

Christianity has role in learning

David Daintree

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THE draft national curriculum for history opened an exciting prospect.

Here was a chance, I thought, to defend the honour of Christianity amid the cut and thrust of educational theory, pitting myself against the intricate arguments of those who would deny, or at least downplay, the greatness of the influence of Christianity in the unravelling of the great events of the ages.

Yet the compilers of the draft curriculum have chosen the simplest strategy of all: deliberate, pointed, tendentious and outrageous silence. In its 20 pages, the draft ancient history curriculum mentions religion twice. There is no reference to Christianity anywhere in the document.

The draft modern history curriculum is 30 pages long. Christianity is simply never mentioned, at least not explicitly. The word religion appears twice, the first occurrence in the context of Indian history, the second in the context of Asian and African decolonisation. However the precise phrase in which it is found discloses the agenda of the compilers: "The effect of racism, religion and European cultures."

This, surely, is an oblique mention of Christianity and a judgment upon it at the same time.

The English philosopher Roger Scruton took the word oikophobia and gave it a new meaning.

Oikophobia literally means fear of one's own home, but Scruton nicely adapted it to mean "the repudiation of inheritance and home", the contemptuous rejection of everything that one's parents and grandparents respected, fed by the vanity of a new and supposedly enlightened way of looking at the world.

The name of Christianity is particularly odious to those oikophobes for whom the hope of a multinational and God-free world stands in the place of the dream of a promised land. For such people Christianity has brought more misery than relief, more gloom than joy, more war than peace, more hatred than love.

And - let us be honest - they can produce evidence to support all those opinions.

They can point to the massacres of the Crusades, the use of torture and connivance at capital punishment by the Inquisition, the ruthless eradication of the Albigensians, the Thirty Years War, apparent indifference (in some places) to slavery, the treatment of the Jews throughout European history, the fighting in Northern Ireland, the brutish behaviour of certain clergy towards children.

But against that - if they are honest - they will have to acknowledge that all the evil deeds done by men professing themselves Christian have been counterbalanced by all the good things that have been done in the name of Christ.

The systematic care of the poor, the relief of prisoners, the establishment of hospitals, schools and universities, the self-sacrificing saintliness of many clergy, active resistance to the bullying of civil authorities, the amelioration and ultimately the prohibition of slavery, and the improvement of the lot of women (yes, that too) . . . all these things have emerged within a society that has been predominantly Christian.

Even today, in the shadow land of the post-Christian era, there are many who insist on calling themselves Christians still who have abandoned the faith but maintain a firm commitment to what they rightly regard as the "Christian ethic".

Yet the draft curriculum in history avoids all of this. It is almost completely silent on the whole matter of Christianity. It chooses to ignore a worldwide religious movement that has marched with civilisation for 2000 years, infusing it with a morality that has shaped the thinking of the whole of society, including the minds of those who lost the faith but clung to the moral view.

This omission is not just careless, it is staggeringly inept and profoundly dishonest.

What would an honest and inclusive curriculum look like?

It would recognise the enormous influence of religion in the world since late antiquity.

Moreover, being an Australian curriculum, intended for students in Australian schools, it would not pretend to the possibly laudable but utterly impossible task of giving all the world's cultures and religions equal coverage, but will acknowledge that, like it or loathe it, Christianity has been the dominant faith and moral mentor for our nation since white settlement began, that many indigenous people have embraced it too, and that the more recent waves of settlers - including Muslims and Hindus - have scarcely been unaffected by it. It would be good to see our society honestly facing up to the implications of its own heritage, and mature enough to recognise the good alongside the bad, and wise enough to see that amid the imperfections of any human organisation there is much to take pride in.

For believers, though, the reality is that the incarnation of Christ was and is the greatest event in human history, and that this greatness is not simply a matter of degree, but it is a kind of an absolute and ultimate truth by which alone the significance of all other events must be judged.

Many unbelievers cannot but be angered by such assurance, and we should not be surprised or disappointed by a savage response to such claims.

Many of those most bitterly opposed to Christianity have perhaps sensed that we are on the ropes, utterly nonplussed by this apathy, and are determined to continue to wage that kind of war of attrition in the hope that we shall simply and finally melt

away. My suspicion is that some of the framers of the curriculum are driven by such a plan, perhaps consciously, perhaps by instinct.

Many other people of goodwill, non or anti-Christian in their orientation, are willing enough to face us on the field of debate and controversy. Such people may indeed admire and respect aspects of Christianity, while rejecting all or most of its metaphysical tenets.

In many such men and women I think I can see - excuse the presumption - the characteristics of the unconverted St Augustine: all too often they bark against a faith they have not troubled (or have not been able, through the scandal of our failings and our own poor example) to understand.

Clearly it is the best interest of the Christian religion boldly and confidently to face the challenge of those who would with equal confidence contest the veracity and integrity of our claims.

To take the battle vigorously to the critic's gates, to emerge thus from the slough of indifference that now threatens to swallow us, is our best hope.

*Dr David Daintree is president of Campion College Australia. This is an edited version of an essay piece appearing in the forthcoming *The National Curriculum: A Critique*, published by the Institute of Public Affairs and Mannkal Economic Education Foundation.*