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The Place of Religion in the School Curriculum



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The Place of Religion in the School Curriculum¹

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1 The following monograph draws on the section of the *Review of the Australian Curriculum Final Report* written by the author and headed 'The place of religion, belief systems and values in the Australian curriculum'. Retrieved 16 August 2022 from <https://www.dese.gov.au/australian-curriculum/resources/review-australian-curriculum-final-report-2014>

Introduction

While teaching about religion, especially Christianity, is accepted in relation to faith-based schools, the argument is often made that government schools are secular in nature and religion has little, if any, part. Significant state and territory legislation suggests the opposite and all schools, government and non-government, have a responsibility to introduce students to what the Victorian legislation refers to as “the major forms of religious thought and expression characteristic of Australian society and other societies in the world”²

It is also common to see religion taught in Years 11 and 12 as a stand-alone subject or included, to a greater or lesser degree, in subjects such as history. While not specifically referring to religion, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration implies religion can be included in the curriculum when noting schools have a role to play in enriching students’ “emotional, moral, spiritual”³ development and wellbeing and that students need to “act with moral and ethical integrity”⁴

The purpose of this monograph is to reassert the place of religion in the curriculum for government and non-government schools and to briefly suggest some possible models for implementation.

2 *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* (Vic) section 2.2.11. Retrieved 16 August 2022 from <https://content.legislation.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-06/06-24aa094%20authorised.pdf>

3 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration. December 2019. Retrieved on 23 August from <https://www.dese.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration/resources/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>

4 *Ibid.* P 8.

Education is never neutral or value free

Whether or not it is recognised explicitly, education always presupposes a particular concept of what it means to be a human person. Before we are able to say what it is for a person to be well formed or prepared for life, we need to think about what it is for a human person to be at all. What kind of being is a human being?⁵

When deciding what constitutes a beneficial and worthwhile education, it is important to acknowledge no approach is ever neutral or value free. In relation to the curriculum, for example, one approach is utilitarian and forward-looking based on the belief students need to master so-called 21st century competencies and skills. A second approach centres on the world of the student and the need for personalised learning and student agency. Teachers are described as ‘facilitators’ and ‘guides by the side’ and students as ‘knowledge navigators’ and ‘digital natives’. Adopting a social critical approach, drawing on the sociology of education, where students are active and informed citizens willing to engage in contemporary issues concerning the environment and sustainability, promoting equity and social justice and overcoming discrimination and disadvantage, represents yet another curriculum model.

While each of the above has value, education, by necessity, deals with spiritual and moral beliefs and virtues under the heading ‘enculturation’. To be fulfilled and able to deal with life’s ever-present challenges and setbacks, students need to be familiar with what religion offers. To contribute to the common good and human flourishing, as well as to be culturally literate, students need to be morally grounded and spiritually enriched and nourished. By its very nature, such a view of education must include introducing students to the world’s great religions, especially Christianity.

While Australian society is increasingly multicultural and multifaith and the percentage of the population identifying as Christian has reduced, Christianity is still the most popular religion and Australia’s institutions, way of life and history as part of Western civilisation, are deeply imbued with Christian teachings and beliefs. When detailing Christianity’s contribution to Western culture, T.S. Eliot suggests:

If Christianity goes, the whole of our culture goes... To our Christian heritage we owe many things beside religious faith. Through it we trace the evolution of our arts, through it we have our conception of Roman Law which has done so much to shape the Western world, through it we have conceptions of public and private morality. And through it we have our common standards of literature, in the literature of Greece and Rome. The Western world has its unity in this heritage, in Christianity and in the ancient civilisations of Greece, Rome and Israel, from which, owing to two thousand years of Christianity, we trace our descent.⁶

5 David Albert Jones & Stephen Barrie. 2015. *Thinking Christian Ethos: The Meaning of Catholic Education*. London. Catholic Truth Society. P 11.

6 T.S. Eliot. 1947. *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*. Faber and Faber. London. P 122.

Is there a place for religion in the school curriculum?

The place of religion in the school curriculum, whether by having dedicated classes or by incorporating teaching about religion in the broader curriculum in subjects like history, art, music and literature, is a sensitive and sometimes controversial issue, especially in relation to government schools and what is seen as a secular, state-mandated curriculum.⁷

The 2014 review of the Australian national curriculum illustrates a range of views about the place of religion, especially Christianity, either as a discrete subject or informing the broader curriculum and a school's management and ethos. The submission by the Rationalist Society of Australia (RSA), for example, states the "RSA rejects the notion that Australia owes its foundations to some putative 'Judeo-Christian' heritage".⁸

The Australian Education Union (AEU) in its submission, while accepting the Bible can be taught in faith-based schools, minimises the place of religion when arguing government schools must remain secular. The AEU states:

