

Teaching about Christmas

Every year, around the end of November or early December, there will be an article in the news or on talk-back radio about what schools can do in the lead-up Christmas to teach about and celebrate Christmas. Sometimes driven by Christians feeling threatened by the “secular” public schools excluding Christmas they perpetuate myths about the nature of religious education in NSW Government schools. What follows is some myth buster information.

MYTH 1. The separation of religion and state precludes teaching about Christmas.

This myth comes from watching too much American television. It confuses the law in the United States about religion in public schools, particular in relation to prayer, and the situation in Australia.

The facts are that Australia has never had a separation of church and state. Our Christian heritage is well represented in our parliaments and acknowledged in its proceedings, like Christian prayers at the commencement of the day's proceedings. Reading the speeches from the late 1800s by the NSW colonial Premiers and others makes it very clear that Christianity and government went hand in hand. This is probably best illustrated by the second reading speech of Sir Henry Parkes to the famous 1880 Education Act in which he describes general religious education as non denominational Christianity and that government schools would teach it as part of the curriculum. The provisions for special religious education (scripture) were additional, and available to clergy from any Christian denomination.

This legacy has continued and allowed Government schools to celebrate Christmas in a non-denominational way and to allow teachers to be explicit about the teachings of Christianity and to engage in religious activities including school prayers where under the provisions for general religious education, the Lord's Prayer would be legal, if not always appropriate in an increasingly multi-faith society.

MYTH 2. Public schools can't teach Christmas carols

Under the provisions of general religious education non-denominational teaching about Christianity is possible. Teaching traditional Christmas carols is not really an issue. Where it sometimes becomes an issue is where some zealous Christians include additional Christian songs, usual of a more contemporary nature, which are not recognised generally as Christmas carols.

MYTH 3. Schools can only have Christmas services as part of SRE.

Under the provisions of general religious education schools can organise their own Christmas service of a religious nature providing it is non-denominational. Parents are to be notified of the intention and they have the right to withdraw their child, but there is no requirement for parents to opt-in. Only those parents who have indicated that they do not want their children to receive any religious education “general” or “special” should be excluded. If schools take responsibility for the Christmas service they could invite SRE teachers to participate if they wish. If schools leave the service to the SRE teachers to organise then the service is not GRE but SRE and the rules relating to SRE apply and non-Christian and non-SRE students would need to have their parents give permission for them to attend.

MYTH 4. Nativity plays and nativity scenes are not allowed.

Under the provisions of general religious education and in relation to the curriculum, students can undertake activities that help them to understand the traditional Christmas story.

MYTH 5. Government schools are limited in what they teach about Christmas. Rather than limited, government schools teach more broadly about Christmas. The resource *Belief in action* published to support teaching about religion in the K-6 Human Society and Its Environment Syllabus provides a model for teachers. It is very explicit about what Christians believe Christmas is about, but acknowledges traditions in our society, many with non-Christian origins, and the origins of Santa Claus. Teaching about Christmas is not limited.

Final comment

The curriculum and the legislative provision for general religious education encourage teaching about Christmas. Some Christians need to be a bit braver in their teaching and not take opposition arguments at face value

John Gore.
12/2006