

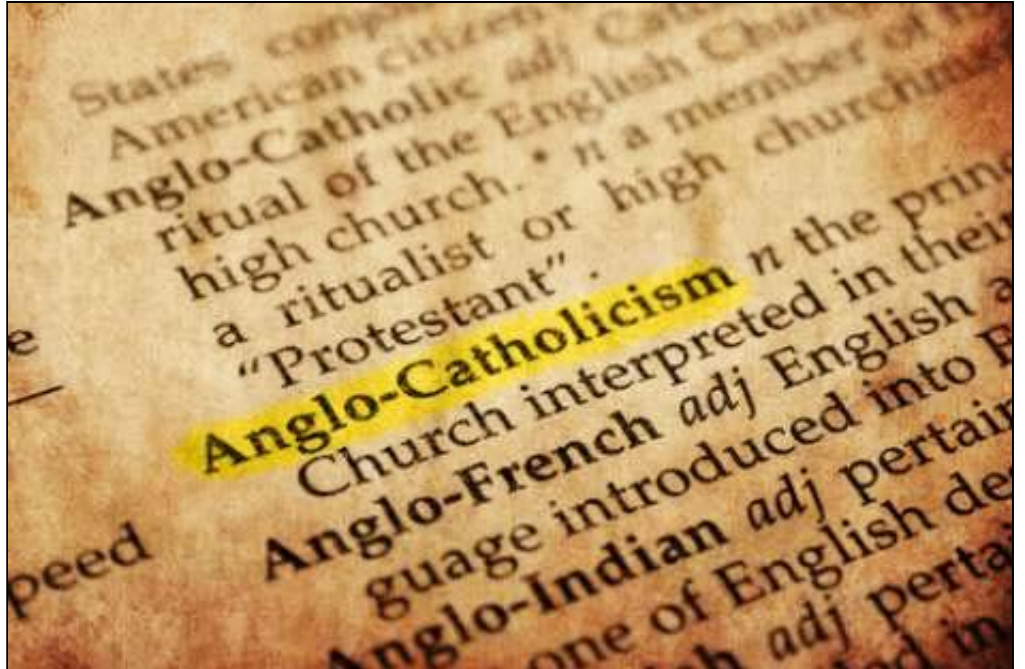
# Religion in the state school curriculum

5 Comments

**Kevin Donnelly** | 30 August 2015

The recent Victorian government decision to remove Religious Instruction classes from the formal school curriculum, and to only allow schools to carry out classes before or after school or at lunchtime, has reignited debates about the place of religion in state controlled schools.

On one hand *The Age* editorial supports



(<http://www.theage.com.au/comment/the-age-editorial/religion-does-not-belong-in-our-schools-20150823-gj5kj8.html>) the change when it states: 'Some 143 years after Victoria's Education Act made clear that education must be free, secular and compulsory, the Andrews government has committed to abolishing special religious instruction classes during school hours. That is as it should be'.

Rob Ward from Access Ministries, the main provider of Religious Instruction classes, on the other hand as reported in *The Age*, is quoted as disagreeing when he argues (<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/religious-groups-warn-students-will-leave-state-schools-after-sri-is-dumped-20150821-gj4y1h.html>): 'The decision seems to emphasise secularism at the expense of faith'.

In relation to being secular it is true that state-based legislation forbids government schools from teaching about religion. In Victoria, for example, the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* states (<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/spag/curriculum/pages/religious.aspx>): 'education in government schools must be secular and not promote any particular religious practice, denomination or sect'.

The Western Australian *School Education Act* section 68(1a) argues in a similar vein when it states (<http://www.det.wa.edu.au/curriculum/support/religiouseducation/detcms/portal/>): 'curriculum and teaching in government schools is not to promote any particular religious practice, denomination or sect'.

Ignored, though, is the fact that the various state governments, while arguing that state schools should not promote one religion or belief system over another, accept that there is a place for religion in the school curriculum. Both in terms of Religious Instruction and also by being incorporated into subjects like history, literature, music and the arts.

The NSW legislation requires state schools to offer religious education classes for 'children of any religious persuasion' and the Victorian legislation requires students to be taught 'about the major forms of religious thought and expression characteristic of Australian society and other societies in the world'.

In its submission to last year's review of the Australian national curriculum, a Foundation to Year 10 curriculum currently being implemented by all the states and territories, the body responsible for designing the curriculum, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, also argues that students have the right to be taught about 'different religions, spiritualities and ethical beliefs'.

The Melbourne Declaration, the road map used by the various state, territory and commonwealth education ministers when formulating education policy, also argues that Australian students, whether in government or non-government schools, need 'to understand the spiritual, moral and aesthetic dimensions of life'.

Clearly, the fact that various state based legislation argues education in government schools, as apposed to non-government faith-based schools, should be secular in nature does not exclude Religious Instruction classes or incorporating religion in the broader curriculum.

What might this involve? In relation to the broader school curriculum many of the submissions to the national curriculum review argue that as Judeo-Christianity is one of the world's major religions, certainly in relation to its impact on Western civilisation and Australia's development as a nation, that there needs to be a greater emphasis.

The submission

([http://https://submissions.education.gov.au/Forms/AustralianCurriculum/\\_layouts/SP.Submissions/ViewDoc.aspx?id=%257B45018320-09af-4f1f-a4f3-1ad5e7208e66%257D](http://https://submissions.education.gov.au/Forms/AustralianCurriculum/_layouts/SP.Submissions/ViewDoc.aspx?id=%257B45018320-09af-4f1f-a4f3-1ad5e7208e66%257D)) by the Anglican Education Commission in Sydney argues: 'Our justice, government, education, health and general welfare systems are all established on the Judeo-Christian foundation of this civilisation'.

The Catholic Education Commission of Victoria puts a similar case when arguing that the moral and ethical teachings associated with Judeo-Christianity: 'are the foundations of our liberal democracy'.

A number of other submissions, including one from Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen, argue that as Australia is increasingly a multi-faith, multi-cultural society that students should be familiar with and understand a range of religions including but not restricted to Judeo-Christianity.

To argue that religions should have a greater place in the school curriculum is not to proselytise. Rather it is to recognise, while we are a secular society, that students need to encounter a more transcendent sense of life that incorporates a strong moral, spiritual and ethical dimension.

As argued by T S Eliot in *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*, it is also the case that religion is a fundamental aspect of any culture and if students are to be culturally literate religion needs to be incorporated in the formal curriculum.



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*Dictionary page image by Shutterstock ([http://www.shutterstock.com/pic-302837651/stock-photo-anglo-catholicism-word-in-old-textured-dictionary.html?src=UwmZEgJLWGc\\_HjTyiF-ljg-1-13](http://www.shutterstock.com/pic-302837651/stock-photo-anglo-catholicism-word-in-old-textured-dictionary.html?src=UwmZEgJLWGc_HjTyiF-ljg-1-13)).*

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