As part of the great education settlement in the colonies of the latter part of the nineteenth century it was agreed that public systems of education would eschew instruction of a dogmatic and specific kind. Part of the guarantee of freedom of religion in this country was to be based on freedom from religion in teaching programs. And part of respect for all citizens' belief systems was the guarantee that one religious tradition was not to be privileged by the state over another. This is simply basic to the finely-honed and successful Western, liberal tradition of Australia and, in particular, its public school system.⁹

In opposition to the RSA and the AEU, several submissions argue the school curriculum should incorporate a strong religious element, especially Christianity. When questioning what it considers an over-emphasis on Indigenous, environmental and Asian perspectives in subjects like history, civics and citizenship, the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) argues:

The CECV is unclear as to why these particular areas have been privileged at the expense of others. Forgotten, for example, are the foundations of our liberal democracy, shaped by our Judeo-Christian heritage.¹⁰

7 Note: Unlike government schools, religious schools by their very nature are dedicated to teaching their particular faith in a substantial and explicit way.

8 <http://www.rationalist.com.au/submission-to-the-review-of-the-national-curriculum/>

9 Australian Education Union, 2014. *Submission to the Review of the Australian Curriculum*. P 9.

10 Catholic Education Commission of Victoria, 2014. *Submission to the Review of the Australian Curriculum*. Melbourne, CECV. P 7.

In addition to Judeo-Christianity, a number of submissions argue religion more broadly, involving the major world religions and significant belief systems, should also be part of the formal curriculum. Rabbi Shimon Cowen, for example, argues for the place of a subject titled 'theology' where students would encounter what constitutes "common theological categories and ethical principles" in what are described as the Abrahamic religions.¹¹ Cowen suggests, instead of being incorporated in subjects like history, art, music and literature, theology would be a stand-alone subject taught by qualified teachers.

The submission by the Religions, Ethics and Education Network of Australia (REENA) also puts a case for religion more broadly, arguing the school curriculum should include what is described as "Education about Religions and Beliefs" (ERB).¹² After referring to the *Toledo Guiding Principles About Religions and Beliefs*¹³, the REENA submission suggests that ERB could either be a stand-alone subject or be dealt with as a cross-curriculum priority.

Once again, stressing the need for a broader view of teaching about religion and one not restricted to Judeo-Christianity, the Australian Association for Religious Education (AARE) argues that students have the right to be introduced to the "religious, spiritual and secular beliefs and worldviews which compose the human world (and) the important role these different belief systems and worldviews have in the lives of many Australians".¹⁴

When arguing the need for teaching about religions and belief systems, the AARE suggests, especially in a post-9/11 world where sectarian prejudice and violence are ever present, students need to be more familiar with other religions and world views. Its submission argues students need to be given a:

*...firm foundation that will enable them to understand, appreciate and engage with differences in society that relate to religious, spiritual and secular beliefs systems and world views.*¹⁵

11 Rabbi Shimon Cohen, 2014. *Theology and the provision of the spiritual development of students*, Submission to the Review of the Australian Curriculum.

12 Religions, Ethics and Education Network Australia, 2014. *Submission to the Review of the National Curriculum*.

13 *Toledo Guiding Principles About Religions and Beliefs*. Retrieved 18 January from <http://www.osce.org/odihr/29154>

14 Australian Association for Religious Education, 2014. *Submission to the Review of the Australian Curriculum*. AARE.

15 Ibid

Teaching about religion is permitted

Contrary to the view there is no place for religion in the school curriculum, especially in relation to government schools, the reality is state and territory legislation permits both dedicated religious education classes as well as dealing with religion more broadly across the curriculum in subjects like history. It also should be noted, governments of various political persuasions have long since accepted religious schools have the right to teach their faith. As a result, Australia has a tripartite system of school education where approximately 35 per cent of students attend non-government schools, of which 19.4 per cent attend Catholic schools while 15.4 per cent attend independent schools.¹⁶

After noting government schools are secular in nature and not permitted to “promote any particular religious practice, denomination or sect”¹⁷, the Western Australian legislation permits religion to be taught in the general curriculum when it states:

*(2) Subsection (1) (a) is not to be read as preventing – (a) the inclusion of general religious education in the curriculum of a school; or (b) prayers, songs and other material based on religious, spiritual or moral values being used in a school activity as part of general religious education.*¹⁸

The Queensland Government, under the heading of ‘Religious instruction policy statement’¹⁹, also allows state schools to include religion in the school day when it states:

Queensland state schools provide religious instruction in accordance with Chapter 5 of the Education (General Provisions) Act 2006 (EGPA) and Part 5 of the Education (General Provisions) Regulation 2017 (EGPR) by making available up to one hour per week for the provision of religious instruction to students (except prep students) who are members of a faith group that has approval to deliver religious instruction at the school.

