Putting religion in the Picture

by Alex Mills

Focus: How can frameworks assist stake holders cope with the 21st century?

The focus of this conference is on helping students to cope with the next century. We welcome the signs that the Curriculum Corporation and the Australian History Teachers Association are encouraging critical debate about the Frameworks. This paper argues that fair treatment has not been given to the cultural impact of religion.

The curriculum can become ‘secularist’ and not ‘secular’

To omit such data is not to sustain some kind of ‘value neutrality’ but to distort the facts. By default, the curriculum becomes not ‘secular’ but ‘secularist’, i.e. endorsing a position that religion does not merit recognition as a social phenomenon which has had, and continues to have, a significant impact on the way many people and societies operate.”

Moral Accounting

On any moral accounting, this impact has been both good and bad. Religious commitment has inspired great acts of compassion and social reform. It has also often led to discriminatory oppression and war. Both aspects need to be noted, if a broader understanding and tolerance of people different in belief to oneself are to be regarded as necessary parts of an education for democracy.

When students are asked to think about religion in the development of society that raises questions about personal meaning, significance and destiny. This aspect of their study is important in helping them to sort out themselves at these levels too.

Areas of neglect

Some particular areas of neglect that need to be addressed are as follows

1. Who plans the curriculum frameworks and what is intended to be achieved?

Discovering Democracy kits: These kits failed to recognise the significance of religious influences in the development of Australians. Although Whereas the People... invited comments, no supplementary report was prepared outlining responses. No arguments based on scholarship have been provided to justify the exclusion of religion.

NSW 7-10 History Syllabus: Religious influences was virtually excluded from the Citizenship Framework and a draft syllabus. The final version of the syllabus did include “religious perspectives” after submissions were made. “Religious influences” had been acknowledged in the previous history syllabus and religious influences were recognised in the Studies of Religion Syllabus. Both were approved by the NSW Board of Studies.

[See references under Documents for publications details. ]

2. Are the frameworks inclusive? Which individuals or groups are served/disadvantaged?

In NSW teachers asked that the writing of the history syllabus be delayed so that teachers could comment on the draft. Those who controlled the time frame would not allow this. Two of the three syllabus writers worked in private schools. (NSW Teachers Federation publications 1998) Teachers campaigned to ensure that the new syllabus met with the pedagogical standards of practicising
teachers in the 1990s, rather than the ‘50s and ‘60s. (Webster 1999 p.41)

Qualifications of Members of the Board of Studies

The NSW Board of Studies members only had the syllabus for several days before they endorsed it. The time frame did not allow members of the Board to consider the syllabus carefully. The final syllabus does raise questions such as how many Board members had history qualifications to be able to assess the content of the syllabus, the pedagogical approach in the syllabus, and the qualifications of the officers of the Board of Studies who were responsible for the syllabus.

To whom are the Board members responsible? The Minister who appoints or approves of their appointment, the parent group represented, the expertise represented eg early childhood.

Answers to these questions are necessary in examining questions of inclusiveness and which groups who are being served or disadvantaged. It also raises a civics and citizenship question. In a democracy, to whom are the Board of Studies members, in reality, responsible?

Stakeholders were denied access to shaping the NSW history syllabus.

Teachers are given the opportunity to, are even expected to comment on, and contribute to frameworks and syllabi. They are expected to do this in addition to their normal work load. Those who have the power of time, money, and sometimes position, are advantaged. Because the time frame was insufficient, teachers did not have the opportunity to comment.

The quality of frameworks was unsatisfactory because insufficient time was allocated for syllabus writers to ensure that the syllabus was balanced. The knowledge base of writers is important. eg There is evidence that syllabus writers and those who prepared Discovering Democracy material, did not have a sound understanding of the influence of religion on Australians and our history.

Until the nineteen eighties, even later, indigenous people have been severely disadvantaged by having no input to frameworks. This omission has retarded the reconciliation process.

3. How do frameworks facilitate/affect teachers work?

Because there is inadequate readily available material, “to many teachers the task of incorporating religion into their courses will be a daunting one. It is relevant to virtually every subject in the curriculum.” (Nord W A & Haynes C (1998 p203) Additional resources would reduce their concerns.

Significant improvements are readily possible. If the Commonwealth Government provided supplementary material for the Discovering Democracy program to overcome the bias and introduce a more balanced presentation of the development of Australian democracy, that would be a first step.

