

Russell Report Detailed criticism

[Add comments](#) [Edit](#)

Humanist Society of Victoria letter to the Minister of Education, following release of the 'Russell Report', *Religious Education in State Schools* (Report of the Committee on Religious Education – Victoria, chair W. B. Russell), September 1974

Mr L.H.S. Thompson, M.L.A., Minister for Education

The Humanist Society of Victoria gladly responds to your public invitation to make comments on, and recommendations to the Report of the Committee on Religious Education, Victoria (September 1974), prepared by the Committee on Religious Education.

In general we find the Report voluminous and well-documented, but we have important reservations about the tone of it and many of its recommendations. We therefore set out comments and conclusions under particular headings as follows:–

COMPOSITION OF THE COMMITTEE

In May 1972 we were invited to make representations to the Committee and immediately interested ourselves in the views of its members. So far as we could ascertain all the active members of the Committee had some degree of religious affiliation and most held positions of considerable responsibility within the Christian churches. This seemed too narrow a composition for such a wide-reaching question as religion and accordingly we wrote to the Chairman in late 1972 nominating Mr J. Dunn for membership. (Mr Dunn is a former president of our Society, former president of the Victorian Council of State School Organisations.) This nomination was declined by the Chairman and although the Committee very graciously received our delegation we feel that the findings lack appreciation of non-religious points of view, which would have come from daily contact with a formal Humanist as a member of the Committee.

We recommend **THAT THE MINISTER ARRANGE FOR SAMPLING OF THE VIEWS OF COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS INTERESTED IN THE QUESTION OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION.**

BIAS

It is a pleasure to record that some chapters demonstrate scholarly objectivity even if we do not agree with the conclusions. Therefore when the standard fails the contents should be closely scrutinised. (The history of Religious Instruction in Chapter 2 is controversial because of the intemperate language used in discussing the humanist movement.) Furthermore in Chapter 3 the summary of the Wetherell syllabus is offensive and also unnecessary, since the objectives of the Syllabus are concisely summarised within itself.

In Chapter 3, Table 2, there are deliberate omissions from the Year Book 1972, which are hard to justify. Some minority denominations are left out and also the category 'No Reply'. This is most significant since the total of 'No Reply' plus 'No Religions' has fluctuated between 10 and 13% since 1953 indicating that a group of people, outnumbered only Catholics or Anglicans, has for many years expressed some disapproval of religious affiliations.. For full discussion see 'The Change of Question' by Gerald Spencer, *Australian Humanist*, No. 25, 1973, p. 16), as attached.

Again, in Chapter 5, there is a most pitiable reliance on the results of the Morgan Gallup Poll, No. 13, October 16, 1973. The methods of the Morgan organisation have been widely criticised in the media following notorious failures to forecast elections accurately In No. 13 the questions is slanted in favour of the present scheme without any check built into it.

We know from personal conversations with committee members that some regarded the statistics as giving the Committee a mandate to introduce Religious Education for all and hence we must assert the rights of a substantial minority. Had the data been competently assessed the Committee might well have leaned towards our proposals for 'Ethics and Comparative Religion'.

We recommend **THAT THE MINISTER DISCOUNTS MUCH OF THE SUPPORT ALLEGED IN THE REPORT FOR THE TEACHING OF 'RELIGION' AS OPPOSED TO 'ETHICS AND COMPARATIVE RELIGION'.**

TEACHING CONTENT OF THE PROPOSED COURSE IN RELIGION

We note that the guidelines proposed in chapter 15 for teachers of religion lean heavily on recently revised course material prepared by the C.C.E.S. for use by the present accredited instructors, although some weight is given to other sources. We grant that effort is made at comparisons between Christianity and other religions at the Secondary level, but cannot escape the impression that the comparison is made from 'Christ is best' position. The desire to show that there is a great deal in common between Christianity and other religions or ethical systems is commendable, but to conceal

cause of hostility among religions and sects is a violation of objectivity and, for the student, also of interest.

At the junior primary level two of the sources of syllabus material contain a significant amount of devotional material (prayers and hymns) and one at least (Religion in Life) is specifically based on the old agreed syllabus although its dogmatic content is hidden. The guidelines for the senior primary level state that it is best that the teacher assume the existence of God even though students may later modify their views. Such an instruction directly leads to hypocrisy.

We believe that all non-Christian groups within the community and some Christian churches will be united in their opposition to the guidelines.

We recommend **THAT THE SUBJECT TO BE TAUGHT BE BROADENED TO 'ETHICS AND COMPARATIVE RELIGION' ACCORDING TO THE GUIDELINES SET OUT IN OUR SUBMISSION TO THE COMMITTEE** (attached).

TEACHER TRAINING

We deeply disagree with chapters 16 and 17, which clearly envisage that theology is a suitable precursor [?] for a teacher and that specialist teachers of religion will in fact have a Christian conviction. In our view theology is an anti-educational qualification and we would be most unhappy if State funds were used to provide such training.

We recommend **THAT TEACHERS BE TRAINED WITHIN A CONVENTIONAL UNIVERSITY AND NOT IN A SPECIALISED INSTITUTION BASED ON CHRISTIAN CONVICTION.**

CHAPLAINS

We believe that schools should be able to invite people holding a wide range of beliefs to expound those views to the pupils. However the developing institution of Chaplaincy goes far beyond this. In a pluralist society, such as Australia, government schools are open to all students regardless of class colour, race or creed. Allowing chaplains into schools implies State support from a person holding specific religious beliefs. Catholics, Jews, Atheists, Muslims and others might view with suspicion official support for a Protestant Minister who is given special privileges at State Schools.

Moreover many of these chaplains attempt to give student counselling, a task, which should be undertaken by qualified psychologists from the Psychology and Guidance Branch.

We point out that it is most uncharitable of the Committee to seek to restrict members of outside groups to meet after school hours (p. 279) whilst accredited chaplains have freedom of entry, once established against the possible wishes of a school principal and can be expected to be provided with office facilities.

We are opposed to the suspension of removal of a parent's right of withdrawal (p. 279) in the context of the committee's recommendations (but see our submissions regarding the element of coercion in the present arrangements).

We abhor the suggestion that State funds will be used to provide the training of chaplains.

We recommend **THAT THE INSTITUTION OF CHAPLAINCY BE ABOLISHED.**

GENERAL

As we see the present situation, religious instruction, because it is largely indoctrination, is anti-educational. The instructors themselves are untrained and because of lack of interest, are in short supply.

Paragraph 6 on p. 286, sections © and (d) on p. 287 and paragraphs 15 and 17 on p. 288, are attempts to sustain the present situation by the State making payments to the present volunteers and either monetary inducements to others whose qualifications would, as far as we can judge, be an urge to teach religion for money.

If the recommendations in the report are implemented the principle that State and Church should be separate would be breached.

Whilst we believe that students in government schools should be informed about religion, it is our opinion that the power and authority of the State should not appear to support the teaching of religion. This Society therefore does not support the Committee's recommendations.

CONCLUSIONS

We are conscious that many issues have been canvassed in this letter, which may require amplification or substantiation. Therefore we seek an opportunity to discuss the matter further with you at some mutually convenient time.

Yours sincerely, John Browning, President, Humanist Society of Victoria

Enclosure: Humanist Society of Victoria Submissions on Religious Instruction in Victorian State Schools (amended).