The Victorian legislation, in addition to allowing state schools to provide Special Religious Instruction, if desired,²⁰ also allows for what is described as general religious education in the curriculum. The Act allows students to be taught “about the major forms of religious thought and expression characteristic of Australian society and other societies in the world”.²¹

16 Australian Bureau of Statistics. Schools. 23/02/2022. Retrieved 16 August 2022 from <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release>

17 *Western Australian School Education Act 1999*, Section 68(1a). P 66. Retrieved 16 August 2022 from https://www.legislation.wa.gov.au/legislation/statutes.nsf/main_mrtitle_878_homepage.html

18 *Ibid.* P 66.

19 Queensland Government, ‘Religious instruction policy statement’. Retrieved 18 January 2023 from [https://education.qld.gov.au/parents-and-carers/school-information/school-operations/policy-statement#:~:text=Queensland%20state%20schools%20provide%20religious,religious%20instruction%20to%20students%20\(except](https://education.qld.gov.au/parents-and-carers/school-information/school-operations/policy-statement#:~:text=Queensland%20state%20schools%20provide%20religious,religious%20instruction%20to%20students%20(except)

20 *Victoria Education and Training Reform Act 2006* section 2.2.11. P 76. Retrieved 16 August 2022 from <https://content.legislation.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-06/06-24aa094%20authorised.pdf>

21 *Ibid.*, section 2.2.10. P 76.

A clear example of teaching about religious thought is what is described as ‘Ethical Capability’, one of the four capabilities listed in the Victorian Curriculum Foundation-10. The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority describes its curriculum as representing a version of the Australian national curriculum redesigned to suit Victoria’s unique educational history and context. Under the heading ‘Learning about world views, religions and philosophical thought’, the statement is made:

*In Ethical Capability, students are introduced to different religions and world views and a range of relevant philosophers and/or schools of thought. Students develop the capacity to apply this broad understanding to the investigation of ethical problems.*²²

The NSW legislation, like Victoria’s, also expects state schools to provide religious education classes when it states, “... in every government school, time is to be allowed for the religious education of children of any religious persuasion, but the total number of hours so allowed in a year is not to exceed, for each child, the number of school weeks in the year”.²³ Special Religious Education (SRE) classes have been an established part of the secular school system for many years and are fully supported by a NSW parliamentary inquiry into Special Education in Ethics classes. The inquiry’s report states, “we adamantly support the continuation of SRE and acknowledge the valuable contribution it makes to NSW schools”.²⁴ In addition to supporting classes dealing with a specific religion, the NSW legislation also supports government schools teaching what are described as Special Education in Ethics classes.

It should also be noted the body responsible for the national curriculum, the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), accepts religion (and belief systems) do have a place in the curriculum when it argues:

*The Australian Curriculum offers students in all schools – whether faith-based or secular – an opportunity to learn about religions, spirituality and ethical beliefs. In the curriculum, religion is represented as a study ‘about religion’ rather than study about a particular religious faith. In subjects such as history and civics and citizenship, the focus is on learning about religious identity and diversity, the role and significance of religion in our society, and identifying various religious traditions and key developments in religion.*²⁵

Clearly, state and territory legislation allow teaching about religion in both government and non-government schools whether as stand-alone religious education classes or by dealing with religion in the broader school curriculum either as a discrete subject or a cross-curriculum priority. In addition to learning about various religions, some states and ACARA also make specific mention of teaching ethics.

22 Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2015. *Victorian Curriculum Foundation-10 Ethical Capability Learning in Ethical Capability*, Melbourne, VCAA. Retrieved 17 August 2022 from <https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/ethical-capability/introduction/learning-in-ethical-capability>

23 NSW Parliament, Education Act 1990. Part 6, 32 Special Religious Education. Retrieved 16 August 2022 from http://classic.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/download.cgi/au/legis/nsw/consol_act/ea1990104

24 NSW Parliament, 2012, Legislative Council, General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2. *Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011*. P IX. Retrieved 16 August 2022 from <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/Pages/inquiryprofile/education-amendment-ethics-classes-repeal-bill-2011.aspx#tab-reportsandgovernmentresponses>

25 Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. Religion in the Australian Curriculum, 11 August 2014. Retrieved 16 August 2022 from <https://www.acara.edu.au/news-and-media/acara-facts>

How do other education systems deal with religion in the curriculum?

