



DIALOGUE AUSTRALASIA

# BECOMING FULLY HUMAN

A new academic approach to  
Religious and Values Education  
in Australia and New Zealand

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DIALOGUE AUSTRALASIA is a non-profit making journal dedicated to improving the standards of Religious and Values education in the curriculum of Australian and New Zealand schools. It is published twice a year and is intended for teachers and year 11 to 13 pupils. It contains articles written by front rank academics and others dealing with topical issues in:

1. The theory of ethics and current problems (such as genetic engineering (human, animal and plant), genetic testing, IVF, euthanasia, virtue ethics, natural law, crime and punishment, just war, social ethics),
2. The philosophy of religion (including different understandings of God, arguments for and against God's existence, miracles, prayer, different understandings of what it is to be a person and life after death, the problem of evil and innocent suffering)
3. The Hebrew and Christian scriptures including the latest Biblical scholarship, different ways of understanding truth claims about the biblical stories, the interests of the gospel writers and the historical situation in which the bible stories were written.
4. World religions including Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Aboriginal spirituality.
5. Science and Religion including the origins of the Universe, the Gaia hypothesis, Stem Cell research, Germ Line and Somatic cell genetic engineering, chaos theory and its implications.

Every issue of DIALOGUE AUSTRALASIA has a review of a recent film showing how it can be used in the classroom (recent films covered include The Matrix, Contact and Groundhog Day).

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The editors of Dialogue Australasia are: Dr. Beverly Zimmerman (CEO, Newcastle); Rowan Swaney (Geelong Grammar School); Debbie Stevens (Genetic ethics advisor to the Bishop of Wellington) and Dr. Peter Vardy. The editorial committee includes Chris. Gleeson sj (chair), Murray Evans, Alyson Groom, John Inverarity, John Pill, Paul Sheahan, Andrew Syme.

# BECOMING FULLY HUMAN

## Towards a new approach to Religious and Values Education

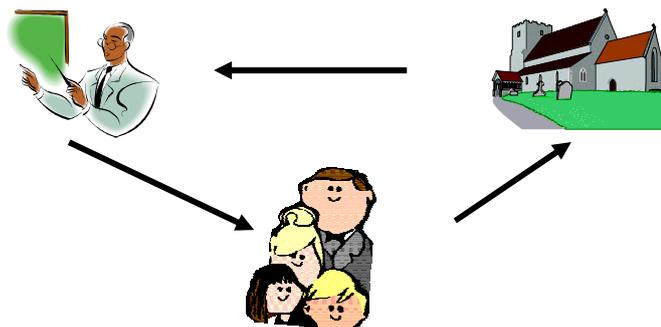
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Schools offer parents many attractive features - a high academic standard is crucial and any parent paying for independent education will expect that the school will get as much as possible out of each child irrespective of ability. Music and sport are important as well as a wide range of extra-curricula activities. However other factors are required and in Britain, and now in Australia, there is an increasing emphasis on spiritual and values education. Parents who may themselves have little in the way of spiritual understanding or religious commitment are often keen that their children should be educated into sound values and an understanding and appreciation of a religious perspective on life. Many independent schools lay considerable stress on values education and see this as not only being part of their ethos but also providing a 'marketing edge'.

Words like 'spirituality', 'values' and 'religious education' can sometimes be divisive, although their importance is recognised by most parents. - their meanings are not clear and people differ as to how these terms are to be understood. However underlying them is the claim that there is more to being fully human than simply the acquisition of knowledge and that part of the task of education is to help young people to 'become more fully human'. This is not easy to define - but most teachers will recognise its importance. St. Augustine said that no-one could define time, but everyone knew what it was. It is rather like this with educating people to become fully human. Unless this is addressed within the curriculum, there is a real danger of a crucial element being omitted from the lives of young people. This is not easy to do well. Schools now have pupils who are born as the result of IVF - times are changing rapidly and sensitivity is required in dealing with complex and sometimes controversial areas.

The present concentration on material things and, perhaps more important, on physical perfection which we may soon be able to aim for through the use of genetic manipulation, masks a dangerous trend to ignoring a much more important part of what it is to be human. This was recognised by Aristotle and by great Christian thinkers such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas but is also recognised in all the major religious traditions including Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism. There is a potential for human beings to fulfil which goes considerably beyond physical characteristics and schools which do not specifically set out to develop this potential may be missing the most important part of education.

