

## Does God make a difference?: An Australian perspective. Part 2

Part 1 reviewed the arguments in the book *Does God make a difference? Taking religion seriously in our schools and universities* by Warren A Nord 2010 and asked the question is religion taken seriously in the school curriculum in Australia? A key argument of Nord was that public schools should be neutral when it comes to religion and not favour any particular religion, world view or Christian denomination. Nord's argument is that the influence of secular thinking through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries in the USA led to religion being ignored and produced a school curriculum which is no longer neutral but biased against religion, approaching secular indoctrination.

In relation to Australia, Part 1 noted that Australia is different to the USA with its provision for Special Religious Education (SRE) and General Religious Education (GRE) which was included in a definition of "secular". While there are state variations, the NSW legislation is their legislative base. In NSW, GRE has evolved as *teaching about the world's major religions, what people believe and how that belief affects their lives* and yet as a legal definition is actually non-denominational Christianity. In this regard, there is considerable scope for GRE across the curriculum. However, as indicated in a recent response from the NSW Department of Education and Training, GRE is seen to be only a component of Human Society and Its Environment K-6 Syllabus, ignoring even the elective Years 11-12 Studies of Religion Syllabus. Where GRE is located in other subjects has, to my knowledge, never been mapped. Its presence in the NSW curriculum outside the above references is not identified and as for the national curriculum almost non-existent.

### Liberal education

In relation to the existing NSW curriculum and the emerging national curriculum, it is worth considering the discussion by Nord of *liberal* education which is what most politicians and curriculum managers believe they are incorporating. He outlines five dimensions of liberal education:

- *critical thinking and being reasonable.*

Nord is keen to highlight the freedom of a liberal education to allow students to critically explore alternative views and perspectives. Without such rigorous interrogation, students can fall into a particular theory, world view or ideology without rational thinking. He laments that most critical thinking occurs only within the framework of disciplines and he encourages transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary curricula to help students better understand reality and to integrate their learning.

In the Australian context, the national curriculum illustrates just how entrenched learning and critical thinking are within disciplines. In such a framework, important cross discipline matters can be lost (religion, gender, multicultural, cultural understanding) or when given recognition (Aboriginal,

Asia, sustainability) arguments abound about insufficient substance across all subjects to assure their importance.

In these matters, Nord argues that students should be taught to think critically about the disciplines and contenting ways of being rational. To make sense of the world, perhaps students should have opportunities to consider whether enquiry method is the only way to learn in the social sciences area or whether studies in science should also have some inclusion of the philosophy of science to acknowledge other world views. Liberal education requires students to be educated about alternative world views, not merely trained in disciplines where secular views have been allowed to dominate. He argues that without this broader curriculum approach, study of disciplines alone, which carry a secular focus, provide an unreasonable approach to making sense of the world. A liberal education requires religion to be taken seriously and critically studied.

- *inside understanding*

Nord argues that understanding from a butterfly approach to other cultures and traditions results in superficial knowledge being viewed as quaint or exotic. Students need substantive studies using primary sources to be able to get inside a culture or tradition and to be able to think and reason from within.

While opportunities exist broadly within the NSW curriculum, and probably within the national curriculum, to study aspects of cultures and traditions, with the exception of the elective Stage 6 Studies of Religion courses, inside studies of religions are not part of the existing or proposed curricula. This matter does not appear to be taken seriously and religions are not promoted as live options with most cultural studies occurring within secular frameworks.

- *existential big questions - life, death, justice, suffering, love*

*A good liberal education will provide opportunities for students to explore those existential questions about the meaning of life that are inescapable for thoughtful human beings, and this can not be done without taking religion seriously(P. 125) .*

In the last decade, and mainly prompted by an Australian Government program, there has been a renewed focus on values education in schools. The NSW policy *Values in NSW public schools* talks about *strategies that highlight the core values* and is about values being brought to the surface and explored across the curriculum and in every class. In addition, there has been an emphasis in the last decade on civics education which provides opportunities for students to address some of these existential questions. Yet, it is probably in the study of literature, and not the social sciences, that most opportunities for teaching abound. The curriculum and texts used need to provide the context for this learning. Text selections within schools, as well as prescribed texts, are critical to the study of religious perspectives. Careful selection to exclude these

matters can simply impose further secular perspectives, not take religion seriously and add to student indoctrination.

- *an ongoing conversation (study) of difference and contending views*

*Not all cultures, intellectual traditions, or academic disciplines are compatible with one another; there are tensions and conflicts, as well as continuities and complementarities between them (P.110).* A liberal education helps students to understand these differences through disciplinary, transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary studies.

