

April 1973.

## **HUMANIST SOCIETY SUBMISSIONS**

**ON**

### **RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION IN VICTORIAN STATE SCHOOLS**

#### **Part 1. INTRODUCTION**

1. In these submissions we understand Religious Instruction (P.Ij (under Section 23 of the Education Act, 1958, Regulation XIII of the Education Department, and Instructions in Education Gazette of 29 Jan. 1972) to be the arrangement in Victorian State Schools whereby normal classes are suspended for one period per week and, after a regrouping of the pupils according to religious affiliation, "accredited" instructors from various religious organizations conduct a session which may include Bible study, hymn singing, prayer, and discussion.

2. The "usual" curriculum for R.L. is called the "Agreed Syllabus" and is prepared by the Council for Christian Education in Schools (C.C.E.S.) This Council –is representative of seven Protestant churches in Victoria., and it has its office at 55 Exhibition Street, Melbourne. We understand that there is some freedom to depart from the Agreed Syllabus, which itself is in process of revision, and that this freedom is exercised more in the secondary schools than in the primary schools.

3. All the Protestant accredited instructors receive their authorisation via the C.C.E.S., in accordance with Regulation XIII. There are some Catholic and Jewish accredited instructors authorized directly by the Minister, but none for Plymouth Brethren, Orthodox, Lutherans, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, followers of Islam, etc.

4. Most of the accredited instructors are lay people and very few have teacher training.

5. Sometimes full-time ministers of churches are accredited and give R.I. as part of their duties. Their professional qualifications do not normally include teacher training.

6. In the last fifteen years the Education Department has permitted appointment by the C.C.E.S. of chaplains to secondary schools, and at present (early 1973) there are 30, of them (27 men and 3 women). Twenty-eight of the chaplains are ordained ministers, and eight of them have formal teacher training. Their salaries of about \$5200, including allowances, are financed by local committees who raise funds by voluntary contribution, but also obtained by grants from the C.C.E.S. and local municipal councils. The chaplains conduct classes that are integrated in the normal school timetable, and thus R.I. is less an obvious religious observance than when the whole school convenes for R.I. at the same time. In some cases the chaplains' class material tends towards a study of comparative religion.

7. The parents of each child enrolled at a at school receive Form No GC 557 (see Schedule I of Regulation XIII) and also Form No GC 550 (see Schedule II) if the Minister of Education has given prior approval to the formation of a class for R.I. other than on the Agreed Syllabus. If Form GC 557 is returned signed 'Yes' or if the forms are not returned within 14 days their child is given R.I. by instructors accredited by the C.C.E.S. If GC 550 is returned signed 'yes' the child is taught appropriately. If GC 557 alone is received with the answer 'No' child is usually sent to a vacant: room for a period of private study or sometimes permitted to do a housekeeping job around the school.

## **PART II. ARGUMENTS OPPOSING RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION**

8. R.I. and Education – From antiquity educators have preached the necessity of searching diligently for knowledge and painstakingly checking the truth of it. Yet through R.I. it would seem that effort is made to produce a stereotyped response. The very term 'Religious Instruction' assumes established truth and is concerned to encourage belief without adequate evidence. This is contrary to all modern concepts of education.

9. R.I. and History – History is perhaps the subject most abused by authorities wishing to advance a given world or national view. When religious history is taught the standards of historical truth are notoriously and the child's uncritical mind is frequently exploited by teachers both in church and in R.I. Classes.

10. R.I. and Doctrine – There are very few major doctrines of Christianity that are not publicly disputed by leaders of the churches. The existence of God, the Virgin Birth, miracles, the Resurrection, and the Divinity of Christ are all in doubt to some extent, judging by statements published by various churchmen. Yet these doctrines are implicit in the R.I. syllabus. As in Paragraph 8 above, we believe that it is unethical to teach to a child as the truth those things for which there is little or no evidence, or where the "facts" presented are widely questioned within various Christian sects. This is surely indoctrination.

11. R.I. and Discrimination – The segregation of children for the delivery of R.I. according to religious belief may make them feel second class citizens. Firstly, some children may be of non-religious parents, of whom there is a rapidly increasing number (see Appendix I). Secondly, there may also be children of parents who are Jewish, Greek, and Turk. Thirdly, there may be in some schools Catholic children of parents from Spain, Italy and other countries. Since many such segregated children have physical characteristics easily distinguishable in Australia, their enforced separation promotes a sense of racial superiority among the Protestant children (who are in the majority.)