Even within schools with a proclaimed religious commitment, the old ways of inculcating young people into a religious tradition simply do not succeed - even if they were considered desirable. Research in Catholic schools in New South Wales in Australia shows that the number of Catholic children educated at Catholic schools who continue to attend mass once they leave school is less than 4%. In Australia, many young people feel no need for God and consider religion to be largely irrelevant in their lives. Fifty years ago there was a mutually reinforcing triumvirate:



The school/Church/family triumvirate has now largely broken down and this needs to be recognised in schools. The approach of many young people to moral issues may be based on the maxim 'Anything goes provided you don't hurt anyone'. Tolerance is the new god and, whilst tolerance of others is obviously good, it can mask the distinction between truth and falsity, right and wrong and any opinion can seem as good or as valuable as any other. This is to deny the great history of Western critical thought which has valued a search for wisdom, truth and understanding. There is, in many schools, an implicit, and sometimes explicit, assumption of radical relativism. This is a post-modern assumption which, without being identified, permeates the lives of many young people. A major contributory factor to this attitude is the poor quality of much religious education which, in some schools, has not changed significantly for more than twenty years. In Australia, this is partly a legacy from the 1872 Victorian Education Act, and corresponding Acts in other States, which said that Australian education should be 'secular, compulsory and free'.

In addition, Australia has one of the highest rates of youth suicide in the world and many young people feel a sense of meaninglessness. Life can seem, to some, to lack any point. Any search for meaning and truth has become almost a dirty word by the time some young people reach Grade 9 - although younger children retain their innocence and sense the importance of a search for truth and understanding. The curriculum is becoming more and more crowded, students have less time for reflection and the demands on them increase all the time.

A survey was conducted of religious education in schools in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria which looked at the qualifications of those teaching, the curriculum content and the time allocation in the curriculum. Catholic schools came out as clear leaders on any objective assessment of time and resource commitment with almost all Catholic schools having a minimum of four periods of R.E. a week - what is more, most of these schools had specialist teachers who often held postgraduate diplomas or degrees in theology or R.E.. Lutheran schools came second with 2 to 3 periods, Uniting Church Schools had about 2 periods and Anglican schools averaged 1.2 periods a week. Few Anglican schools had qualified staff other than Chaplains who taught R.E.. Almost no state school had R.E. as a significant part of the curriculum (as would be expected following the 1872 Act although there is variation between States with Queensland possibly being slightly more active in this area than any other state).

- The Anglican Lambeth Conference, which brings together Anglican bishops from all over the world every ten years, maintains that at the heart of Anglican Christianity lies a 'fearless love of truth'.
- Catholic theology has always walked hand in hand with philosophy. It has made considerable use of philosophers such as Aristotle and has always emphasised the importance of sound philosophical thinking in any understanding of morality or theology. Indeed the very word 'catholic' means universal and the breadth of the Catholic tradition is one of its major strengths which, today, is not always recognised in some quarters.
- Evangelical Christianity takes seriously a sound understanding of the Bible which goes beyond the superficial and Luther and Calvin both used reason to argue carefully and forcefully against their opponents.
- Judaism has always prized itself on the sound academic thinking lying behind rabbinic reflection on the Torah and
- Islam had, at least in the middle ages, a profound respect for philosophy.
- Buddhism has always made clear the importance of an individual search for truth and urges people to see through the illusion of appearance to try to understand the truth that lies beneath.

It seems fair to say, therefore, that philosophy and the use of reason are central parts of all the major religious traditions - although it must be accepted that there are still those who see R.E. as educating children into their own view of the truth and who resist the idea of open-minded questioning which is essential to personal development.

In the last fifteen years, Religious and Values education in Britain has been transformed. R.E. is now a compulsory part of the curriculum from years 1 to 11 in the state sector. The number of children choosing to take GCSE in R.E. at 16 and 'A' level at 18 is showing a rapid increase. Teachers qualified in Theology or Theology and Philosophy are now common with an increasing number choosing to study for Masters degrees in these subjects. This transformation has resulted in an increase in curriculum time; greatly improved resources and innovative teaching methods.

It is suggested that the time has come for schools to re-examine their Religious and Values Education programmes to produce a vision that:

1. Is distinctively Australian or New Zealand orientated
2. gives real insights into key areas of religious belief,
3. Is academically sound and relevant to children, and
4. Is acceptable to parents

There is also a need for well qualified staff and for proper reporting on Religious and Values education - just as for any other subject area. Dialogue Australasia and the Dialogue Australasia network are committed to fostering these objectives and to helping teachers develop the skills and resources to improve the standard of teaching.