4. How do frameworks affect the roles of students, parents, employers?

Parents have the right to expect that the influence of religion as part of Australian history be taught to their children in a balanced way.

It is a clear historical fact that one of the outcomes of being committed to the faith hitherto most influential in the European phase of Australia’s development has been a commitment to seeking justice, better laws and expanding welfare services. Failure to acknowledge religious motivation in historical movements can be seen as a hindrance to young people in respecting the faith of their parents. Failure to point out the religious motivation of people in local communities is a sign of not taking religion seriously.
How well rights regarding religion and minorities are protected by educational institutions can in turn effect the role of parents. Some may be so dissatisfied with frameworks in schools that this becomes a reason for setting up a school to meet their expectations (Smith TL 1988)

Employers who are expecting teachers, clergy, and youth workers to influence students understanding of religion on the development of Australian society will expect that this information will be included in their employees training. They may also see the need to run inservice courses.

5. Commitment to reconciliation: indigenous focus

There are a number of reasons why there is difficulty in achieving reconciliation. Educators of past generations have been ignorant of, or have chosen to ignore, the truth of what had happened to Aboriginal people.

Some educators literally cut out pages from books that mentioned poisoned flour. Some syllabus writers were unaware that missionaries had prevented massacres. Indeed Aborigines themselves have said there is evidence to show that it was only the presence of Christian missionaries that prevented the complete genocide of some Arnhem land people. Some educators, text book writers, and high profile media people are unable to cope with the positive role of religious people in the development of Australia or South Africa and so do not provide a balanced account.

Faith Bandler, who has stated that she cannot believe in God, is able to cope, and have warm friendships with Christian people. She describes Dr Charles Duiguid, a former Presbyterian moderator of South Australia, as “that marvellous man from South Australia” who played a significant role in Aboriginal advancement. Another Christian friend of Faith’s, Jack Horner (1974) wrote the biography of Bill Ferguson. Ferguson, with several other Christian Aborigines, as well as non Christian Aborigines, implemented the Day of Mourning in 1938. (Harris J (1990) pp629-30)

Many Christian Aboriginal and non Aboriginal Australians and some of their children are part of the reconciliation process in country towns. To ignore the Christian motivation of these people in academic studies is another means of presenting an unreal world to young Aboriginal and non Aboriginal stakeholders.

Churches, and individual members have played a significant role in promoting reconciliation. Patrick Dodson, an Aboriginal leader, trained for the Catholic priesthood. Sir William Deane, Catholic Governor General, and Sir Ronald Wilson, a former President of the Uniting Church, have made significant contributions.

**TAKING RELIGION SERIOUSLY ACROSS THE CURRICULUM**

For many Australians, religion makes a profound difference to how they live their lives and how they think about the world. “...religious traditions carry with them implications for all of life; they shape our most fundamental beliefs and values.”(Nord & Haynes (1998)p1-2)

As in the United States “...public schools do teach students to think about virtually all aspects of life in secular terms rather than religious ways as if God were irrelevant and those secular ways of making sense of the world were sufficient. (Nord and Haynes (1998) p.6)

**Reasons for including religion in the curriculum**

“First, there are civic reasons... it is possible to find common ground in spite of our religious differences.....rooted in ...commitment to respect one another.

In the 20th century the curriculum has often excluded religion...this is unjust; it means that we don’t take religious people seriously....if schools are to be truly neutral they must be truly fair- and this means including in the curriculum religious as well as secular ways of making sense of the world when we disagree.”(Nord & Haynes (1998) p.8)

What marks an education that takes religion seriously is that it responds to the invitation to study religion especially the expression of religious commitments in the actions of daily life.
In the *Joining In* unit in the *Mid Primary Discovering Democracy* kit there is a failure to acknowledge the significance of churches and church people in local communities. *(Joining in (1998) pp 99-127)*

“Second. A good liberal education should expose students to the major ways humanity has developed for making sense of the world - and some of those ways of understanding the world are religious. An exclusively secular education is an illiberal education.

Indeed, we cannot systematically exclude religious voices in our cultural conversation without conveying the implication that religion is irrelevant, that religious views have no claim on the truth. By conveying a limited (secular) range of views that students must, in effect, accept on authority for want of any understanding of the alternatives, we place them at a deep disadvantage in thinking critically about where the truth might lie.”

