



VICTORIAN HUMANIST

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The divine comedy plays on

The case of discrimination associated with special religious instruction (SRI), which is now before the Victorian Civil & Administrative Tribunal, consists of complaints by three particularly aggrieved families against the State Department of Education & Early Childhood Development. The discrimination line was first proposed by our vice-president John Russell, who initiated the action. The case is that the Department neglected the care of certain students while they were excluded from SRI and consigned them to limbo. It is not a charge against the 'CRE' purveyor, ACCESS ministries, because they behaved according to their lights and, as far as evidence could be gathered (beyond odd instances of lolly bribes), stayed within the remit of the Victorian *Education Act* and Departmental guidelines on SRI, *which say nothing against proselytizing*.

Nevertheless, public dismay is spreading about the missionary, often amateurish conduct of 'CRE'. ACCESS ministries found themselves embarrassed on television, and Education Minister Dixon demanded an assurance that their religious instructors did not proselytize. ACCESS obliged hastily saying, 'The chaplains and Christian religious educators at ACCESS ministries are guided by strict policy forbidding proselytizing of children and young people in our schools.' Adding to the confusion, tho renouncing proselytizing, they affirm 'evangelizing'.

These political stirrings have appeared as debate in the media: in *The Age*, ABC TV, Radio National and online, *New Matilda*, *Eureka Street* and *On Line Opinion*. There have been testaments to well managed SRI classes, but they miss the point that any number of such anecdotes cannot refute cases of abuse that have occurred. Some liberal clerics have called for SRI to be reviewed.

ACCESS posted an alarm call on their website:

'Urgent action needed! We need your voice! The very foundation of ACCESS ministries is being challenged as ACCESS ministries finds itself in the spotlight of a Court challenge that questions the Education Department's guidelines regarding the teaching of the Christian faith (and other faiths) in schools. ... You may be aware of the recent claims by the Humanist Society of Victoria and others regarding the provision of CRE in Victorian schools. ... Their argument is that schools may exercise discretion in the provision of SRI. However, the Act and regulations are clear, schools must give access to faith-providers for SRI and the providers may accept that provision!'

It was claimed that 130 thousand students underwent SRI in 2010, and about 95% of them got CRE from ACCESS. An online article by ACCESS later in April explicitly repudiated the letter sent by HSV to State primary schools in February. ACCESS claimed over 3,200 volunteer CRE instructors and concluded, piously, 'The presence of SRI programs by various religious faith providers in schools across Victoria recognises and respects the diversity and richness of the religious faith and experience of the Australian community.'

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HSV Monthly Public
Lecture
THURSDAY
23 June

7.30 for 8.00 pm

Meeting Room
Balwyn Library

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

Amelia Young
(Environment Victoria) on

**'Saving the
Murray River'**

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SUBMISSION REPORT

1. To the inquiry into Organ Donations in Victoria we made the following points in answer to specific questions.
 - Humanists regard the act of organ and tissue donation as an altruistic, humanitarian promotion of well-being.
 - We suggest that the State and Territory legislations on organ donations be streamlined into a uniform, national system governing this health service.
 - A national public education campaign involving all media could aid in increasing the low rate of donations in Australia. It could address some misconceptions – e.g. the age limit for donors or their health status – and stress the value of organs for transplantation research.
 - We support the use of the Australian Organ Donor Register established in 2005, rather than the “opting out” systems (presumed consent in absence of documented opposition to donation) such as those in Austria or Spain. Our Register contains consents and objections easily checked at all times. We suggest this should be periodically adjusted, noting changes in commitment as donor and health matters relevant to being a safe organ donor.
 - Regular blood donors receive an attractive badge. Issuing a “badge of honour” to those who pledge to be an organ donor might enhance participation in this service.
 - A symbol – like the daffodil for cancer research – adopted for organ donation and featured in popular events would keep the issue of organ donation in the public mind. Celebrities and prominent members of society could join in advocating this life-giving gift.
 - We acknowledge the difficult ethical issues at the “coalface” of death and grieving families. Personnel involved in organ donations should have received specialised training and a set of guidelines. Bereavement counselling should be offered to relatives of the deceased. We enclose a copy of the recommendations issued by the National Health and Medical Research Centre in 2005.
 - We oppose the recommendation that “A sincerely held objection by the family should be respected even if it is in conflict with the known intentions of the potential donor.” We are of the firm belief that a person’s autonomy and altruism should be respected at all times. Divergent beliefs are common among members of the same family. They deserve respect but not the right to oppose the documented wishes of the organ donor.
 - We suggest that at registration donors be issued with an information brochure on the role of families, so as to facilitate discussions with the next-of-kin about respecting their wishes.
 - Generous funding is required for this service and the publicity to obtain an increase in rates of donations.