As noted in the *Review of the Australian Curriculum Final Report*²⁶, teaching about religion and other belief systems, both as specific classes and as part of the broader school curriculum, is included in several overseas education systems. The New Zealand legislation allows primary schools to have up to one hour a week, with no more than 20 hours over the year, for religious instruction. Schools are permitted to put aside such time for:

*... the purposes of religious instruction given by voluntary instructors approved by the school's board and of religious observances conducted in a manner approved by the school's board or for either of those purposes; and the school buildings may be used for those purposes or for either of them.*²⁷

The English National Curriculum deals with the spiritual and moral development of students and Religious Education (RE) is a mandated subject on the basis that:

*RE is an important curriculum subject. It is important in its own right and also makes a unique contribution to the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils and supports wider community cohesion. The Government is keen to ensure all pupils receive high-quality RE.*²⁸

Given the increasingly multicultural and multifaith nature of British society, the government also requires schools to teach British values, including respecting and tolerating people of “different faiths and beliefs”.²⁹

While not referring to religion specifically, the Singapore school curriculum suggests that students should develop a strong moral compass and, when detailing the desired outcomes of education, lists at the three stages of schooling (end of primary, end of secondary and end of post-secondary) the ability to:

- *be able to distinguish right from wrong*
- *have moral integrity, and*
- *have moral courage to stand up for what is right.*³⁰

26 Chapter Six: The Structure of the Australian Curriculum – The place of religion, belief systems and values in the Australian Curriculum, P 155 – 162.

27 New Zealand Education Act 1964, section 78. Retrieved 16 August 2022 from <http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1964/0135/latest/DLM357868.html>

28 Religious education in English schools: Non-statutory guidance 2010. Department for children, schools and families. P 4. Retrieved 16 August 2022 from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/190260/DCSF-00114-2010.pdf

29 UK Department of Education, 2014. *Promoting fundamental British values as Part of SMSC in schools*. Retrieved on 16 August 2022 from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/380595/SMSC_Guidance_Maintained_Schools.pdf

30 Singapore Ministry of Education, *Desired Outcomes of Education*. Retrieved on 10 November 2022 from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/desired-outcomes/>

The REENA submission to the review of the Australian national curriculum³¹ also notes several European nations have joined to promote teaching about religious and belief systems based on the Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools³². The principles include:

- teaching about religions and belief systems in a way that is “fair, accurate and based on sound scholarship” and “inclusive, fair and respectful”
- being undertaken by properly trained teachers where teacher preparation is “developed according to democratic and human rights principles and include(s) insight into cultural and religious diversity in society”
- if the program lacks the necessary balance and objectivity that parents may be allowed to opt out.

The REENA submission also notes that a Council of Europe Committee of Ministers representing both religious and secular states has endorsed a recommendation calling for teaching about “religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education”. The recommendation goes on to state such an education has the potential to promote “social cohesion, mutual understanding (and) intercultural and interreligious dialogue and solidarity”.

31 RENNA. Op Cit.

32 A copy of *The Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* can be found at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/29154> Retrieved 17 August 2022.

Why religion should be included in the school curriculum

As previously mentioned, faith-based schools by their very nature are committed to teaching the tenets of their faith both in terms of specific religious education classes and in relation to the broader curriculum and how schools are structured and managed. Catholic schools, for example, are committed to teaching religious education as well as imbuing the curriculum more generally in the school day with the Church's teachings and the word of God. Many faith-based schools also emphasise the need to teach inter-faith tolerance and understanding.

Even though the argument is often put that religion has no place in government schools, existing state and territory legislation allows government schools to incorporate both specific religious education classes and teaching about religion in the broader subject-based curriculum.

The reasons why religion, especially Judeo-Christianity, should be included in the curriculum for both government and non-government schools, either as a specific class or more broadly, include:

- Freedom of religion is an essential and fundamental human right that is protected in Australian law and by international covenants and agreements. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, for example, protects parents' rights to educate their children in a religious context whether in government or non-government schools. Under Article 18, the Covenant states:
4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.
- Australia is an increasingly multicultural, multifaith community and, as argued by the REENA submission to the review of the Australian national curriculum, teaching about religion, hopefully, promotes tolerance, respect for difference and inter-faith harmony. The submission to the national curriculum review by the Australian Association for Religious Education (AARE) also makes the point that, in an increasingly pluralist society and post-9/11 world, teaching about various religious beliefs has the potential to promote greater understanding and tolerance.³³
- As argued by the American academic Samuel Huntington³⁴, world affairs involve a mixture of various religions and belief systems and students, if they are to be critically informed, need to be familiar with the history, teachings and cultural context of a range of religions and belief systems.
- In an increasingly materialistic society shaped by consumerism and the new digital technologies, young people in particular need a strong moral compass and, as suggested by the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, an appreciation of the moral and spiritual aspects of human nature and the wider world.³⁵

33 Australian Association for Religious Education, 2014. Submission to the Review of the Australian Curriculum.

34 S.P. Huntington 1993, 'The Clash of Civilizations', published in *The Clash of Civilizations The Debate: 20th Anniversary Edition*, Foreign Affairs. USA. Council on Foreign Relations.

