

HUMANIST SOCIETY OF VICTORIA INC.

POSITION PAPER – **Religious Instruction in State Schools**

Nov. 1998 revised March 2000

Recommendations

1. That the provision for Religious Instruction (RI) should be phased out and eventually deleted from the Education Act.
2. That State school curricula at both primary and post-primary levels should include opportunities for students to learn about the diversity of beliefs within Australia. Beliefs being understood in the widest possible sense to include, ‘thought’, ‘conscience’, as well as ‘religion’. Such a course could be called ‘Ethics for Living’.

Background

In Victoria, State school education is by legislation secular, and teachers employed by the State are specifically prohibited from giving religious instruction.¹ Contrary, however, to the principles of secular education, Religious Instruction is permitted in State schools. Provision for Christian Churches to provide Religious Instruction, for children of non-objecting parents, dates back to the first school legislation of 1872. Similar clauses, violating the fully secular nature of education were retained in Section 23 of the 1958 Education Act. (See Appendix). In 1996, additional clauses extended the option of Religious Instruction to non-Christian religions. In 1998, provision for school-based religious pageants and performances are to be included.

The **Humanist Society of Victoria** as an organised community voice for a secular, Humanist point of view, has consistently argued against the inclusion of Religious Instruction in State schools. As an alternative, Humanists advocate the inclusion of units of study on ‘Comparative Beliefs’.

The place of religion in State school curricula was thoroughly investigated in the early 1970s by a committee chaired by Mr W. B. Russell, former Deputy Director-General of Education. His “*Report of the Committee on Religion Education in Victoria*” (the Russell Report), was published in 1974. Its findings and recommendations are summed up as follows;

*The argument of the Report is that because religion is significant and influential in human experience and because the methodological tools for its impartial exploration now exist, the schools should be freed from the traditional restraints in this area. It recommends the wide-ranging, open-ended and descriptive programs of religious education designed and conducted by professional teachers in each school should be available to all children.*²

Despite the hours of work, and the many thoroughly researched contributions to this enquiry its recommendations were ignored, and the existing arrangements for Religious Instruction continued.

Today, Victoria is an increasingly secular and multicultural society. While the trend towards cultural diversity is recognised by the Government through *A Multicultural Policy for Victorian Schools*, aimed at ‘respect for all cultures by all cultures’ and intent on ‘promoting cultural inclusiveness’, the growth in secularisation has not been formally acknowledged. This omission is most obvious in respect of Religious Instruction, where no equivalent provision is made for children from secular backgrounds.

Beliefs as personal choice

Religion and other life stance beliefs are personal choices. Parents have the right to convey their beliefs to their children. It is also the right of an individual to seek association with others whose beliefs correspond to their own. A secular State protects the right to freedom of belief for its citizens. To do this impartially requires the State to make no special provisions for instruction in any particular belief including religion. Any partiality towards selected beliefs not only compromises the State’s commitment to providing a fully secular education, it also reduces the likelihood of a course on ‘Comparative Belief’ being introduced.

Religious Instruction in State schools violates the tenets of a secular education

The comprehensive education, personal welfare and future prospects of students are the most important concerns of State schools. As students come from a wide range of backgrounds, no organised school component should set out to alienate any student from their family support, nor their peers. Unlike core curricula sessions, Religious Instruction provision may well produce a divisive effect for it selectively excludes some students. Being overtly identified as different, can generate conflict between students, and between students and parents.

Considering the range of beliefs in Australia today, it is not feasible for Religious Instruction sessions to be provided for all. Even though amendments in 1996 broadened the Religious Instruction option to

¹ Clauses 1. & 3. Of Section 23 of Education Act 1958 – see Appendix

² Digest of Report of the Committee on Religion Education in Victoria pp. 2

include non-Christian religions, it made no provision for children from homes where secular values are practised and discussed.

The Act permits instructors from various religious bodies, approved by the Secretary of the Department of Education, to give Religious Instruction in their particular denomination. “*Instructors who deliver the non-denominational agreed syllabus **Religion in Life** are accredited through the Council of Christian Education in Schools (and not by the church to which the instructor may belong.)*”³

The degree to which this option of Religious Instruction is taken in different State schools varies. In 1997 only 55.9% of primary students received Religious Instruction.⁴ Of particular concern to Humanists is the way children of parents with secular beliefs do not have their life views granted equal validity. Those requesting exclusion from Religious Instruction sessions, occasion varying degrees of inconvenience to the school’s requirement to supervise properly all children in their *in loco parentis* care. It is of concern that those taking Religious Instruction may have little or no teaching experience, and may themselves require assistance or supervision from the school’s teaching staff.

Some specific flawed outcomes resulting from optional Religious Instruction

1. Students whose parents require them not to partake of Religious Instruction, are usually a group for whom the school may not be able to provide adequate substitute activities. This results in these excluded students being an inconvenience to be handled by a range of poor education practices such as being placed at back of other classes, sitting in corridors, or elsewhere, during Religious Instruction sessions.
2. Through language slippage, religious **instruction** becomes religious **education**, when spoken of and on consent forms. (e.g. Schools of the Future enrolment form – see photocopy attached)
3. Activities such as visiting performances, films or outings arranged within the Religious Instruction program may be organised so that the entire school or all students in particular classes are obliged to attend.
4. School performances with a specific religious character, potentially involve all students, with practice sessions taking up normal classroom times.
5. In some schools, parents are required to sign a form for exemption of their child from Religious Instruction, but no similar requirement for agreement to Religious Instruction classes is necessary. This is the reverse of most school run activities which normally require parental consent for their child’s involvement.
6. Religious Instruction material may be listed on official school book lists. This is a measure that normalises Religious Instruction as an officially sanctioned part of the curriculum.