“These are not arguments for promoting religion or for indoctrinating students. They are arguments for including religion in the curricular discussion, for taking it seriously. *(Nord and Haynes (1998)pp 8-9)* The authors argue that while it is not proper for public schools to proselytize, it is not permissible to make them into “religion-free zones” either.

**Social Capital and taking religion seriously**

Using the authors' arguments religion must be taken seriously if Eva Cox's view of social capital is to be accepted. Students need to learn to respect the values of others. This means leaving something of the origins of values and what sustains them people who have particular values. For example, it means that religion has to be included in the study of history for the sake of fairness even if the often pressing argument that religion has been significant in shaping people and events is ignored. The exclusion of religion and demonisation of others” undermines groups of people in a society.

**Social Capital**

“Social capital describes what makes groups of people a society. It refers to the social cohesion or ‘social glue’ that enable people to work together civilly...[ongoing group contact] “involve levels of expectation and trust if they are to work well.” *(Cox E. 1999 p.3)*

“High levels of social capital allow us to

1. work together collaboratively and respect each other’s values and differences
2. resolve disputes civilly...within a framework which takes account of common good, not just sectional interests;
3. recognise that building trust requires fairness and equity to all involved and therefore that prejudice and exploitation have to be opposed.
4. ensure that building groups with internal cohesion is not affected by the exclusion and demonisation of others.” *(Cox 1999p4)*

**UNDERSTANDING THE FRAMEWORKS**

**A preliminary framework**

In *Schools and the Social Development of Young Australians* (1998) Camberwell ACER, it is said: “Even though it is a daunting task, this review has attempted to embed the wide variety of expressions of social objectives in a systematic framework.” That framework was derived from a consideration of literature concerned with social objectives.. Social objectives included: Common Goals *fostering respect for others “developing optimism *developing self esteem.*

Curriculum documents etc: honesty, empathy for others, tolerance and fairness, knowledge p.5 of
value traditions and empathy with adherents (tolerance), cooperation, democratic processes, ethical behaviour/socially responsible, accountability for use of social resources, partnership between school home and community, social justice (p.11) developing a personal value system, individualself respect, pride of identity, logical critical and reflective thinking, commitment to a search for truth, belief that it is possible to make a difference, developing visions for the future, distinguishing faith and hope (p.12)

**Larger explanatory pattern:** Brian Hill (1993) argues “that to have application in the work of teaching a compilation of value statements must be woven into a larger explanatory pattern”.

Many of the social objectives listed require, that if they are to be applied with “commitment to a search for truth”, they will need to take account of the religious dimension. “Fairness”, “logical critical and reflective thinking” requires this.

“Partnership between home and school community”, “self respect”, “pride of identity”: Respect for the beliefs of parents, their spiritual experiences and their commitment to church affiliation should not be undermined. Students identity is shaped by home life.

The “belief that it is possible to make a difference” can be affirmed by stories of the action of church people who draw on their faith to sustain them. It is important that students know what sustained people non believers such as Don Dunstan and Faith Bandler. “Developing a belief that it is possible to make a difference” was a major emphasis in the teaching of two out of every five teachers.” (Schools and the Social Development p138)

**UNDERSTANDING & VALUING FRAMEWORK THAT DEFINE PUBLIC LIFE**

**Civics Education:** Civics education goes well beyond understanding the three branches of government and voting. It involves enabling students to understand and value the way we have constituted ourselves as a nation, the framework of rights and responsibilities that defines our public life.”(Nord 1995 p346)

If a ...subculture’s most fundamental beliefs about the world are not given voice in the curriculum they are, in effect, disenfranchised much as if they could not vote.”(Nord 1995 p239)

**Is the overall explanatory framework of history in Australia relentlessly secular?**

The National Council for History Standards (USA 1994) standards do not require that students be made aware of religious interpretations of history as the working out of God’s purposes. **It is the conceptual categories used by historians that subtly but substantially influence students’ interpretation of history.** As a result, the religious ideas and values that students encounter in the study of history will lack plausibility because the overall explanatory framework remains so relentlessly secular.

Nord has argued “that it is incumbent of history teachers and texts to make students aware of - and therefore able to think critically about - alternative (religious) ways of making sense of history. (Nord 1995 p385-6)

It is important that students “recognise that practical moral judgements are not made in a cultural vacuum; students need not construct anew a moral world for themselves. They should recognise the extent to which their identities are embedded in historical traditions and see how practical judgements are grounded in interpretations of human nature, history, and worldviews that provide rich resources for moral reflection and direction.” (Nord (1995) p388
Where is a proper understanding of the place of religion essential? p.6

The institutional framework: The role of the churches can be seen in education, health, aged care, social welfare.

