

Can a religious student study VCE matriculation philosophy?

The Institute for Judaism and Civilization, seeking avenues for allowing harmonies of religious belief with a general education, recently turned its attention to the Victorian matriculation subject "Philosophy". Currently this subject prescribes a number of texts which could be construed as anti-religious, particularly those coming from materialist and nihilist traditions. The subject clearly posed conflicts for students with religious beliefs, as was also reported from the experience of teachers of the subject.

The Institute organized in conjunction with the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority (VCAA) a seminar on this very question, coordinated by the Officer of the VCAA overseeing the subject Philosophy, the Chief Assessor of the subject and a variety of teachers of the subject, who had chosen to attend a seminar on this very question. The Director of the Institute presented a paper exploring responses to or critiques of the prescribed texts from a religious standpoints. The further question was: Could students be taught critique of these texts from the standpoint of faith? The Chief Assessor stated that it was possible for a religious student to critique the texts from the standpoint of his or her own religious beliefs, but that such a student would (a) require a thorough understanding of his or her own faith and (b) be able to respond with a religious critique in philosophical manner. Both of these conditions were generally absent.

The moral of the story seems to be that at an age when children begin to think, if they are not already equipped with a rigorous (reflective and even philosophical) understanding of their own faith they will not be able to deal with ideas which contradict religious belief. This points to the need and entitlement of a child, certainly those who themselves or from their parental home wish this, to be *educated* in the religious tradition with all the rigour of any other subject. See our "Essay".

ESSAY



Recognizing religion and a common spiritual heritage in Australian life

*Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen, Director,
Institute for Judaism and Civilization*

The following is a proposal for a bipartisan motion of the Australian Federal parliament, acknowledging the value of religion in Australian life and proposing that the new National Curriculum find specific ways of acknowledging this. It arises not only from my own involvement with the Organization of Rabbis of Australasia but also from extensive work with a prominent interfaith committee which sought to establish common ground on current political issues.

Reaching out to Australian grassroots spirituality

There is a wall of political correctness, maintained by major segments of the media which protects a dominant materialism, hedonism and secularism in Australia. However this wall is in fact a mirage. One has only to put words out there which touch the grassroots spirituality of Australians and a resonance will be felt which will also pierce and breach that wall. A recent story, showing how the press turned full cycle after a politician had the courage to disregard Press pronouncements and prognoses, and was vindicated by public opinion, carried a succinct moral: politicians are advised not to take policy guidance from the press gallery.

The loss of a moral compass

The courage to bypass mythologies purveyed by the media is required when the moral stakes are high. The biography of a former Prime Minister sets forth the mood felt by many Australians in the 1950s and early 60s. They were launched upon a life which had as its major hallmark values, “family, social stability and optimism”. These are now for many neither realities or even virtues, and the bleak void which replaces them constitutes the stage upon which contemporary youth sets out. For many, the family, as part of a global phenomenon (which does not mean that we are free of responsibility in our own corner of the world), has significantly broken down; what was social stability has entered into a greater flux: what for millennia were stable social institutions and contexts have been overturned by the legislative redefinition of marriage (recasting de facto law in conjunction with a “relationships register” at least), abortion on demand, diminished safety on the streets, IVF commissioning redefining parent and child, drug related crime, racial and cultural conflict. “Optimism” has been replaced by a cultural pessimism and nihilism: there is a flight into hedonism. Government legislation, seeking to justify itself by a perpetual redefinition of human rights, acts to service

and legitimates the trends: the dissolution of commitment in relationships, the attitudes and behaviours which create a market for mass abortion. It does not seek to address the causes of social breakdown, which these laws express, other than to sanitize and service the symptoms. In Victoria, a piece of legislation in its zeal to provide abortion on demand, has produced a clause compelling a GP, on pain of penalty, to be an instrument or an accessory (by referral) to an abortion, which in a multitude of instances, is absolutely contrary to the practitioner’s moral and religious beliefs. The society, and least of all youth, notwithstanding legislative legitimization and servicing of socially degenerate trends, is not a happy one. Even more than the sense of a conflict values, is the sense of a loss of moral reference points: the absence of a “moral compass”.