Belief in Contemporary Australia

In order to gain a picture of belief in Australia it is necessary to gauge the accuracy and reliability of data from several sources. First, the ABS Census, asks a single optional question “*What is the person’s religious denomination?*” The 1996 census identified Victorians as 67.6% Christian, 27.6% None and 4.5% Non-Christian.⁵ However, the use of a closed question directs respondents to mark a religion, whether or not they still adhere to one. (see attached pamphlet ‘40%’) Worded this way the question violates United Nations directives that all beliefs, whether religious or other be given equal recognition. Those who are humanist, rationalist, atheist or agnostic, only have the option of marking ‘no religion’, i.e. a negative of the established cultural pattern. Therefore census data can not be considered ‘reliable and accurate’ as it overestimates the level of religious adherence compared with data from other sources.

A second indicator is the rise in civil marriages from 18% in 1974 to 50% in 1998, showing an increasing secular trend since the introduction of the civil marriage celebrant program in 1973.

Third, the most recent **National Social Science Survey** (1993) using a range of questions on religion and beliefs, grouped respondents as follows:

Non-religious	42%
Religious non-attenders	29%
Attenders	22%
Others (did not answer survey)	7%

Compared with the census figures, this data resonates more closely with widely recognised belief patterns of the late 1990s. The religiously committed are about a third of the population and the fully secular over 40%, while the rest are residually religious in non-organised ways.

Fourth, at the time of the Russell Committee investigations, an in-depth survey of teachers and students, conducted in September 1972 yielded responses that show a significant group had no religious beliefs or allegiances. 45% of teachers and 47% students either never attended public worship or only did

³ Section 3.19.1 Schools of the Future Reference Guide

⁴ 1998 figure from The Council for Christian Education in Schools, whose instructors provide RI. This organisation serves approximately 1,100 schools – approx. 300 have no RI.

⁵ See Appendix for 1991, 1996 Census figures.

so for weddings and funerals. 29% of teachers and 21% of students had no religious preferences, while 75% of teachers and 72% of students were not involved in religion-centred organisations.⁶

APPENDIX

Education Act 1958 Act No. 624011958

23. Religious instruction

- (1) Subject to this section religious instruction may be given in any State school but otherwise secular instruction alone shall be given in State schools.
- (2) When religious instruction is given in any State school during the hours set apart for the instruction of the pupils-
 - (a) such religious instruction shall be given by persons who are accredited representatives of religious bodies and who are approved by the Minister for the purpose;
 - (b) such religious instruction shall be given on the basis of the normal class organization of the school except in any school where the Minister, having regard to the particular circumstances of such schools, authorizes some other basis to be observed;
 - (c) attendance at any class for such religious instruction shall not be compulsory for any pupil whose parents desire he be excused from attending.
- (3) No teacher within the meaning of this Act shall give any instruction other than secular instruction in any State school building.
- (4) Nothing in this section shall prevent any State school building from being used for any purpose on days other than school days or at hours on school days other than the hours set apart for the instruction of the pupils.

Census data State of Victoria

	1996	1991
CHRISTIAN	67.6%	70.7
Catholic	29.0	29.2
Anglican	16.5	18.2
Uniting	7.3	8.1
Orthodox	4.7	4.7
Presbyterian	3.9	4.6
Baptist	1.4	1.4
Pentecostal	0.7	0.7
OTHER	4.5	3.4
Islam	1.5	1.2
Buddhism	1.4	1.0
Judaism	0.8	0.8
Hinduism	0.4	0.3
NONE	27.6	25.6
No religion	18.7	14.4
Not stated	8.9	11.2

The National Social Science Survey

(an analysis of which is published in *Believe it or Not*, a Christian Research Association publication co-authored by Philip Hughes, Craig Thompson, Rohan Pryor & Gary D Bouma). The **National Social Science Survey** used a range of open-ended questions to gauge both basic belief positions, as well as strength of conviction. Here are a few questions with rounded percentage responses:

“*Would you describe yourself as ?*”

- very religious 10%
- non-religious 25%
- somewhat religious 36%
- neither religious or non-religious 28%

“*In the present, how often do you attend religious services?*”

Weekly – 13%, monthly – 10%, occasionally – 42%, never – 34%.

⁶ See Appendix for a sample of questions and responses.

“Which is the closest to expressing what you believe about God?”

- Believe in God, but have doubts 31%
- Believe in God, no doubts 30%
- Believe in a higher power 18%
- Don't know if there is a God,
and don't believe there is way of finding out 13%
- Don't believe in God 9%

Survey 1973 (full account in Russell Report)

‘A stratified random survey conducted in Melbourne metropolitan area covering a full spectrum of socio-economic status areas’ of teachers in primary, high & technical schools, and senior students in same high schools. Responses to three questions from this survey are included below.

9. Do you attend public worship, if so how often?

	% teachers	% students
at least once a week	18.9	15.6
at least once a month	9.5	12.1
about 6 times/year	8.7	5.9
2 or 3 times/year	11.7	12.1
once a year	5.3	5.3
only weddings & funerals	30.6	32.4
never	14.1	14.3

10. With which church, denomination or religion do your religious preferences lie?

	% teachers	% students
Church of England	20.1	29.0
Greek Orthodox	1.4	4.0
Presbyterian	13.1	10.0
Roman Catholic	15.0	15.9
(others with small percentages)		
No religious preferences	28.7	21.1

11. In how many church or religious centred organisations are you involved?

	% teachers	% students
None	75.0	72.0
one	14.8	20.9
two or more	9.5	6.5