's stated goal, then it must allocate much more money and eliminate entrenched inequalities between advantaged and disadvantaged schools and students.
- We agree that parents have the right to choose educational opportunities for their children but we ask the government to mandate a universal funding and curriculum across all schools .e.g. religious schools should not be permitted to insert creationism into their science teaching or present only one view on complex ethical issues. Public funding for education demands teaching of pluralist views to promote tolerance and social cohesion.
- We regard the current introduction of Christian chaplains into schools at great public expense, as a denial of rights of the many parents who wish their children to have a secular and pluralist education and ask that the practice be revoked.
- We quote experts who state that the current system of allocating federal funds by socio-economic status is heavily biased in favour of private schools and creates an 'upstairs-downstairs' society.
- Finland leads internationally in educational outcomes. Its legislation provides the right to extra tuition if needed and is described as a 'democratic way of evening out differences in the social background of students and a way to increase the educational performance of a country.'

We ask the Australian Government to enact similar legislation to redress inequality.

Mary Bergin, Geoff Allshorn, Halina Strnad

Letter

Wasting time

For the life of me, I cannot understand, why humanists/atheists, spend more than one second of their time trying to work out the difference between the two of them. There is too much in common to waste time on minor differences, whatever they may be.

Barry Revill, Moorabbin

Members in print

Religious instruction

(*The Age*, 8 April)

To many students and ex-students, religious instruction has become religious destruction.

Itiel Bereson, St Kilda

Politics

(*The Age*, 11 April)

Is it possible the French have another (covert) reason for banning Muslim dress? Would the new laws not be a deterrent to Muslims seeking refuge?

Jean Menere, Albury

Tercentenary of Hume

The Scottish philosopher David Hume was born in 1711, 26 April Old Style and 7 May New Style.

Beginning with his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Hume strove to create a total naturalistic 'science of man' that examined the psychological basis of human nature. In stark opposition to the rationalists who preceded him, most notably Descartes, he concluded that desire rather than reason governed human behaviour, saying famously: 'Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions.' A prominent figure in the sceptical philosophical tradition and a strong empiricist, he argued against the existence of innate ideas, concluding instead that humans have knowledge only of things they directly experience. – Wikipedia.

For more of his profound thoughts, tune to The Philosopher's Zone, ABC Radio National.

Corrigendum

March issue, page 4, Submission Report 2, 'chaplains in State schools': for connect students, read Scripture Union Queensland requires its chaplains to connect students.

We regret implying that ACCESS in Victoria was guilty of such unashamed proselytization as occurs in Queensland. Editor.

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PS Unfinancial, members will be deleted from list.

International criminal justice and the prevention of atrocity

HSV public lecture by Professor Timothy McCormack* University of Melbourne, on 24 March 2011 at Balwyn Library

Report by Jennie Stuart

Over the last ten years there has been a protracted and polarized debate over whether the international community has an obligation to stop atrocities. The UN Charter is silent on the question of whether military intervention for humanitarian purposes is a right. If the UN Security Council has not sanctioned intervention, is it tantamount to a violation of sovereign territory? When NATO forces intervened in Kosovo in 1999 they did so without the authorization of the Security Council. This was seen as a turning-point; although at the time NATO claimed it was not a precedent, however, that is really what it has become. Kosovo is now seen as exemplifying circumstances in which intervention by force in the sovereign affairs of a state is permissible because of gross abuses of human rights and international crimes.

International humanitarian law, or the law of war, is a particularly difficult field. Many of the laws pertaining to it are violated in the event of conflict. However, there have been some significant developments recently, such as the Yugoslav Tribunal which was instigated by the UN Security Council in 1993, and later tribunals investigating atrocities in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Cambodia and Lebanon. In 1998 the first permanent International Criminal Court (ICC) was established. And although punishment after an atrocity has occurred is less than ideal, it is better than no accountability at all.

