

Does God make a difference?: An Australian perspective. Part 1

The book, *Does God make a difference? Taking religion seriously in our schools and universities*, Warren A Nord 2010, is a challenging and relevant work for both Christians and non-Christians in western countries, including Australia. Although written to the context of the United States, the issues raised and arguments put forward have relevance for Australia. In this article, I would like to pull out the relevant arguments and comment on their application to the Australian school context. Quotes from the book are in italics.

The bottom line

The foundation argument of the book is that public schools in the USA, which comprises about 95% of schools, ignore religion in their curriculum, textbooks, teaching and practices. They simply don't take it seriously, or as a *live option*, and therefore institutionalise a world view that *borders on secular indoctrination* (P.5).

The argument

The opening chapter focuses on *Does God still matter at the beginning of the 21st Century?* Nord explains how some intellectuals believed that religion would wither away as science, enlightenment and social progress consumed western society. He acknowledges a commonly held view that *religions did a great deal to shape people's moral understanding of the world and their ways of finding meaning in their lives* (P.24). He argues that the world is actually becoming more religious, and that the decline of Christianity in some western countries has been nowhere near as rapid as the predictions. In the USA, there has been little decline in belief in God and poll figures over twenty years indicate a change from 10% to 20% for those who do not identify with a specific religion.

In Australia for a ten year period, the census figures show that in 2006 18.6% of Australians recorded no religion compared to 16.4% in 1996. In the Australian figures, there is a count for *religion not stated* which is controversial because the reasons for not answering the question could be many. Some may not want to state their position as no religion and others may have a strong religious conviction, but do not want to disclose it on a Government form, including some migrants who come from countries where religious persecution is common. In the 2006 census, the *religion not stated* figure was 11%, up from 8.4% in 1996. While religious belief in Australia is declining and Australians are becoming more atheistic and secular, these figures indicate that a large majority (between 61% and 72%) of Australians identify with a religious tradition. To many of these Australians, their religious world view is important in making sense of the world. Religions retain their vitality to shape people's lives and the world. But what do students learn about religion in school?

Nord argues that USA curricula and textbooks in history:

- are overcrowded and don't provide space to make religion intelligible
- understate the importance of religion

- focus on military and political history, mentioning religion only in relation to violence and conflict
- contain no discussion of the intellectual or theological dimension of religion
- emphasise thinking skills and different perspectives but don't provide a religious perspective
- don't have religion as one of the required eleven recurring themes.

In economics and other textbooks, discussion of moral judgements is *ahistorical, apolitical and amoral* (P.48). In science, there is no discussion of the relationship between science and religion. In literature there are minimal references to Biblical literature or the texts of other major religions.

From this overview, Nord traces the secularisation of the school curriculum through the immigration that led to pluralism and educators wanting peace by eliminating anything divisive from public education, to an emphasis on shared values and a common democratic faith. In the 20th Century, *education was caught up in the economic revolution that played a major role in secularising culture more generally* (p.66). The result is the secularisation of the curriculum and the relegation of religion to minor elective course.

Australian context

In Australia, it can be argued that similar factors have produced a similar result, but until recently, Australia still had the provision of both General Religious Education (GRE) and Special Religious Education (SRE) which were provided in the NSW 1880 Education Act on which most states modelled their legislation. In NSW, the Education Act 1990 still retains these two forms of religious education and now has an additional provision for secular ethics courses during SRE time. The provision of SRE is uniquely different from the USA where the separation of state and church has been more clearly defined. In Australia, religious groups can continue to teach their faith during SRE time to students whose parents nominate that faith for instruction.

The second difference to the USA is the nature of GRE. Both the USA and Australia have a place for teaching about religion and the NSW Department of Education and Training defines GRE as *teaching about the world's major religions, what people believe and how that belief affects their lives.* (<http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/policies/religion/implementation/definitions/index.htm>) This is an agreed definition, not a historic or legal definition where GRE is non-denominational Christianity. The definition also acknowledges that GRE is *mainly* (not exclusively) *taught through the curriculum*. This is why it might be inappropriate in NSW for schools to have a Christian prayer (including the Lord's Prayer), but not illegal, inappropriate for Christian teachers to pray with students who are not Christian, but not illegal and why schools sometimes use non-denominational prayers in formal assemblies or even say grace before a break or before a formal meal. Such activities are not part of USA schools.

A point of growing controversy has been the inclusion of GRE, as defined by the NSW Department, in the curriculum which then influences the textbook writers. In 1990 in NSW, curriculum responsibility was handed to the NSW Board of Studies. At this time, the 1981 primary social studies syllabus was under review within the Department of Education and Training by a broad consultative group, including representatives of religious groups, to form a new K-6 Human Society and Its Environment Syllabus. In addition, there was a primary school Moral and Religious Education Syllabus that was not widely used and courses in Studies of Religion for Years 7-10, and 11 and 12.

The development of the new HSIE K-6 Syllabus was taken over by the new Board and several attempts were made before the final 1998 draft was released. At a late stage in its development, the issue of GRE came to the fore and it was realised that the syllabus writers and Board officers had not (as could be argued also for other syllabuses) taken GRE seriously. A number of religious experts were called into the Office of the Board to make additions and embellishments. As a result of this intervention this syllabus carries its share of GRE. The question remains, by way of a mapping exercise yet to be done, as to how much GRE is incorporated into the total of Board syllabuses - I fear not much. The marginalisation of GRE within the NSW curriculum may be verified by such mapping, but its omission from the new National Curriculum is certainly easy to verify. Almost weekly, commentators are coming out with their criticism of the lack of acknowledgement of the development of Western civilisation, including religion and religious perspectives within these drafts.

The importance of GRE

The inclusion of GRE in the curriculum helps to make it neutral regarding different religions and other world views. It provides learning about religions and can help students to understand religious motivation from thinking within a religious perspective. While not treating all religions equally, it is neutral in its stance because it does not favour one particular religion or denomination. Nor should the curriculum favour an alternative world view, for example, humanism or secularism. The argument of Nord, which I support, is that ignoring religion in the curriculum, and not presenting it as a *live option*, secularises the curriculum. The extent of this secularisation leads to the claim that the curriculum is secular indoctrination because it is not neutral in relation to religion, but biased against it.

This approach to secularising the curriculum is really not what is meant by *secular* because *secular* is non-religious and not anti religious i.e. it does not favour any religion. The NSW Education Act 1990 has got it right and captures this understanding when it says that education will be *secular* and defines *secular* as including GRE. The national curriculum will need to include GRE to show that it is neutral and not biased against religion. To not do this means that the curriculum writers and developers, intentionally or through ignorance, are taking sides against religion in favour of a secular approach.

In the next edition of *TCFNews* I will consider more about Nord's arguments for a liberal education and just what this GRE should look like in the Australian context.