The constitution and political life.

The world of work. Union leaders such as WG Spence

Social Justice as it applies in war, to indigenous people, humans rights

Overseas aid and peace movements: Not for profit organisations.

Examples of people and movements motivated by religious conviction can be found in papers on my website.

My leaflet, “Discovering Democracy Kits” is also on my website. It includes examples from the kits demonstrating bias and lack of balance.

These resources, now in all schools, do not capture this religious essence present in so many parts of the framework that makes up Australia’s history. The kits are sorely in need of revision.

It took a bus load of university students in 1965 travelling through New South Wales to highlight appalling Aboriginal conditions. This was a necessary step for many Australians to become aware that there could be a problem, and for some action to slowly take place. A small group of Australians had continually highlighted injustices to appropriate authorities, going through the accepted democratic channels but to no avail. Within twenty years of the bus ride Aboriginal people’s place in Australia’s history had begun to be recognised in schools.

For years attempts to ensure that religious influences are included in Australian history, and the Commonwealth Government’s proposed civics and citizenship education program have been made. Appropriate democratic methods have been used. Letters to members of parliament, petitions, submissions to appropriate government commissions and Boards, arguments based on scholarly work have been presented but to little avail.

Some educators have been delighted that the Freedom Ride for Aborigines has been used in the kit. What imaginative initiative needs to be implemented to ensure that religion is taken seriously in the curriculum?

This Freedom Rider is devoid of fresh ideas. (Freedom Ride Resources)

Do we have to show young Australians, that it is part of the process, that when the democratic approach is inadequate, that more confrontational means are necessary?

A supplement to the present kits would be an easy alternative first step.
References

References have not been included. It is hoped that these will be placed on my website by the end of December 1999. Those who do not have access to the internet are welcome to request a copy of the references.

Details of several references that are not easily obtainable follow.


Dr Nord is director of the Program in the Humanities and Human Values, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill NC 27599 (e-mail:wnord@email.unc.edu). His book Religion and American Education is a comprehensive study of historical, philosophical, constitutional, and pedagogical issues relating to religion and education.

Dr Haynes is Senior Scholar for Religious Freedom at the First Amendment Centre. He was principle drafter of a series of consensus guidelines on religious liberty issues in public schools. He is author of Religion in American History: What to Teach and How (1990) and Finding Common Ground. Fax 0015 1 703 284 2879 (E-mail: chaynes@freedomformum.org)

The Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, Robert Menzies College, PO Box 1505 Macquarie Centre 2113 is a very important reference centre.

Freedom Ride Resources. Some of the Freedom Riders were nurtured and supported by church people, and Jews. Other were non religious of socialist and other persuasions. Each has their own story of their motivations to go on the bus ride. James Farmer, a former divinity student, initiated the American “Freedom Rides”. Some of those participating were Christians, but most were not.

Professor Ann Curthoys History Department Australian National University, is writing a book on the Freedom Ride.

Rev Dr Bill Lawton (1998) Universal Declaration of Human Rights - 50th Anniversary: Paper delivered at HREOC Conference December 1998 [Rector at Darlington]: “Christianity is at root a religion oriented to human existence and human dignity. That this principle has been violated through the centuries does not diminish that Christianity has as its fundamental quality an engagement of God in human destiny.”

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http://www.midcoast.com.au/~alecmils The site includes comments on the Discovering Democracy kits and a version of Hurts Hopes & Heroes which is also in Australian History Teacher 24, 1997.

See EQ Australia Spring 1998 pp42-44 for “Religious values and Australian Democracy”. [The Curriculum Corporation invited me to write the article. Some comments I made on a draft history and frameworks document were included in the Board of Studies report. This is a healthy sign that contrary views are given the opportunity to be expressed.

Subsequent to preparing this paper I became aware of the contents of the Human Society p8 &
Its Environment K-6 syllabus published by the Board of Studies New South Wales in October 1998. This syllabus has given recognition to the role of religion in shaping Australia including the way in which religious beliefs affect decision-making. (HSIE 1998)

Australian Readers Discovering Democracy Middle Secondary Collection November distribution

This commendable collection of factual and fictional texts illustrate civics and citizenship themes. They “were selected for the richness and power of the writing”.