#### 1) A new way forward

A new vision for Australian and New Zealand Religious and Values education has recently been adopted by a number of significant AHISA schools in all Australian states and, more recently, in New Zealand. This is called the 'Five Strands' approach. These strands were first outlined at a national conference of Heads of Independent schools held at Geelong Grammar School in September 1997 and were further explored in conferences for Heads of Curriculum, Heads of R.E. and R.E. teachers held in Adelaide, Brisbane, Cairns, Hobart, Launceston, Melbourne, Newcastle, Sydney, Toowoomba, Perth, Auckland and Wellington from 1998 to 2002. In July/August 2001, conferences bringing together science and religion teachers were held in all Australian states. The first national conference was held in Canberra in April 2002 and the second conference is planned for Melbourne in April 2003.

The 'Five Strands' are intended to provide the basis for a planned curriculum extending from Prep to year 12. The magazine DIALOGUE AUSTRALASIA has now been published for five years and subscriptions come from schools across Australia and now New Zealand - this brings together major writers in the fields outlined below to improve the standards of teaching and also to be a resource for both teachers and students.

The 'Five Strands' approach puts forward a structure covering five themes which can be developed by each school to form the curriculum base for each school's Religious and Values Education programme from Year 1 to Year 12. Each school will need to develop these strands according to its curriculum, traditions, ethos and strengths. Schools vary, and any attempt to impose a curriculum from 'on top' or from outside is doomed to failure. The strands are as follows:

**STRAND ONE:** An appreciation of the Bible and Christian tradition (including the tradition of the individual school).

Biblical Studies has been neglected in schools yet the Hebrew and Christian scriptures underlie much great literature. Without an understanding of these scriptures, it may be difficult to fully appreciate Shakespeare, Dante and much European literature and history as well as a great deal of art and classical music.

Biblical education would include detailed examination of selected stories from the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. Children need understand how God has been seen to be at work within human history within the monotheistic traditions. The Scriptures are central to the faith of all Christians, Muslims and Jews and underpin many of the values in Australian society. The main stories in the Hebrew scriptures (The Old Testament) need to be understood as they represent defining moments in Israel's understanding of God. In some cases, different interpretations found within varying religious groups are significant today (for instance the story of Abraham who is looked to by Christians, Jews and Muslims - albeit in different ways).

The Christian Gospel narratives need to be introduced and examined with progressive understanding as pupils move through the school, with particular stress on these stories from Prep. to year 8. A spiral approach is needed so that students return to the stories at progressively higher year levels. The level of understanding at age 6, 10 and 17 is not the same in Science, English or Mathematics - nor should it be the same in Religion. Stories such as Jonah and the whale, Jacob and the many coloured coat, David and Goliath or Samson are delightful for Years 1 and 2 but frequently, even if these stories are taught, the level of understanding rarely progresses beyond these levels.

If Biblical stories are to have any relevance to young people their complexity must be explained and evaluated. These are sophisticated stories so it is essential that students appreciate the 'depth grammar' involved and that 'truth' may be communicated through story without all stories necessarily being literally true. Metaphor, analogy, symbol and art are important in appreciating recent Biblical scholarship hence the need for a spiral approach in the curriculum returning to the stories at different stages in the educational process.

Australia's roots lie in the Christian tradition and an insight into this tradition together with its doctrines, creeds and places of worship is suggested. Contrasts between Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Uniting Church views need both exploring and understanding. Within denominational schools, stress may be placed on particular features of the tradition - for instance Catholic schools stress the teaching of the Church, the Catechism and Sacraments. Some young Australians may never have even entered a Church and may not appreciate the significance of its many features and layout. It may also be considered desirable to have knowledge of key figures in Christianity from St. Francis, Aquinas, John of the Cross, Thomas More, Teresa of Lisieux, Mary MacKillop, Martin Luther King to Nelson Mandela.

#### STRAND TWO: Ethics and Values education

Young people face greater ethical dilemmas than ever. The challenges of somatic cell and germ line genetic engineering, designer babies and genetic testing are amongst a range of issues which will change the lives of the next generation. Young people need to be able to address these issues.