Halina Strnad

2. Re: Anti-discrimination exemptions letter sent to Victorian Attorney-General, MPs and newspaper editors we made the following points.

- We seek clarification on the proposed anti-discrimination legislation which proposes to allow religious organisations to discriminate against certain groups and individuals.
- The HSV is repeatedly on record in support of human rights, racial and religious tolerance, respect for diversity and against bigotry.
- Discrimination is wrong because
 - a) it condones abuse of human rights for different people in the name of religion,
 - b) it creates different classes of human rights for different in our community,
 - c) it is a retrograde step in our efforts to foster a cohesive society with equal opportunities for all.
- We ask for detail of any proposed changes to the Victorian anti-discrimination legislation.
- We expect that as Attorney-General you will ensure that the law provides full and equal opportunities for all Victorians at all times.

Geoff Allshorn, Stephen Stuart

3. On the education of gifted and talented students we made the following points to the Victorian Parliament (in answer to specific questions).

- We support A. J. Tannenbaum’s conception of giftedness as the “potential of becoming a critical performer or exemplary producer of ideas in spheres of activity which enhance the moral, physical, emotional, social, intellectual or aesthetic life of the community”.
- We believe that such students should be placed in mainstream setting and not in segregated areas which would be detrimental to both talented and the ordinary in terms of self-image and concepts of society.
- Students should not regard talents and gifts as the paramount values in life. Development of the person involves the sense of social responsibility and relating to others with tolerance and sympathy.
- Students offered enrichment programs have accelerated skills development but this should not take them out of their peer group.
- Additional resources and flexible teaching in the mainstream should satisfy the needs of all students. We applaud the policies of the Education Department to recognize the special needs within the curriculum to cater for different individual abilities.

Stephen Stuart, Meg Paul et al.

The divine comedy plays on

(Continued from page 1)

The anglican archbishop of Melbourne responded to this call by repeating the traditional misconception that christianity is essential to our society (*The Age*, 25/4). Humanists recognize that christians are fond of appropriating to themselves the common values of humanity, values which were enunciated more than three centuries before the time of Jesus, for instance by Gautama Siddhartha and by Aristotle.

The Australian Education Union Victorian council lent powerful support to HSV policy on SRI when, on 13 May, it confirmed that 'the separation of church and state is not a peripheral issue;' it declared support for 'teaching about religions from a cultural and historical perspective, by qualified teachers, as part of an accredited curriculum program ... If SRI is made available to students, this should occur only outside school hours and be provided on a voluntary basis.' It further resolved 'to call on the State Government to withdraw all funding from ACCESS ministries and redirect funding to programs for disadvantaged students cut in the State budget.'

Stephen Stuart, president

Is your Advance Directive current?

ELDERLY MEMBERS are recommended to complete a general Advance Healthcare Directive (AHD) and specific directives for any particular conditions, such as dementia, motor neurone disease and nursing-home residence. In addition, everyone should appoint a medical agent, known as Enduring Power of Attorney (Medical Treatment), which is quite different from the ordinary Enduring Power of Attorney.

The forms previously distributed by HSV are now considered out of date. We advise obtaining the latest version from Dying With Dignity Victoria – either through its website, www.dwdv.org.au, E-mail, dwdv@dwdv.org.au or office, 3/9b Salisbury Avenue, Blackburn 3130, ph. 9877 7677.

In any case your documents should be reviewed regularly, say around a significant anniversary. If you are still satisfied with the statements and provisions in them, attach a dated, separate statement, witnessed by at least one other person, saying, 'I affirm that the statements and provisions shown in my documents [and here write the titles of the original documents and their signed dates] still express my views and wishes and what I believe are in my own best interests, should the stipulated situation/s arise.'

Halina Strnad, Stephen Stuart

The peak of tolerance is most readily achieved by those who are not burdened with convictions.

Alexander Chase

Change the *Education Act* 2006

Currently two sections of the Victorian *Education Act* mention religious teaching, namely, Section 2.2.10, defines the phrase "general religious education", which "means education about the major forms of religious thought and expression characteristic of Australian society and other societies in the world", and Section 2.2.11, defines the phrase "special religious instruction", which "means instruction provided by churches and other religious groups and based on distinctive religious tenets and beliefs." The christian form of it is known as "CRE".

I would like to see the Act changed to what follows.