“The aim of ...the Discovering Democracy School Materials Project...is to provide students with materials that will develop the necessary knowledge, skills and values for them to become effective and responsible citizens.” (Australian Readers DD Middle Secondary 1999 p.i)

For many in the Civil Rights Movement, and for many Australian citizens, religious conviction was, and is, an integral part of what equips them to be effective and responsible citizens. Andrew Young, a close associate of Rev Martin Luther King, “says, ‘we all expected to die.’ ‘How could you with a young family?’ “You believe in heaven. I never thought death was the end. And Martin prepared us...and his own children...they showed no bitterness towards his killer.’ ” (Wills, Gary (1990) Under God NY Simon and Schuster)

However in the Discovering Democracy introduction to the segment on the letter from Birmingham Jail by the Rev M L King positive recognition of the role of people of religious conviction in the Civil Rights movement is ignored. There was no mention of the 1000s of church people who turned out to show support for the jailed King and others bringing an end to racial segregation. (Young, A(1989) “MLK: theologian ” in Theology Politics & peace NY Orbis p83)

No mention is made that the Hindu Gandhi’s “tactics of non-violent protest” had been introduced to King by a religious organisation committed to nonviolence, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). When the Montgomery bus boycott began in December 1955, FOR sent Rev Glenn Smiley, a staff worker to persuade King and other leaders to accept fully a non-violent philosophy and strategy. (Swomley JM (1998) Confronting Systems of Violence FOR PO Box 271 NyackNY10960). There was no mention that the idea of the “Freedom Rides” had been developed by James Farmer who had become aware of Gandhi’s techniques at divinity school. Although Farmer decided against the ministry he worked for FOR. With Rev G. Houser’s assistance he organised the Congress of Racial Equality(C.O.R.E). They launched the first nonviolent “sit-ins”.(Swomley)

The extract from Taree NSW Aborigine, Ella Simon illustrates the pain of prejudice and restrictions that she experienced, and she tells that with God’s help, that she was able to forgive her relations who prevented her from attending her father’s funeral. A missionary’s support is also acknowledged. The introduction says that “Ella lived her life according to two belief systems that she found complemented each other - her Christian faith and Aboriginal lore”. This extract illustrates how integral religious faith was to one Australian citizen.

Undermining curriculum with material that includes incorrect information and comment.

A History of Australia in 10 volumes Macmillan Education Australia Nov. 1999 has been “approved by Aboriginal authorities”. However in an early volume on page 32, it misrepresented Rev Richard Johnson, the first chaplain of the colony of NSW. “He was a gentle man and few took much notice of him. Johnson was busy gardening most of the time.”

His biographer leaves a different impression. He was faithful in his liturgical and pastoral ministrations, concerned himself with the education of children, the welfare and evangelisation of Aborigines, farmed with some success. His reputation among the convicts as both a Christian and pastor were very high. (Macintosh NK (1994) in Australian Dictionary of Evangelical Biography Syd. Evangelical
Selection of references to religion in the 1998 NSW K-6 Syllabus

HSIE is the key learning area in which students develop knowledge, understandings, skills, and values and attitudes about people and their social and physical environments.... General religious education is incorporated into the syllabus to assist students to understand the role of religion and spirituality in communities and societies and in the lives of individuals.

Reconciliation

“The content”..recognises the importance of concepts that will support reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, such as the recognition of spirituality and shared heritage.”

“The syllabus...provides opportunities for students...to determine the usefulness, accuracy, reliability and validity of information.” (HSIE 1998 p5-6)

The rationale states that “Through analysing information and values, students can make responsible decisions about social, economic, religious, civic and environmental issues that may affect them now or in the future.” “Studies include perspectives of...people with different religions and belief systems...”

Reference to religion in the syllabus can be seen in the following examples.
Stage 1: “Describes the cultural, linguistic and religious practices of their family, their community and other communities.” (HSIE 20)
Stage 2: “explains the roles played by some significant people...eg Richard Johnson”(HSIEp23)
Stage 3:“
Stage 3: “considers the influence of religion in the development of democracy.” (HSIE 25)
Stage 3: “recognises that Aboriginal Dreaming stories explain the origins of features of the landscape, natural phenomena and ways of caring for the environment.” (HSIE 33)
Stage 1: “identifies the roles and responsibilities of religious workers in the community” (HSIE 36)
Stage 3: “reflect on the ways in which religious beliefs affect decision-making.”(HSIE 37)