The term 'values education' in many schools is broadly interpreted to include issues such as bullying, discrimination, tolerance and social justice - yet this needs extending. Pupils need intellectual space to explore different approaches as a means of evaluating ethical issues. Values education should both be theoretically based (including the difference between Divine Command Theory, Natural Law, Proportionalism, Situation Ethics, Utilitarianism, Emotive Ethics and Virtue Ethics) and issue related. Children may be aware that different religious denominations<sup>1</sup> have different attitudes to some key moral issues, but without understanding the underlying theoretical positions, they will not be able to compare, contrast and evaluate the differences effectively.

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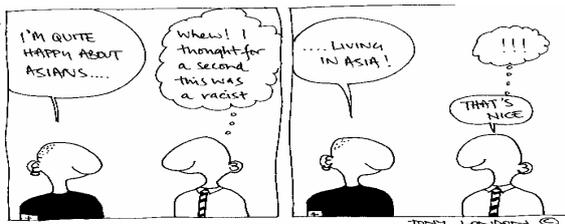
<sup>1</sup>For instance the importance of the Aristotelian/Thomist tradition of Natural Law underlying Roman Catholic Natural Theology or the Biblical/ Situational and Contextualist approach found in recent Uniting Church documents.

Specific issues to be covered, at pre-determined age groups, might include racism, crime and punishment, abortion, euthanasia, medical ethics, genetic engineering, just war thinking, social justice issues, relationships, sexuality (including homosexuality), business ethics and the issue of animal rights and environmental ethics. Young Australians will have to grapple with the complexities of these issues when they enter the adult world and they need to be given the intellectual tools to engage with today's or tomorrow's problems at a level that goes beyond the superficial or emotive.

**STRAND THREE:** To introduce young people to central areas in Philosophy of Religion This includes arguments for and against the existence of God; an understanding of God's omnipotence and omniscience; what it means to talk of 'Eternal Life'; the philosophic problems raised by the idea of survival of death and the problem of evil and innocent suffering. The holocaust can be dealt with in an intellectual framework which provides a broad understanding of the challenge presented by innocent suffering for many religious believers. The challenge of Ivan Karamazov (in Dostoyevsky's 'The Brothers Karamazov') against God could be contrasted with the position of Job. Ivan Karamzov rejects God because he maintains that a world where innocent children have to suffer is not a world that can be justified - no matter what the final aim of creation may be. After tragedies such as the holocaust, Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia or even the Port Arthur massacre, young people cannot fail to be aware of the tension between belief in a wholly good and all powerful God and the undoubted reality of evil. They need to be given the opportunity to think through the consequences of this tension in an intellectual framework that takes the issues seriously whilst also encouraging freedom of thought.

The issue of truth should be examined with young children moving from a very concrete, black and white understanding to an increasing appreciation of the sophistication of the issues raised. Issues of truth underlie discussions in science, history, English and many other subjects and the curriculum should help to make these links and to begin to question whose truth is being proclaimed. In the teenage years, the curriculum can help pupils think through the challenges posed by feminism and postmodernism as well as the broad assumption of meaninglessness which underlies some of contemporary society

**STRAND FOUR:** To help young people to become familiar with the main World Religions



Australia is now a multi-cultural society with a wide variety of religious traditions. Our country is set in the Pacific basin and has trading links with countries with widely different belief systems. A real appreciation and understanding of alternative faith perspectives is vital as this may be a necessary pre-cursor to tolerance and acceptance of the position of others. R.E.

should provide children with an understanding of the beliefs of the main world religions and an empathy for what it means to belong to these religions - in particular Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism as well as the sophistication of aboriginal beliefs. The cultural heritage that accompanies these religious movements also needs study. Too often, young Australians have scant understanding of the religious perspectives of others and therefore do not take them seriously. It is all too easy to teach world religions badly - as will be made clear below.



Part of the task of teaching world religions should be to minimise the degree of prejudice held by pupils. A survey undertaken through NSW schools by the Australian Catholic University revealed considerable evidence of prejudice. Pupils aged 18

were interviewed in 1995 and the following percentages said that they would be unwilling to live next to the groups named below:

Criminal background	52.1%
Asians	20.8%
Buddhists	6.3%
Homosexuals/Lesbians	20.8%
Elderly people	12.5%
Unemployed	10.4%

The level of prejudice increased after two years study for the NSW 'Study of Religions' papers - this may reflect on the way the material is presented and any school will have to be sensitive to this. Prejudice is often based on poor information and a lack of understanding and a sound curriculum, sensitively applied, should seek to minimise these reactions. To teach, for instance, World Religions by looking at 'festivals' is a very poor way to approach the subject. If, for instance, one was teaching Buddhist or Muslim children about Catholicism, then studying the festivals which mark Saints days in Latin America or Spain is unlikely to provide a great deal of insight into the complexities and intellectual depth of the religion studied! There is a need to develop in young people an empathy and real understanding of the profundity of great world religions to avoid children resorting to stereotypes.

