

From time to time the question about religious instruction in schools comes up. Although the opponents use all kinds of arguments like 'my child is out in the corridor and feels excluded', at bottom the objection to religious education is an objection to Christianity. All the rest is a muddying of the waters. What these people are saying is 'The teaching of Christianity or any religion in a state school is objectionable to me.' There are other religious groups accredited to teach Special Religious Education but the objection is to teaching any specific religious faith in a secular education curriculum.

On the defence side, there is to my way of thinking a lot of smoke and mirrors too, which does not reflect the main issue. The Access Ministries web site (you can google it) has its response to the question. First they say that far from being unwanted, most of the SRI is welcomed by principals and teachers in primary schools. This was my experience in Bulleen. The way I presented myself gave the teachers and children a chance to see that Christians did not have two heads and once they got to know me, it was possible to introduce members of staff to the ways of the Church in a way that made sense.

Second, the web site says that the large majority of Australians are in fact 'believers': that is, they identify with one form of religion or another. It makes sense then that these religions be taught as part of Children's education. This argument flies in the face of the opponents' claims that Australia is a secular society. My experience here in Alexandra is that that belief is a passive thing. It is like the 'wilderness': everyone wants to know its there and to keep it, but not many people go or put money into

keeping it there directly.

But for my money, the question about Special Religious Education in Schools has to do with the idea of Christian Initiation and what people who oppose SRI call 'proselytising.'

Here is what Daniel Stevick says in his book about adult baptism 'Christian initiation in a highly secularised society will not be dominated by motifs of growth, but by motifs of decision. Becoming a Christian does not embed one in today's culture, but separates one from it. In baptism one joins a community of pilgrims and strangers'

John Westerhoff 111 has written about the ways in which, previously, the society at large has provided supports for Christian faith by providing space and time in which people could go to Church. These are being steadily eroded, but the Church has not responded by lifting its own level of commitment. In the early days of Christianity, Church was put on around the demands of a secular world 'Very early on the first day of the week' as the Bible says, but but people were thoroughly taught the faith, and their lives were examined as they were initiated into this new way of love.

These days we function without much initiation into the faith. We have people who 'attend' and people who 'volunteer' and this is understood by the rest of society because it looks like the Lions Club or Rotary or the Lodge.

So I think that if we could become an evangelising, catechising and baptising community, we could well do away with Religious Education in Schools, because we would be doing adult initiation, including the children of these adults within the

framework of Church life. That would make the Church look closely at how it is a witness to God in Christ, and how people are initiated into this mystery. My emphasis here is on inviting the Church to be herself more and more.

But there is one very serious reason why I think it is important that SRI remains in schools. I am thinking of other places where the 'separation' motif dominates. Some people who have gone on to become terrorists, have done so because they have spent a lot of time in the 'Madrasahs' where their contact with other members of society has been limited. It is possible then to become more and more extreme in one's views because these are the only views to which one is exposed.

Christianity does not say 'God so loved his own and *hated* the world that he extracted them from the world so that they might become purer and purer'. But instead 'God so *loved* the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have the life of the Age to Come.'

Our job is to be drawn ever deeper into the reality of Christ, but also in love, to be ever more engaged with the World. That is why it is important for me to roam the town. That is why it is important for us to have the community kitchen and garden. It is in the rubbing up against difference that we learn love. It is in having dinner parties with people who are 'not like us' that we learn to know them not as 'types' or 'stereotypes' but as human beings. That is why we need Religious Education in Schools.

Even the people who are wanting to get religious education out of schools are demonstrating a kind of isolationist mentality. There is noth-

ing that causes misunderstanding and potential long term conflict than groups of people sitting in different camps that have nothing to do with one another.

It belongs to the essence of Christianity to be an engaging religion. We are not a group of people with a circle drawn around us, but a group of people who are formed into a 'body' in the first place by our own interaction and initiation into Christ. But this process of 'going out in love' to have the conversation about God and to demonstrate what our God is like is not an added extra, but part of the centre of the faith. Connecting with lots of different people does us all good.

So my argument about Religious Education in the state schools goes both ways. I think that the Church should pay more attention to its own processes of initiation, and stop relying on the State to give us the chance to sprinkle a light dusting of Christianity on an otherwise uncaring populace. But at the same time, for the sake of the good order of the state in which we live, I think that Christianity as well as atheism and agnosticism need to be rubbing up against one another so that differences can be negotiated on the basis of knowledge and human contact. Remember: every group that has no knowledge of other groups says 'They eat babies'

Your 'Companion on The Way' and Priest



Paul Dalzell.