2.2.10 Education in Government schools to be secular

(1) Except as provided in section 2.2.11, education in Government schools must be secular and not promote any particular religious practice, denomination or sect.

(2) Sub-section (1) does not prevent the inclusion of general worldview education in the curriculum of a Government school.

(3) A Government schoolteacher must not provide religious instruction other than the provision of worldview education in any Government school building.

(4) In this section "general worldview education" means education about the major forms of religious and secular life philosophies thought and expression characteristic of Australian society and other societies in the world.

Repeal section 2.2.11 Special religious instruction

Furthermore I would like to be allowed to involve HSV in my view by signing myself

"Harry Gardner, Children's Ethics Tutor, Humanist Society of Victoria Incorporated."

Would this be going too far at this stage when Fairness in Religions in School (FIRIS) has hived away from HSV, so as to permit liberal religionists to join with CRE protesters of all views, and tells us that the word "Humanism" is now counterproductive?

If so, you must forgive me when I talk to my five local MPs purely as an aggrieved grandfather, whose grandson has bravely endured six years of sitting variously outside the principal's office, a computer room, but now in his final year of primary school my grandson has been told that he must sit at the back of his classroom and listen to CRE, anyway.

My grandson is diminutive for his age, very polite, even charming, but when asked about CRE he looks you steadily in the eye and says, "I don't do religious instruction!"

I feel that I would be letting him down if I didn't complain loudly to my MPs that his treatment by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is unacceptable.

What do HSV members think, please?

Harry Gardner

Humanism and morality

[*Sophia* (Springer) 50, 135–139 (2011). Paper presented at the Parliament of the World's Religions, Melbourne, December 2009.]

Abstract. A theory of morality acceptable to humanists must be one that can be accepted independently of religion. In this paper, I argue that while there is such a theory, it is a non-standard one, and its acceptance would have some far-reaching consequences. As one might expect, the theory is similar to others in various ways. But it is not the same as any of them. Indeed, it is a radically new theory. Like Hume's ethics, it is founded on our natural sociability, and feelings of empathy for others. Like Aristotle's theory, it incorporates an ethics of virtue. Like Kant's theory, it regards the set of moral principles as those appropriate for a socially ideal society. But unlike Kant's theory, it is essentially utilitarian. I call it 'social contractual utilitarianism'.

Brian Ellis

Humanist film

'Babies' as described in *The Age* EG.

This beautiful, humanist, decidedly non-cutesy film from director Thomas Balmes and producer Alain Chabat follows the first year in the lives of four babies in four locales: Tokyo, Mongolia, Namibia and San Francisco.

A documentary film that focuses on the babies' interactions with parents, siblings and animals. It contrasts the cosseted child-rearing practices in developed countries with the basic care mode in undeveloped counties. Most enjoyable. [Editor.]

DEBATE – Is there a God?

Peter Singer and John Lennox
debate the evidence.

7pm, 20 July, Melbourne Town Hall

Peter Singer, [AHOY 2004] is Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics in the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University and laureate professor at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, University of Melbourne. His controversial views on animal rights and other issues in bioethics have received much attention. His other books include *Animal Liberation*, *Rethinking Life and Death*, *The Reproduction Revolution*, *How Are We to Live?*, and *Should the Baby Live?*, among others.

John Lennox is Professor in Mathematics at the University of Oxford and Fellow in Mathematics and Philosophy of Science at Green Templeton College, University of Oxford. He has doctorates from Oxford, Cambridge, and the University of Wales. John travels widely speaking on the interface between science and religion. He is the author of *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?*

Tickets: www.fixed-point.org

Aging

There are adjustments required when aging, just as such are required through the previous phases of life. There is a need to question both possibilities of extinction and some form of afterlife; this latter consideration possibly entailing a remoteness that is not consistent with our present abilities to understand possible higher states of being.

Aging at best and as it progresses entails a progressive diminution of both physical and mental abilities, leading to varying degrees of dissatisfaction which need to be addressed as stoically as possible. Not only is the grim reaper ever closer, so too is the potential of succumbing to a myriad of very nasty disabilities.

On a more pleasant note, particularly for very late bloomers such as myself, there can be a mellowing inherent with the progressing years, which enable us to become more eclectic and deep in our pursuits of happiness simply by virtue of the fact that past joys have become redundant in terms of intensity and youthful exuberance. Like old wine new maturity can present the aging person with more subtle and expansive pleasures.