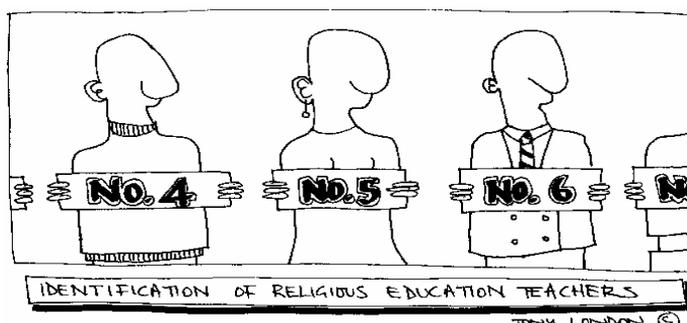
On some occasions in the past, Australians have often neglected Aboriginal religious and cultural heritage and a more nuanced approach needs to be attempted at different stages in the school emphasising the Aborigine understanding of the transcendent and aspects of their religion (such as care for the environment and spirituality) from which all Australians can learn. It must be accepted that it is not easy to give a real understanding and appreciation of aboriginal culture. Sensitivity and skill will be needed to help children to understand the complexity of aboriginal culture as well as the difficult social problems they face today and the challenge to chart a constructive way forward. There are no simple answers and the challenge may well be to help children obtain a developing understanding of the complexity of some of the issues that racism raises including issues of social justice, economic welfare, employment, etc.

**STRAND FIVE:**

To provide children with an appreciation of the value of stillness.

The Affective approach seeks to redress the imbalance when education solely stresses the cognitive. In the 1970s, some Philosophers of Education stressed the idea of 'Rational Autonomy' as an educational aim, but emphasis on this alone can develop the rational side of human nature at the expense of the emotional and affective, closing people off to religious possibilities. Religious education touches on issues of life and death, God and evil, sexuality and relationships, marriage and divorce in a way unmatched by other disciplines. However religious education does not simply transmit knowledge, but also explores the implications of the central claims for each individual. This can give an alternative perspective to materialism and help students to gain inner confidence and to recognise the value of silence, gentleness, compassion, concern for others and personal responsibility as well as achievement, success, recognition and reputation. Many young Australians' lives are filled with noise (CD player, video, television, computer game and so forth) making the ability to be still more important than ever. Through this, they may come to know themselves and to find peace an increasingly valuable part of their lives.

Australia is an increasingly materialist society where a attitude is accepted and anything is permitted does not hurt others. Life adults and children is frenetic. There is a want to 'keep children avoids them getting into



secular and laissez-faire where almost provided it for both increasingly tendency to busy' as this mischief. 'The

devil makes work for idle hands to do' may be implicit in many teachers thinking. However a central dimension of religion is that it affects an individual's subjectivity and that time is needed for silence and reflection. The word 'meditation' has acquired an unfortunate aura and there is no suggestion that this should be introduced into the curriculum but it is essential that the spiritual side of pupils is taken seriously. In Britain, stillness is a compulsory part of the National Curriculum from Years 1 to 11.

If this approach is adopted, teachers will, over a period of time, need to be trained in the use of stillness and silence in the classroom, although in some schools it is likely that some teachers will already be using these techniques. Initially this training may be by 'in-service' days. Those teachers who have a real interest in this subject area can be sought whilst being careful to ensure that this interest does not mark a desire to indoctrinate children with a particular viewpoint at the expense of others.

There are many ways in which stillness can be fostered but they will include the use of music, art, icons and (see below) the Australian Bush. However young people should be enabled to develop the capacity to be 'still' even when in the middle of noise and busyness. There are great opportunities in the Australian bush for this process to begin. To stand on top of a high peak and look out over the mountains after a night spent on a solo expedition is a profound and moving experience which can stay with young people throughout their lives and challenge their existing views of the world. Such 'bush experiences' are a valuable part of Australia's heritage which are too often neglected and ignored in a society which seems to prize activity above reflection.

