

“Mad” bureaucrats censor Jesus Christ

Daily Telegraph 3 March 2005 Page 3.

Some may have observed this article and read of the issue about the use of the term BCE (Before the Common Era) in the Year 7 English Language and Literature Assessment (ELLA). The term carried a foot note so that students who were in any doubt about this term would have the traditional western civilization dating of BC (Before Christ). It was the fourth year that this practice had appeared in either the Basic Skills or ELLA tests.

It appears that this was not good enough for one non-government school where the order of BCE in the text and BC in a footnote was seen as an attempt by secular bureaucrats to further take Christian references from the curriculum, hence the Telegraph headline.

The matter was raised with an opposition member who then raised it in parliament. The media love this sort of moment. Anything to do with conventional use of words, phrases or symbols appeals to their training and so it became the focus of talkback radio and some print media comment. While the media interest was understandable on the grounds of self interest, the general public of adult age, with the exception of those working in the field of history, may have found the BCE dating simply unknown and outside their experience. Where had this new term come from?

The use of the terms BCE and CE are not new. They date back to the 19th Century where there was an attempt to use terms for dating that were not specifically religious. There was no wide spread acceptance of these terms and they were not often used in historical literature. From the late 1960s and especially during the 1990s, secular world views dominated western societies with a belief that religion would become irrelevant as better living standards made religion irrelevant to economically sufficient people.

The wider use of BCE and CE during the 1990s posed a challenge to educators as to when students should be introduced to these terms. The 1998 Human Society and Its Environment K-6 syllabus contained these terms in the Glossary. From 2000, this syllabus was mandatory in government schools and although not included in the mandatory content for each stage of learning, teachers began to use the terms so that students would be familiar with them when they came across them in research and reading. Their inclusion in the Basic Skills, ELLA and SNAP tests with reference to the traditional dating should have posed little problem for students, but for their parents the terms may well have been a mystery.

The revised Years 7-10 History syllabus being implemented in Years 7 and 9 this year contains specific reference to this dating system and to other systems. The very first learn about statement is *the terminology and concepts of historical time, including year, decade, generation, century, age, BC/AD, BCE/CE*. NSW Department of Education and Training resources use either or both. *Belief in Action*, a resource to support general religious education uses exclusively BCE and CE. The religious groups consulted on the drafts did not raise this issue. As Christian educators, do we have a view on this matter?

There is every reason why students should know about different calendars and ways of dating. We don't celebrate Chinese New Year in February because they are a bit slow getting around to it. There are in fact many different calendars and ways of dating and this is why the history syllabus appropriately explores them. While Christians may not want to see Christmas renamed to remove any religious

connection, over the centuries Christians have been good at taking secular or pagan celebrations and giving them their own meaning, including Easter.

In the 1990s secularism had its day with the dominance of post modernism and relative values, but since 11 September 2001 western communities have wanted more certainty about their beliefs and directions. Religion has gained a resurgence and the Christian right in the USA and other western countries has placed pressure on governments to maintain religious symbols and to reject secular symbols that replace traditional Christian markers.

While the Christian Right has every right to make its position known, I would prefer it to select better marks than the use of BCE, with reference to the traditional BC. The Christian Right still needs to learn that “knowing about” does not constitute “belief in”.

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