The significance of religion

The major religious traditions supply a moral compass. Traditional religion, with which about 70% of Australians according to the last census associate, acknowledges a Creator and the mirror of the Creator within the human being, the “soul”. Religion is not only about belief in a Creator and about providence and purpose in creation, traditionally called redemption; it has also to do with steady, objective transcendent values

and these values derive from revelation: they were given by the Creator, not invented by humans. Religion is the source of explicit values which acknowledge revelation as their source; but it is also paradoxically the source of many of (though most certainly not all) the values even of secular, humanist movements. The concept of social justice, of charity, is a concept of religious origin, which has been carried forth by secularist movements which now reject or forget the religious origins of these values. Yet for most of humanity, for whom religion is still (however tenuous) a reality, the effective reason why one does not steal, is not a piece of social contract theory, but because it is believed to be wrong out of an essentially religious context. The commandment not to steal is observed as a consequence of believing in the Creator, Who commanded it. The attitude of so much of modern youth, that one should not steal only because one might not get away with it – one could be caught without a ticket on the train by the inspector - is due to the attrition of a conscious sense of a Creator, in whose presence one is always standing. Religion, on the other hand, is internalized as practical conscience, it motivates to ethical conduct and, as has often been pointed out, is a tremendous

resource for personal transformation.

Religion and state

The separation of religion and state in the Australian and American constitutions was not intended to exclude religiously inspired values from the public square and from observance in public institutions. What it meant was that Government, from the top down, could not prescribe adherence to a particular religion, or require its officers to be of that religion.

Religion, however, as a source of values within the public square, which can well up into social policy, is absolutely legitimate. To the contrary to curtail the expression of religious values in public policy and institutions as these arise in the practice of individuals and political response to the views of individuals, would violate the separation of religion and state. It would install a religion of secularism, which purged religious values from social institutions and social policy.

The entitlement to spiritual literacy

Just as health policy recognizes the needs of the human body, and secular education recognizes the need for training of the mind, so also must there be an acknowledgment of the existence of the human soul and its “education”. Each child is entitled to a developing

understanding of personally experienced religious tradition, in parallel with his or her own intellectual and emotional development. We live in an environment where family breakup impedes the transmission of religious values, beliefs and practices. There is also an information flood, to which the individual adult and child is virtually indiscriminately exposed. Both of these facts entitle the child to a spiritual literacy, the ability to acquire a rich and differentiated consciousness of personally experienced religious tradition and an understanding of how the tradition addresses the myriad challenges from the social, cultural and natural environment. Accordingly, it should be recommended through a bill of the Parliament that the new proposed national educational curriculum should contain an at least elective subject in religion through to matriculation level. This is a subject, which should have a broad enough template, negotiated by the major faith groups, to bring out the common categories and values of religious thought. It should be taught by believers for those wanting to believe or grapple with belief. It should be quite distinct from those subjects – as offered already in various State matriculation subjects – which treat the philosophy of religion, comparative religion, the history of religion or the

sociology of religion; it should not be religion with secular filters, but religion itself, thought about and taught from the experiential interior. It should be education – a “leading out” and an “upbringing” – in the spiritual, from within our shared religious heritage, with all the rigour of any other subject.

It may well be that proponents of atheism and secular ethics will also want to enter this space, as we have seen the latter trialled in NSW primary schools alongside Scriptural religious education. Traditional religion need not be afraid of the competition. Nor should such a proposal for religious studies through to matriculation as an offering within a national curriculum have to fear that it has opened the stage to the extremism and violence taught by certain groups claiming to speak on behalf of a great world religion. To the contrary: the template for this subject (allowing for certain differences of tradition) would have to be worked out together by proponents of the major world religions, with the desideratum of certain basic commonalities including that of coexistence of all human beings. The purpose after all is to articulate a common spiritual heritage, with its individualities and differences, and to find one’s own portion and nurture within it.

The Institute for Judaism and Civilization Inc.

Religion and Aesthetics

A six week course exploring the theoretical and practical relationships between Judaism and the practice of the fine arts. The course will look at traditional and philosophical Jewish perspectives on beauty, halachic considerations in art, several successful religious artistic and literary projects by major Australian artists, and pedagogical issues in the teaching of Jewish content in art.

Instructor: Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen

Texts and materials: a course text will be supplied together with materials illustrating successful projects in contemporary religious Jewish art and literature in Australia

Course cost: \$250 incl GST (concessions available)

Venue: to be advised upon enrolment

Time: Thursday mornings 9-10 am

Course commencement: 18 March with break

for Passover

Enquiries: 9527 5902



Registration: Please fill out and send registration form to the Institute for Judaism and Civilization Inc. 88 Hotham St, East S. Kilda 3183, fax to 9527 5902, or e-mail to director@ijc.com.au by 16 March 2010

Please enroll me in "Religion and Aesthetics"



Name.....

Address.....

.....

Phone(BH).....(AH).....

Mob.....

Email.....

ENCLOSED IS MY: Cheque Money Order

OR CHARGE MY: MasterCard Visa Amex

(Card Number)

Mr. Mrs. Ms. other

Name.....Exp.....

Signature.....