Earlier this year the Security Council unanimously voted to refer the Gaddafi regime in Libya to the ICC. This was despite the fact that neither Russia, India, China nor the US have signed up to the ICC. The passing of UN Resolution 1970, as a result, authorized international military intervention, putting Gaddafi on notice and announcing to other Middle Eastern regimes that there is a point which will trigger international action. However, international humanitarian law is only one piece of the matrix. While it is important to be working towards greater awareness and respect for humanitarian law, and educating the military in this regard, greater effort needs to be given to addressing factors which may prevent the outbreak of hostility, as well as to training in conflict resolution.

When international law began in the middle of the nineteenth century it concentrated on the activities of a state in its bilateral or multilateral dealings. The traditional view was that whatever happened within a state's boundaries was that state's own affair. The idea that state sovereignty and the rights of a state are not absolute is a relatively recent shift. The notion that individuals or groups have rights by virtue of their humanity only gathered momentum after the Second World War and, as a consequence, states that fail to respect or protect the human rights of their citizens are now deemed to be in violation of international law.

The commitment of the international community to the obligation to intervene in the event of life-threatening civil

unrest crystallized at the Millennium Summit in 2000. Kofi Annan, as UN Secretary General, was haunted by the memory of the massacre of 900,000 Tutsi Rwandans following his decision not to deploy extra UN troops. Prior to the Summit the ground-breaking report of the Commission chaired by Gareth Evans had explored the grounds on which intervention might be justified. Coupled with NATO's willingness to intervene in Kosovo in 1999 all these factors contributed to the new dynamic.

However it is patently not the case that the international community is now prepared to intervene wherever and whenever atrocities are reported. The civil war in Sri Lanka, the Zimbabwean situation under Mugabe and the recent shooting of civilians by government troops in Côte d'Ivoire are instances which have not resulted in action.

The establishment of the ICC has changed the options which are now available to counter atrocity and crime internationally, although the first trial, dealing with alleged war crimes in the Congo, has not yet quite finished. It has been debated widely whether international criminal trials have a deterrent effect, but this is not a matter which can be examined empirically.

The ICC has also acted as a catalyst to motivate states in revising their own criminal codes to give jurisdiction domestically to try war crimes or acts against humanity. Australia is one of the 112 states that have taken this step, revising the *Commonwealth Criminal Code Act 1995*. It has introduced a hundred new crimes, in line with the Rome Statute of the ICC. This allows trial of crimes against humanity once the perpetrator arrives in Australia, no matter whether the act was committed elsewhere, by an Australian or someone of another nationality. One benefit of this legislative revision is that it gives Australia first call in trying its own citizens, should they be accused of war crimes, whether they occurred here or elsewhere. Further-more, it necessitates greater vigilance and commitment to human rights on our part as a result, as our failure to investigate a relevant crime when it is reported would see the matter flowing through to The Hague and the ICC.

The ICC has enabled progress in international humanitarian law, but it is not a panacea and it has limitations. Change has been incremental. However, the contrast between Resolution 1970 in February 2011 in response to the Libyan uprising and Resolution 1264 in 1999 in relation to atrocities perpetrated in East Timor is illuminating. In the second instance the Resolution merely stated, "the Security Council condemns the atrocities occurring and demands that those responsible be brought to justice." The ICC was not fully operational at that time. However in 2011 the Libyan crisis was referred by the UN Security Council promptly, and Resolution 1970 gave the Prosecutor of the ICC the authority to investigate the matter. The fact that the option for referral is available and that the international community has been prepared to utilize it is progress without a doubt.

* Professor McCormack was appointed Special Advisor on International Humanitarian Law to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court in The Hague in 2010.

The real battle over religious education

(Continued from page 1.)

Admittedly, this is not an exhaustive statement of the secular position. The 1973 HSV submission identified another alternative to religious instruction in paragraph 13:

One solution to the ... controversial problems of R.I. is to abolish all teaching of religion or religious matters from State Schools. Both the United States and France adopted this solution many years ago.

However, this alternative is not mentioned any further in the submission, which places much greater emphasis on Ethics and Comparative Religion.

Even the much-maligned Richard Dawkins (the only atheist and secularist specifically mentioned in Zwartz's piece) stresses – in *The God Delusion*, no less (Chapter 9) – that the study of religion is important:

[A]n atheistic world-view provides no justification for cutting the Bible, and other sacred books, out of our education ... We can give up our belief in God while not losing touch with a treasured heritage.