One does not need to be religious to feel a sense of awe relating to nature and the world as we perceive it. As the years roll by, issues such as personal egoism, appearance, acquisition of material commodities and petty grievances may give way to a more mature idealism involving altruism relevant to the issues of life, which engage social norms that may have been imposed upon us by both religious and political ideologies. Issues such as euthanasia and palliative care, where one issue may surpass the other, need to be carefully addressed, while paying high regard to deemed value of existence where it applies in particular to sufferers and their ability to assess such issues on goingly.

As we mature some of us look seriously to our demise and view it as extinction. That this may well be the case cannot be proven beyond doubt. To move as joyously as we can through descending shadows with a hopeful yet wary eye, to where the cosmic future may take us along a rosier path. This is not to say we should become Scientologists, Mormons or New Age gurus, unless of course such holds some strange and pleasant fascination.

It seems wise to let the moderate pleasures of life take their course as we intelligently deem fit, viewing eternity as one great mystery, our part in which may ever remain inexplicable.

Paul Murchison

Reason can wrestle with terrors, and overthrow them.

Euripides

Council of Europe Moves to Make Humanists Equal With Religions

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The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) has welcomed the Council of Europe's move to include Humanist organizations in international dialogues that were previously restricted to religious groups.

IHEU president Sonja Eggerickx, who has represented IHEU at dialogues at the Council of Europe, said, 'Bringing those with different beliefs together for dialogue is an important part of the work of the Council of Europe and religious people are not the only people who need to be included in that dialogue. IHEU is recognised at the Council of Europe as the world union of Humanist and other non-religious organisations, and it is a real advance that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council is now recommending that Humanists and Humanist organisations should be included in intercultural dialogue.'

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recommended that its 47 member governments 'promote a genuine partnership for democracy and human rights between the Council of Europe, the religious institutions and Humanist and non-religious organizations'. To this end they should 'establish . . . a place for dialogue, a workspace between the Council of Europe and high-level representatives of religions and of non-denominational organisations, in order to place existing relations on a stable and formally recognised platform.'

IHEU and the European Humanist Federation (EHF) have campaigned for many years against the privileged position given to religious groups in the Council of Europe. Despite the Council's bias towards religion over Humanism, the IHEU and the EHF have taken part in Council of Europe discussions on religious education and in conferences on intercultural dialogue.

Eggerickx said, 'We call on the Council to accept the recommendation of its Parliamentary Assembly. By including Humanists in its discussions on matters of belief and morality, the Council of Europe can make a vital contribution to the development of a Europe that respects the freedom of conscience of all its citizens, irrespective of their religious identification.'

The secular humanist project

The rejection of religious belief need not mean a hostility to religion in all its manifestations. Many humanists, I know, are implacably opposed to religion and they can give reasons for being so. They can point to the ways in which religion has blighted people's lives, imposing restrictions and inhibitions in the name of divine commands which thwart people's aspirations to happiness, filling them with guilt for innocent pleasures and fear of eternal damnation. They can point to a long list of terrible things done in the name of religion: the medieval Crusades; the self-styled 'civilising' mission of Christian imperialism and the wiping out of the indigenous cultures of the Americas, Africa and the Pacific in the name of the Christian god; in the modern world, the continuing conflict between religious groups in Northern Ireland, and in the south Asian subcontinent, and the destructive fanaticism of Christian and Muslim and Hindu fundamentalists. I am less inclined than some humanists to condemn religion wholesale on these grounds, partly because I recognise that one could produce an equally horrific litany of crimes committed in the name of secular ideologies. I shall say more about this in a moment, but for now the point is simply to suggest that there are deeper causes of human destructiveness than the explicit beliefs which people hold. I recognise also that religion has inspired not only some of the worst but also some of the best human achievements. It has inspired social and political movements to improve the lot of human beings, such as the abolition of the slave trade, the civil rights movement, campaigns for peace and against world poverty and famine. It had inspired many of the greatest cultural and artistic achievements – the religious art of the Renaissance, magnificent works of music such as Handel's *The Messiah* and Bach's B-minor Mass, the great medieval cathedrals and innumerable other gems of ecclesiastical architecture. To present religion and its works in a wholly negative light would in my view be hopelessly unbalanced. My objection to religious belief is not that it is universally harmful but, simply, that it is false. If that is so, however, then we had better look for some alternative set of beliefs to live by, and that is the project of secular humanism.

Richard Norman, *On Humanism*, (2004).

On its merits

A JUDGE calls the opposing lawyers into his chambers, and says, 'The reason we're here is that both of you have given me a bribe.' Both lawyers squirm in their seats. 'You Alan, have given me \$15,000. Phil, you gave me \$10,000.'

The judge hands Alan a cheque for \$5,000 and says, 'now you're even, and I'm going to decide this case solely on its merits.'