

Article from Teacher Christian Fellowship of NSW : General religious education: Where is it?

The Education Act 1990 provides for two types of religious education: general religious education (GRE) as part of secular education and special religious education (SRE) (Scripture). GRE is learning about the world's religions, what people believe and how that belief affects their lives and the lives of others. Given the history of Australia it is predominantly Christian but increasingly about other faiths. While SRE is provided by people from outside the school, GRE is provided through the key learning areas.

In the case of primary schools, GRE is well represented, especially within the K-6 Human Society and Its Environment (HSIE) syllabus and, in Government schools, supported by the resource *Belief in Action*. However, what do students in the compulsory secondary years of schooling learn about GRE?

The recent revision of Years 7-10 syllabuses included a mapping by the Office of the Board of Studies (OBOS) of cross curriculum content and, for example, includes environment, civics and citizenship, gender, difference and diversity, key competencies, information and communication technologies. It did not include general religious education. At best, there would be considerable uncertainty about what is included in Years 7-10 syllabuses about GRE.

In the HSIE learning area, history and geography are compulsory subjects in Stages 4 and 5. There are some minor references to religion as part of culture, but nothing that would give any confidence that there would be sustained outcomes in the GRE area. The syllabus to carry studies of religion, as an elective for those who wanted such studies, was to be, *Cultures, societies and identities*. It was prepared by the Board of Studies to replace three existing syllabuses, *Studies of society*, *Asian Social Studies* and *Studies of religion*. These elective subjects have all struggled to find a place in the curriculum of schools.

As reported in the newspapers, the new syllabus, although complete and recommended by the Board of Studies to the Minister, has not been approved by the Minister. Apparently, the Minister has indicated that the important content of this syllabus should be part of the compulsory curriculum. An initial reaction might be to say, good, this will see these three areas of learning strengthen in the compulsory Years 7-10 curriculum. However, the OBOS has completed the revision of Years 7-10 syllabuses and the Minister has already approved the new Years 7-10 History and Geography Syllabuses. It is difficult to know how this matter can now be dealt with.

Since the OBOS began the current revision of Years 7-10 syllabuses in 2001, the world has changed. An Australian community that happily embraced the countries of the world in the 2000 Sydney Olympics has given over to one fearful of others and focused on security. As a community we want greater assurance about what we stand for as a nation. Safety, protection and antiterrorism have replaced a focus on multiculturalism, Reconciliation and global citizenship.

In the light of these changes, our curriculum might already be out of date and the Minister correct in wanting to ensure that a greater focus on cultural and intercultural understanding is embedded into the compulsory curriculum. In this context, a greater understanding of religion, what people believe and how that belief affects their actions and the lives of others, is essential knowledge in a world where, outside the developed nations, life is often more driven by religious than secular beliefs.

For those of us with religious beliefs in secular countries like Australia, it will remain a priority to ensure that studies of religion have a place in the curriculum, not primarily so we can promote our own religious belief, but so that those with secular beliefs can better understand other people in the world, including ourselves.

I am not sure how the OBOS, or the Board itself, are going to deal with this matter but it does pose a significant question that needs to be addressed if the curriculum is to continue to be the driving force in developing young people for tomorrow's world.

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