Atheism as an 'ideology'

Even were we to adopt the strong secular position as exemplified by the US and French education systems, this would still not be tantamount to 'advocating' atheism. This brings me to Mr Zwartz's claim that there is a 'battle taking place within secularism as to whether atheism should be an unofficial state ideology'. I wish to take Mr Zwartz to task on semantics, specifically for his usage of the words 'secularism' and 'atheism'.

Mr Zwartz is right, in my opinion, to point out that secularism is not 'ideologically neutral'. It is indeed the promotion of an ideal, namely that matters of church and state be kept separate. This ideal has its roots in the Enlightenment era, when ideological opposition to the arbitrary authority of religious institutions and divinely appointed rulers came to the fore in culture and politics. However, there is an element of neutrality to secularism in that, by definition, it does not allow any religion to be favoured by the state over another.

The second point I wish to make on this front is that there is no necessary link between secularism and atheism. While I have little doubt that most self-described atheists would also describe themselves as secularists – as I do – it is perfectly possible for religious people to be secularists. In fact, as author and atheist Christopher Hitchens is fond of pointing out, the 'wall of separation' between church and state which Thomas Jefferson helped to erect in the United States served, in no small measure, to protect Christian groups from persecution by other Christian denominations. I don't think I'm exaggerating when I suggest that the cultural survival and flourishing of religious minorities in the West would have been impossible were it not for the rise of secularism.

Thirdly, to speak of atheism as an 'ideology' is meaningless. This point is only tangential to the piece to which I'm responding, but still needs to be reiterated, because of the misunderstanding it betrays, and how widespread this misunderstanding is amongst the religious and non-religious alike. Just as there is no necessary link

between secularism and atheism (between 'I think that church and state should be kept separate' and 'I don't believe in a god'), there is none between atheism and anti-religion. True, you could fairly say that atheism necessarily implies that religion is incorrect (at least those religions that profess the existence of a god), but the idea that religious activity ought to be suppressed, or to be forcefully eradicated, requires a 'middle term' to complete the syllogism. I am unconvinced of the existence of any such term, which is why I happily tolerate people practising religion in their private lives.

If you think I'm defining atheism too simplistically – as summarised by the statement 'I don't believe in a god' – I would challenge you to look at what prominent atheists *actually* profess to believe, even the supposedly incorrigible Professor Dawkins (see, for example, the seven-degree 'spectrum' in *The God Delusion*, Chapter 2), and I think you'll find that this interpretation is by far the most common amongst self-identifying atheists.

Is teaching religion 'child abuse'?

Citing Richard Dawkins as an example (his only one), Mr Zwartz takes issue with the idea that teaching religion to children is a form of abuse. As I have already shown, Richard Dawkins is not opposed to educating children about religion *per se* – if you read the book, you'll find that what he considers abusive is teachers, parents and clergymen terrifying children with the image of hellfire.

On this argument, I agree with him. The fact that the adults involved may genuinely believe the truth of it is hardly an excuse, any more than the belief that one's religion is correct is an acceptable excuse for seeking to impose it on others through governmental power, or killing people in its name. These kinds of behaviour are examples of why even the devout ought to support secularism in all governmental matters, including education – which brings us back, neatly enough, to where we started.

Why this response?

I chose to offer a rebuttal to Mr Zwartz's piece because, ironically, I think the concerns he raises and the system he advocates are potent arguments in favour of secularism, and against the influence of religious ideologies, in educational matters – it's just that, in my opinion, his misunderstanding of secularism and the motivations behind it lead him to the opposite conclusion. The misunderstanding is a common one, and my only aim is to clear it up so that the debate is directed at concrete issues rather than straw men.

Samuel Mason-Smith

Reference

Website for Zwartz's article:

<<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/why-christianity-should-be-taught-properly-in-our-schools-20110410-1d9bb.html>>

President's note

Dismay about special religious education is spreading. *The Age* ran a good editorial on 8 April, 'RE must not be an exercise in faith', and from academia the new Religions, Ethics & Education Network of Australia has emerged (<http://www.abc.net.au/religion>, also 8 April.)