

Does God make a difference?: An Australian perspective.

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 people of various religious faiths and secular beliefs 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 Australian 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 Australian 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.

Liberal education

In relation to the existing NSW curriculum and the emerging Australian 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 Australian 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 contending 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 Australian 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 Australian 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 Australian 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 Australian Curriculum

Before concluding it is worth considering what might be considered GRE to include in the Australian Curriculum.

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 inter alia: wisdom of Solomon, patience of Job, falling on your sword (King Saul), washing your hands of a matter (Pilate), 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 Australian 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 Australian 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 Australian 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 advocates curriculum standards outlining content, but does not give enough attention to 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 want courses to improve their knowledge and understanding of the subject matter.

The Australian Curriculum is an appropriate focus for people of faith and of secular persuasions 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.

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