35 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration. December 2019. P 2, 6 and 8. Retrieved on 23 August 2022 from <https://www.dese.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration/resources/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>

- As argued by Eliot in *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*³⁶, religion and culture are interwoven and different civilisations, especially Western civilisation, can only be fully understood and appreciated in the context of their unique religious history and beliefs.
- Douglas Murray, who describes himself as a Christian atheist, makes a similar point to T.S. Eliot when arguing Judeo-Christianity has had a profound and ongoing impact on Western civilisation. Murray suggests concepts like forgiveness and redemption, the inherent dignity of the person and the right to liberty and freedom are primarily Christian in origin and vital to a civilised society.³⁷
- Australia's legal and political systems, as argued by Augusto Zimmermann³⁸, have been profoundly influenced by religion. The justification for the Magna Carta, for example, was based on the belief the monarch was not above God's law and that a just ruler followed the Bible's teachings.³⁹
- As argued by the political philosopher Larry Siedentop⁴⁰, key liberal concepts that underpin free and open societies (such as sanctity of life, free will, individual conscience and a commitment to the common good), are largely based on Judeo-Christianity and the New Testament.
- As suggested by the Australian art critic Peter Craven, much of Western civilisation's language and culture, including literature, music, the arts and architecture, have been strongly influenced by various religions, especially Judeo-Christianity.⁴¹ Cultural literacy depends on being familiar with religious texts such as the Bible.
- Two of Australia's former Prime Ministers, Julia Gillard⁴² and Tony Abbott⁴³, both argue the school curriculum should include teaching students about the Bible.

The argument there is a place for religion in the curriculum, as a stand-alone subject and informing the curriculum and how schools are managed, is especially important for faith-based schools compared to government schools. Christian schools, for example, are committed to teaching students what constitutes the good life, how best to contribute to the common good, how to promote human flourishing and how to find eternal salvation based on the word of God and Christ's teachings. As stated in the Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools 2030 Strategic Plan, Catholic education involves "forming lives of faith, hope and love in the light of Jesus Christ".⁴⁴ Central to such a task is viewing education as:

36 T.S. Eliot. Op Cit.

37 'Unbelievable? Douglas Murray and Esther O'Reilly – The Madness of Crowds and Christian atheism'. Retrieved on 23 August 2022 from <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/unbelievable/unbelievable-douglas-murray-and-esther-oreilly-the-madness-of-crowds-and-christian-atheism/12472.article>

38 Augusto Zimmermann, 2013. 'A Law above the Law: Christian Roots of the English Common law' in *Global Conversations*, Vol (1) November 2013 and Augusto Zimmermann, 2015, 'Constituting a Christian Commonwealth: Christian Foundations of Australia's Constitutionalism' in *The Western Australian Jurist*. Retrieved on 23 August 2022 from http://www.murdoch.edu.au/School-of-Law/_document/WA-jurist-documents/2014/Zimmermann---A-Christian-Commonwealth2

39 Augusto Zimmermann. 'Under God and the Law: Limited Government and Civil Disobedience in the Christian Legal Tradition' in Kevin Donnelly (ed) *Christianity Matters in These Troubled Times*. Melbourne, Wilkinson Publishing. PP 44-59.

40 Larry Siedentop, 2014. *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*. UK. Penguin Books.

41 Peter Craven. 'Literature, Music and the Arts' in Kevin Donnelly (ed) *Christianity Matters in These Troubled Times*. Melbourne, Wilkinson Publishing. P 60-75.

42 Sid Maher. *The Australian*. 'Julia Gillard makes stand as a social conservative'. Retrieved 6 December from <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/julia-gillard-makes-stand-as-a-social-conservative/news-story/21875f66ae033443d1446dea41edad4f>

43 David Hastie. *The Australian*. 'Bible study opens door to mastering literature'. Retrieved 6 December from <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/opinion/bible-study-opens-door-to-mastering-literature/news-story/831242e9737c3d7069d3f50a0ae54e23>

44 MACS Strategy 2030. Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools.

... integral to the mission of the Church to proclaim the Good News. First and foremost every Catholic educational institution is a place to encounter the living God who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth.⁴⁵

Religion in the school curriculum – the current situation

While it is true government schools are secular in nature, it is also true learning about religion is occurring in such schools; either as stand-alone classes, known as scripture classes in NSW, or more broadly in subjects like history, art, music and literature. Further evidence of schools teaching about religion includes the NSW's Higher School Certificate incorporating two subjects titled 'Studies of Religion 1' and 'Studies of Religion 2', where schools are told both studies involve promoting:

... an understanding and critical awareness of the nature and significance of religion and the influence of belief systems and religious traditions on individuals and within society.⁴⁶

The Victorian Certificate of Education also includes a senior school subject titled 'Religion and Society' that seeks to introduce students to several religious traditions and philosophical beliefs on the basis that:

*The study of religion and society can assist students in reaching a deeper, balanced understanding of societies and cultures in which multiple worldviews coexist. Students explore how such societies and their religious traditions negotiate significant ethical issues. Religious traditions offer value systems that guide their interactions with society and influence society's decision making.*⁴⁷

As noted earlier, specific religious education classes and teaching about religion in the broader school curriculum are permitted by existing legislation and, while there is debate about the most effective way for the two models to be implemented, there is broad agreement they are desirable and beneficial.

Evidence includes a number of submissions to the Review of the Australian National Curriculum,⁴⁸ and the NSW's Legislative Council's evaluation of ethics classes where the statement is made "the Committee acknowledges the valuable contribution that [SRE] makes to NSW government schools".⁴⁹ Under the heading 'Religious Instruction', the Tasmanian Education Department allows government schools to teach about religion in general as well as religious instruction.⁵⁰

45 MACS Constitution, Statement of Mission (2020).

46 NSW Education Standards Authority. 'Studies of Religion 1. Course description. Retrieved 29 August 2022 from <https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/11-12/stage-6-learning-areas/hsie/course-descriptions>

47 Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. *Religion and Society VCE Study Design*. Rationale. Retrieved 24 August 2022 from <https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/vce/religion/2017ReligionSocietySD.pdf> and <http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/vce/religion/religionsocietysd2011.pdf>

48 *Review of the Australian Curriculum Final Report*, PP 155 – 162.

49 New South Wales Legislative Council, 2011. *Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011*. P IX. Retrieved 29 August 2022 from <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/inquiries/1769/120530%20Final%20report.pdf>

50 Tasmanian Department of Education 'Religious Instruction'. Retrieved 24 August 2022 from <https://www.education.tas.gov.au/parents-carers/parent-fact-sheets/religious-instruction/>

In relation to how religion is taught in government schools, it is important to distinguish between stand-alone religious instruction organised by religious bodies and teaching about religion more generally in the broader curriculum.

Two approaches to dealing with religion and belief systems in the broader school curriculum are the Special Education in Ethics classes introduced in NSW and the decision in Victoria to introduce Ethical Capability as one of the four capabilities informing the Victorian Curriculum Foundation Preparatory to Year 10.

The Special Education in Ethics classes, currently provided by Primary Ethics, were introduced as an alternative to Special Religious Education (SRE) classes based on the argument some NSW government school parents want a properly designed and structured secular alternative to religious education classes. As noted by the NSW Legislative Council inquiry into Special Education in Ethics classes:

Over the years, some parents have raised concerns regarding the activities that these children undertake during the SRE timeslot. They have been seeking a more meaningful alternative to those outlined in the Religious Education Implementation Procedures. For example, some inquiry participants have suggested that students not attending SRE were watching DVDs, entertaining themselves, waiting in corridors and/or doing nothing.⁵¹

As a result of the inquiry, the NSW Legislative Council recommended dedicated religious classes continue to be offered to NSW primary schools.⁵² In addition, the Legislative Council recommended establishing classes designed to “provide philosophical ethics education to children in New South Wales public schools who do not attend special religious classes” and to:

...support and encourage students to develop their moral reasoning and critical thinking skills, providing them with a lifelong capacity to make ethical judgments, and to act reasonably and responsibly.⁵³

Unlike Special Religious Education classes and examples of including religion in the broader school curriculum, such as the NSW and Victorian senior school study designs previously referred to, the Primary Ethics curriculum is secular in nature and does not include any material detailing or examining religion.

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority’s decision to include Ethical Capability as one of the four capabilities provides another example of incorporating what the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration refers to as moral and spiritual values and beliefs in the school curriculum. The capabilities are defined as “a set of discrete knowledge and skills that can and should be taught explicitly in and through the learning areas.”⁵⁴

51 New South Wales Legislative Council, 2011. Op Cit. P X. Retrieved on 29 August 2022 from <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/inquiries/1769/120530%20Final%20report.pdf>

52 Ibid. P XV. Retrieved 29 August 2022 from <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/inquiries/1769/120530%20Final%20report.pdf>

53 Ibid. P 26. Retrieved 29 August 2022 from <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/inquiries/1769/120530%20Final%20report.pdf>

54 Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. General Resources for Capabilities. Retrieved 30 August 2022 from <https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/foundation-10/resources/Pages/OverviewoftheCapabilities.aspx#:~:text=Developing%20a%20whole%2Dschool%20approach,and%20through%20the%20learning%20areas.>