Within the NSW curriculum there is considerable scope for examining difference and contending views, although some of the better examples are within elective courses. In particular, the NSW history curriculum has strongly supported this approach but been less forthcoming about the inclusion of religious perspectives into these considerations. There is considerably less certainty about such matters within the national curriculum.

- *a historical dimension*

A historical perspective is needed to understand ones own times and because historical knowledge is contested there is a need for critical thinking and examination of perspectives from the inside.

In the NSW curriculum, history is a compulsory subject to the end of Year 10 and has long supported critical thinking within perspectives. However, within the curriculum the place of religion and lack of acknowledgement of the religious background of people and events has been contentious. This contention rightly remains as one of the areas of dispute with the national curriculum which almost entirely expunges any direct reference to religion. It is here that the major focus of the battle to take religion seriously is being waged.

No one is asking for a partial approach. Religion should be explored warts and all but not ignored. It has been the motivation for so much good in the world including humanitarian aid, but also the motivation for so much evil when in the hands of extremists wishing to dominate others. If a more inclusive approach is not forthcoming in the national history curriculum, then it will rightly be labelled as yet another secular document to support the continued the secularisation of young Australians. Is this indoctrination?

## **GRE and the national curriculum**

Before concluding it is worth considering what might be considered GRE to include in the national curriculum for Australia.

### **1. religious literacy**

The facts, symbols, stories, celebrations and history of the world's major religions need to be included across the curriculum. As well as including common Biblical stories and the history of the Hebrews, religious literacy

should also include commonly used words, sayings and ideas that have a religious origin i.e. wisdom of Solomon, patience of Job, washing your hands of a matter, grace, forgiveness.

The studies of English and literature, history and cultures, the arts and the sciences can all contribute to religious literacy.

## 2. religious understanding

Some depth of study of religion including the use of primary sources will help students to understand alternative world views and to critically evaluate them. In the national curriculum, history and geography will carry much of the burden to include such studies. However, as already noted, the disciplines are not ideal frameworks for cultural studies and some transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary studies are better suited when exploring religion. Such studies are not part of the national curriculum. Subjects in NSW like Society and Culture and Studies of Religion will continue to struggle to find a place in the curriculum.

## 3. religious perspectives

Religious perspectives are about understanding from the inside. Such understanding is not necessarily as a believer, but as someone who has the depth of understanding to recognise how people from within a religion think. Such thinking assists students with a religious interpretation of history, art, nature: What was Jewish/Catholic/Protestant thinking during the 1930s in Germany? Why are paintings of the middle-ages dominated by religious themes? How has Confucianism affected Chinese culture and political positions? Why is Christian mission still so active in the world? Why do some Indians want a Hindu state? What are the Jewish, Christian and Islamic beliefs involved in Middle East conflict? There is considerable scope with the national curriculum to flesh out these opportunities by being explicit.

## 4. religious motivation

Where applicable, students need to understand the religious motivation of people, ideas and groups who have had a significant impact on the development of the world and our nation. It requires a teacher to help students to unpack religious belief underlying actions, events and ideas to give them an understanding of what motivates people, organisations and governments. In all subjects, greater recognition of the religious motivation of people including the underpinning beliefs, would assist students to understand the impact, both good and bad, of religion in history and in the world today. In Australian history, belief influenced development and social change: Lachlan and Elizabeth Macquarie, John Dunmore Lang, Bishop Bede Polding, Caroline Chisholm, Mary MacKillop, Jim McGowen, Mary Lee and many others

## Conclusions

In this short article, it is not possible to do justice to all the arguments put forward by Nord and to provide a commentary for Australia. I have attempted to take only his main points. In fact, after a comprehensive discussion of the issues, his conclusions to move forward have a lack of conviction and are focussed on highly unlikely requirements, by schools and governing authorities, on teachers and student course selection. Nord seems unaware of the research indicating that explicit curriculum with assessment accountability can change both what teachers teach and what students learn. When the curriculum has explicit requirements including: religious literacy, knowledge, perspectives and assessment accountabilities that reflect this explicitness - then textbook writers will follow with the subject matter. Teachers will then use these textbooks and seek courses to improve their knowledge and understanding of the subject matter.

The national curriculum is an appropriate focus for people of faith and of secular persuasion to ensure that religion is taken seriously and the move, whether by intention or through ignorance, to omit religion from the curriculum is corrected. Both religious and secular citizens should want a balanced curriculum if their children are to understand their heritage and the world they live in.

The current dominance of a secular only approach to curriculum means that the curriculum is not neutral, but biased against religion. In other words, religion has to be taken seriously by curriculum managers and writers if students are to receive the liberal education they deserve and educators and politicians are to make good their promises to have a truly inclusive Australian curriculum.