12. R.I. and Oppression – Since the C.C.E.S. speaks only for seven Protestant churches (Baptist, Churches of Christ, Church of England, Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian, Salvation Army), it is ipso facto supported by only 47% of the population of Victoria (See Appendix I). Yet the Council supplies most of the accredited instructors and thus has virtually captured the State's educational system in the matter of R.I. The operation of Gazette (29/1/1972) Instructions (3) (a) (iii), (3)(b), and sections (3b), (4) and 8(b) of Regulation XIII (which together interpret Section 23 (2b) of the Act) is oppressive.

## **PART III. ALTERNATIVES TO RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION**

13. One solution to the above controversial problems of R.I. is to abolish all teaching of religion or religious matters from State Schools. Both the United States and France adopted this solution many years ago.

14. If, however, this is impossible, the another option would be to convert the present Agreed Syllabus into a syllabus for a subject to be known as "Ethics and Comparative Religion" and to be given by regular (trained) teachers of the Education Department. Indeed, the Humanist Society has been informed that the Committee on Religious Education is currently considering the teaching of a subject known as "Comparative Religion"

15. We have endeavoured to explore the subject of Comparative Religion as currently taught in Victoria by two liberal chaplains on the one hand and a conservative theological

professor on the other hand. We find that there is a very great difference between the above approaches, and we doubt if any broadly based Committee could ever achieve consensus on the definition of Comparative Religion.

16. Whereas the Liberal wishes to show that the great religions have certain ethics in common the conservative wishes to show that the Christian faith is unquestionably so much better than the nearest contender (Islam) that the student should be urged to seek a personal revelation for her/himself within the Christian context. We find that we can perhaps cooperate with the liberal approach up to a point, but in order to avoid possible misunderstanding we define the subject "Ethics and Comparative Religion" as "the factual inter-comparison of various religious and Foral philosophies without implying the superiority of any one philosophy."

17. We commend to the Committee on Religious Education our pamphlet "Humanism for Students", as a summary of Humanist ethics and amplification of one non-religious view. (Forty copies have already been forwarded to the Committee)

18. As an example of guidelines for "Ethics and Comparative Religion" we offer the contents of Part IV of these submissions.

#### 19. PART IV. GUIDELINES FOR ETHICS AND COMPARATIVE RELIGION

Grade 1. Describe ordinary halls, churches, cathedrals, temples, tabernacles, synagogues, Quaker meeting houses, mosques, etc. as the places where people meet for fellowship. Pay visits to local examples.

Grade 2. As for Grade 1, but describe activities such thinking, meditating, praise, prayer, ceremony, and fellowship meetings. Attend local examples.

Grade 3. Describe early Jewish ceremonies, aborigine corroborees, Christian rituals.

Grade 4. Describe the history of different Christian churches in Australia; describe early Christianity.

Grade 5. Outline Greek and Roman mythology including Greek humanism. Give the life of Christ and mention early communal living.

Grade 6. Work through the development of the Christian Church (refer to Kenneth Clark's book and TV series. "Civilization") and note the spread to Britain via Europe including the pagan beliefs displaced.

Form 1. Describe the lives of Thomas Aquinas, Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius, Socrates, Isocrates.

Form 2. Describe early Egypt (pyramids) and Incas (also refer to South American pyramids.) Discuss the spread of Christianity to the British Isles, Iceland, and also North America (where it left no communities). Also include spread to Russia, Abyssinia, India, and Japan, particularly where primitive Christian communities still exist. Describe their present way of life, and relate to the indigenous religions.

Form 3. Study Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Humanism and Communism as if from the inside looking out and compare.

Form 4. Discuss ethics of business, peace, war and family life in relation to the prevailing religion of the community. Relate to life in Asian countries near Australia.

Form 5. Prepare essays on morals, civic life, political groupings.

Form 6. Discuss the new Christian supernaturalism, Existentialism, and the New Left.

## **PART V. RECOMMENDATIONS**

20. We urge the Committee on Religious Education to ask the Minister of Education to prepare legislation repealing Section 23 of the Education Act 1958 in its entirety.
21. Because we express tentative interest in the establishment of a new subject at all levels of primary and secondary schooling to be known as "Ethics and Comparative Religion", we recommend that the title of this subject be included in the list of subjects defining a school in Section 35 of the Act.
22. We also recommend establishment of an instruction course within the teacher training institutions based at least in part on a book list such as that given in Appendix II (note still in course of preparation, March 1973).
23. We recommend further that when a supply of suitably trained teachers is forthcoming, then one period per week be allocated at all State schools to give classes according to the guidelines set out in Part IV of these submissions.