The Ethical Capability is described as enabling students to:

- analyse and evaluate ethical issues, recognising areas of contestability
- identify the bases of ethical principles and ethical reasoning
- engage with the challenges of managing ethical decision making and action for individuals and groups
- cultivate open-mindedness and reasonableness.⁵⁵

Whereas the NSW Special Education in Ethics classes exclude religion, the Victorian Ethical Capability curriculum, while not designed to proselytise and not offering any detailed or substantial treatment of religion, does include a study of various religions when suggesting senior school students will be “introduced to different religions and world views”.⁵⁶ When detailing what this might involve the curriculum writers, in addition to including secular philosophers and authors such as John Stuart Mill, Peter Singer, John Rawls, Kant and Aristotle, suggest teachers can also draw on the teachings of “the five most common religions”.⁵⁷

While not intending to be a comprehensive treatment of the world’s five major religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism) or what constitutes secular humanism and rationalism, the Victorian Ethical Capability curriculum does seek to give students “a broad awareness of diversity across world views and religions”.⁵⁸

55 Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. Ethical Capability. Aims. Retrieved 30 August 2022 from <https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/ethical-capability/introduction/rationale-and-aims>

56 Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. Learning in Ethical Capability. Retrieved 30 August 2022 from <https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/ethical-capability/introduction/learning-in-ethical-capability>

57 Ibid. Retrieved 30 August 2022 from <https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/ethical-capability/introduction/learning-in-ethical-capability>

58 Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. Learning about world views and religions. Retrieved 30 August 2022 from <https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/static/docs/Learning%20about%20World%20Views%20and%20Religions.pdf>

Religion in the school curriculum – a way forward

*The study of religion is a powerful instrument for exploring one's own developing values and beliefs. When taught well, religion places at the student's disposal the amazing wisdom of Taoist sages, Zen Buddhists, Jewish ethicists, Christian and Muslim mystics, scholars and theologians of all faiths and none.*⁵⁹

As outlined in this monograph, while there are debates about the nature and role of dedicated religious education classes, especially in relation to government schools, both in terms of legislation and in practice, such classes are allowed and are common to many schools across Australia. It is also true numerous state and territory governments allow schools to include teaching about religion in the broader school curriculum.

Additional evidence that teaching about religion is allowed includes the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration arguing a well-rounded and comprehensive education should involve teaching about the moral, transcendent and spiritual aspects of existence. Victoria's introduction of Ethical Capability in 2016, and the fact senior school certificates in NSW and Victoria include specific senior school subjects related to religion, also illustrate the acceptance of religion in the school curriculum.

Where the current situation is lacking is in providing all students with a detailed and comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the world's major religions. As argued by numerous submissions to the 2014 Review of the Australian National Curriculum, the attention given to moral and spiritual beliefs and values, especially Judeo-Christianity, is both patchy and superficial. As stated by Anna Halafoff and Cathy Byrne:

*The current Australian Curriculum, under review, provides some opportunities to examine diverse religions, ethics and spirituality. However, there are few resources available, higher-priority competing demands for assessment, and limited teacher training opportunities in these areas.*⁶⁰

It also should be noted, in answer to those arguing students should learn about secular values and beliefs, the existing national curriculum is very much secular in nature, as are the various state and territory equivalent documents, and in NSW the Special Ethics Education classes deal with secular values and beliefs.

59 Ted Witham, 2005. *Religion and the curriculum*. Curriculum and Leadership Journal. Retrieved 3 December 2022 from http://www.curriculum.edu.au/leader/religion_and_the_curriculum,8290.html?issueID=9761

60 A. Haloff & C. Byrne, 2014. 'Religions should be taught secularly in our schools.' *The Conversation*. Retrieved 7 December 2015 from <https://theconversation.com/religion-should-be-taught-secularly-in-our-schools-30022>

Religion in the school curriculum – some proposals

However, the consistently strong support for education about religions – in every consultation participants argued and called for education about religions in all schools – makes this one of the few findings of the report that can be made unequivocally, as it garnered support from the majority of participants, irrespective of their backgrounds.⁶¹

In opposition to the argument there is no place for teaching religion in schools, except for faith-based schools, there is a growing consensus there is a place for religion in the curriculum implemented by government and non-government schools.

As previously mentioned, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (endorsed by Australia's education ministers as the road map for schools and relevant education authorities) suggests a balanced and enriching education includes teaching about moral and spiritual beliefs and virtues.

