

## ***School is for Teaching NOT Preaching***

One wonders what it means to live in a secular society these days. Just in case you were wondering, a secular society is defined by a separation of church and State. Of course, we have people with all sorts of religious beliefs in this country, and they are allowed freedom to practice and worship their religions. We also have religious schools, so that if parents wish their children to receive religious instruction they are free to do so.

Our Constitution seeks to prevent lawmakers from "any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion".

It is a curious exception to our secular society, that we have the *Special Religious Instruction* as a weekly, 1 hour class, which is a *mandatory* part of the Queensland State school curriculum. This is to be provided by either nominated religious service providers or local churches. It is presumably a requirement of this program that the service provider is providing a general understanding of religion to children, and not proselytizing, and aiming to recruit children to their particular religion. Parents are also given forms asking for permission for their child to attend this, however, it is often the case that it is difficult for schools to provide alternative activities. It is questionable as to whether it is appropriate to even consider presenting material that would result in segregating 5 or 6 year old children.

The school my 6 year old son attends occasionally allows parents to visit the class and participate in some educational games. I found myself there 20 minutes early and so sat in on the Special Religious Instruction class.

I must say that I was quite taken aback by the content of this class. The *teacher* or more accurately, *preacher* spent most of the time explaining to the children that God created the world and everything in it. And that God loves them and Jesus loves them. The kids were then given some coloring in books, which also contained familiar looking kids puzzles. I noticed one them was a picture with some words, with a few letters missing. I noticed one of them was, was G \_\_ loves ME. But I had missed out on the songs! A couple of weeks later I was taken aback when my son spontaneously began singing 'JESUS HAS THE POWER.'

This is 5 and 6 year old children who are being exposed to these messages about the world. These messages include primarily the promotion of religious beliefs, which are largely not a question of fact, but questions of faith. Many Australians do not agree with these messages, and this is clearly proselytizing as *opposed* to teaching. But what else would we expect? As theoretical physicist Lawrence Krauss said on ABC's Q&A program, 'you wouldn't invite a clown to a school and tell him not to be funny.' Do we really expect religious institutions not to preach? That we could rely on them to provide a fair and reasonable overview and introduction to religion? Religious organizations are likely to be even less tolerant of the beliefs of competing religious organizations than atheists are.

I am further puzzled to discover that there is a school chaplain who leads prayers at morning assembly. Therefore, it is quite clear that our children are being deliberately led down a path to conversion to a Christian belief system by our State schools. It is worthwhile considering the extent that we either feel this is appropriate, necessary, fair, and consistent with our secular nation.

According to the 2011 Census 61% of Australians identify themselves as Christian. This represents a substantial decline since Federation, when the figure was 96%. Australia has a declining church attendance record. In 2001, only 8.8 % of Australians reported that they attended church regularly. So, whilst 60% of us identify with Christianity, less than 10% are churchgoing or practicing Christians. Other surveys have indicated that approximately 70% of Australians do not actually believe in God.

As a nation we have a majority of people who identify as being Christian, but we have a small minority who regularly attend church, and a minority who actually believe in God. Perhaps this indicates that we are cognizant of our Christian heritage and values, but we do not wish to actively practice religion ourselves. With less than 10% of Australians actively participating in religious services it is hard to see the rationale in promoting religion in State schools, unless this is being promoted due to the *perception* that we are a more traditionally Christian society than the census statistics would indicate.

Concurrently, the Victorian Education Department is investigating a current service provider Access Ministries for providing 'inappropriate and offensive' religious materials to students. At Torquay college, pamphlets were given to students encouraging them to get counseling if they had homosexual thoughts, that they were inviting rape if they wore revealing clothes, and that masturbation and sex before marriage are wrong. And as featured on Channel 9's, *A Current Affair* 12 June 2014, they are also not shy about telling their staff that children provide great potential *disciples* for their religion. This service provider receives \$21 million in public funding.

The Victoria Education Department commented in its statement "The materials are totally inappropriate and offensive and have no place in our schools."

I couldn't agree more. Perhaps our politicians can help us solve the great mystery of why we adults don't need religion, but our children do?

Hugh Harris

Brisbane, Queensland