In the Australian national curriculum, two of the general capabilities, described as Ethical Understanding and Intercultural Understanding, recommend students learn about different cultural practices and belief systems, including how “religious and cultural practices shape people's identity and impact on civic life, past and present”.⁶²

The 2011 report funded by the Australian Human Rights Commission, quoted previously, undertook an extensive process, consulting with a range of religious and secular individuals, groups and organisations exploring “the general issues and concerns of religious and non-religious communities in Australia”.⁶³ Significant is one of the issues for which there was widespread support relates to teaching about religion in the school curriculum. The report states:

While many aspects of education were controversial, there was majority consensus on the need for, and benefits of, education about religion. Repeated calls were made for all schools to develop awareness, familiarity, and respect for difference, from the first year to the final year of a child's education.⁶⁴

The belief students should learn about and become familiar with the history, cultural significance and key values and beliefs of the world's major religions is also argued by a recent report investigating religious bullying in Australian schools.⁶⁵ The academics involved in the research conclude:

61 Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011. *Freedom of religion and belief in 21st century Australia*. P59. Retrieved 8 December 2015 from https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/frb/Report_2011.pdf

62 ACARA. 'Intercultural understanding in the learning areas.' Retrieved 1 September 2022 from <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/intercultural-understanding/>

63 Australian Human Rights Commission. Op Cit P 2.

64 Op Cit. Australian Human Rights Commission. P 58.

65 Nicholas Jensen. *The Australian*. 'Religious bullying 'rampant' in Australian Schools.' Retrieved 1 September 2022 from <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/religious-bullying-rampant-in-schools-says-report/news-story/90340ff36502ef1ce1fb34050373efd>

*Through our research, we have shown that children are being bullied for their religious beliefs, with Muslim and Jewish children being particularly affected by this problem and, as a result, recommend 'Schools need to educate the children explicitly about the problem of (religious) stereotypes and initiate systematic intervention programs to combat it.'*⁶⁶

Model one

Two of the Australian National Curriculum's seven general capabilities are Ethical Understanding and Intercultural Understanding. While the various states and territories are adopting and adapting the capabilities in various ways, they are all committed to including the capabilities in their Foundation to Year 10 curriculum documents. One approach to dealing with religion in the curriculum is to incorporate the study into the ethical and intercultural understandings in a more detailed and comprehensive manner than currently exists. Instead of being discrete subjects, the two capabilities, with a more substantial focus on religion, would be embedded in subjects and areas of study where educationally sound and relevant.

A variation of this approach is to add to existing three cross-curricula priorities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, and Sustainability, a cross-curricula priority dealing with religion, in particular, Judeo-Christianity.

Model two

While existing state and territory legislation allows general religious education to be taught in the context of various subjects like history, literature, art and music, the second model suggests there be a discrete subject like the NSW Primary Ethics curriculum⁶⁷ that currently covers Kindergarten to Year 6.

Such classes would be part of the normal Foundation to Year 10 school curriculum and be timetabled as part of the official school day – with a time allocation of at least 60 minutes a week. With a provisional title Religions of the World, the subject would introduce students to the moral and spiritual beliefs and significance of Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism. Students would also study the similarities and differences between the major religions and, in the context of Australia and Western culture, the unique contribution represented by Judeo-Christianity.

Model three

Given faith-based schools in the non-government sector are inherently religious in character, it stands to reason such schools embody and promulgate the tenets of their faith. To ensure students encounter a substantial and enriching knowledge and appreciation of their faith, model three involves a whole school approach. The way schools are managed and organised, including employing staff and enrolling students, and the formal and informal curriculum must be deeply imbued with the religion the school exists to promulgate, while also providing opportunities, as in non-religious schools, to study the other great religious and ethical traditions in the curriculum.

⁶⁶ Zehavit Gross & Suzanne Rutland. 'Research finds 'pervasive' religious bullying in Australian Schools.' Retrieved 1 September 2022 from <https://plus61j.net.au/featured/research-finds-pervasive-religious-bullying-in-australian-public-schools/>

⁶⁷ <https://primaryethics.com.au/about/> Retrieved 1 September 2022.

Some caveats

Given the diversity of Australia's school education systems and the reality that different schools, and school systems, deal with religion in the curriculum in different ways and at various levels of complexity and depth, there is no one option when recommending future possibilities. Some models are also more realistic and feasible than others. Ensuring the national curriculum's Ethical Understanding and Intercultural Understanding general capabilities deal with religion in a more substantial way is a more realistic option compared to removing one of the existing cross-curricula priorities or adding a fourth priority.

Better dealing with the curriculum also necessitates addressing teacher education and ensuring there are enough knowledgeable, committed and willing teachers to teach about religion. As always, having adequate resources is another issue that would need to be addressed.

The PM Glynn Institute was established by Australian Catholic University (ACU) in 2016 as a public policy think tank to analyse issues of concern to the Catholic Church and the wider Australian community. Its focus is public policy for the common good.

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