In religious and values education young people can be helped to express their own ideas without fear of censure or ridicule. A key assumption underlying the 'Five Strands' approach is that under no circumstances should ideas or beliefs be imposed on children. Rather they should be taught to value the search for truth and meaning and should be tolerant of alternatives viewpoints and willing to listen to opinions markedly different from their own. Religious faith should be seen as a result of a personal quest where the journey itself is central and there should be room for ambiguity and doubt.

## 2. Staffing

Teachers in the field of Religious and Values Education will, in part, be concerned to help young people engage with the issues, to develop understanding and to argue well. This goes far beyond simply getting young people to think for themselves - it also means aiming to get them to 'think well', to be able to analyse presuppositions and assumptions and to understand alternative perspectives other than their own. In these areas, assessment, grading and reports are essential and as desirable as with all other subjects. However as the teaching remit extends beyond the cognitive, it must be accepted that some teaching objectives in Religious and Values Education cannot be easily assessed. The idea that the only education worthy of the name is education that can be assessed or examined objectively needs to be resisted. Teachers should ideally strive for a broader vision which incorporates the affective dimension and values the importance of the individual. Pupils should feel that in Religious and Values Education classes every pupil is equally valued and her or his opinions sought and treated seriously.

In Australia, two Universities are likely to have in place by April 2002 a postgraduate Diploma and a Masters degree in covering the key areas proposed under the Five Strands approach.

## 3. General

Spirituality and the drive to help young people to become more fully human should touch all parts of life and cannot therefore be isolated from the values and ethos of the school. A 'whole school' approach to this area is vital as are cross-curricula links. A cross-curricular approach should be encouraged wherever possible and it will be necessary to develop resources within the school to this end. Mathematics, Biology, Physics, Music, Geography, Business Studies, History, English and other areas can all be relevant to issues dealt with by good R.E. - provided, that is, that the teachers are aware where links may be made. This emphasises the need for co-

operation between departments in a school and for clear leadership by the Head in terms of the desirability of such links.

The 'Five Strands' approach is, in a way, not new as many of the issues dealt with in these strands will already be in the curriculum of schools. However the attraction of this approach is that it provides a curriculum model to help teachers to decide precisely what is to be dealt with in each year. Each school will need to make its own decision, although the role of Advisors is vital in helping schools to think through the alternatives and to develop the cross curricula links that are needed.

The issue of resources needs to be addressed if this approach is to be seriously considered. It is highly desirable to build up a resource centre to include a wide range of books, posters, charts, videos and, ideally, relevant newspapers cuttings as well, of course, as developing lists of appropriate Internet sites.

#### 4. The role of the Head

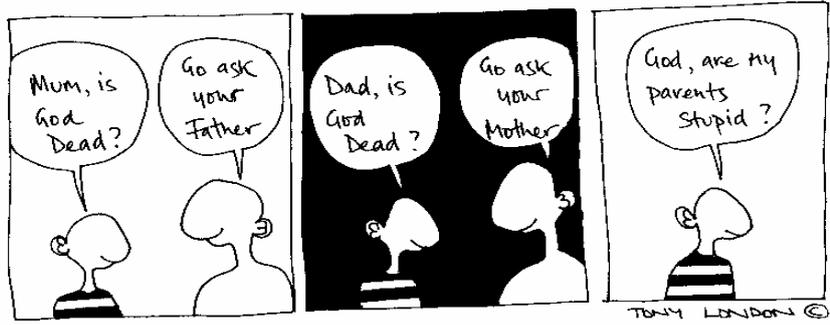
None of the changes needed in the teaching of Ethics and Spirituality will happen in any school unless the Head of the School is convinced. Unless the Head feels passionately that Values and Spiritual education matters in the school and that there is more to being human than passing examination and being successful on the sports field then the school will not generate the energy and enthusiasm needed for change to take place. The need for professionalism in this area, extending across the curriculum, is going to have resource and curriculum implications which will require a changed culture to in which such teaching can take place. The reason the new approach has generated such widespread interest has been almost entirely due to the support of significant AHISA heads in all States in Australia - and now in New Zealand. The involvement of the Head is essential as this approach does not simply raise curriculum and staffing issues but, as already referred to, there will be resource and training implications as well.

#### 5. Conclusion

Too often the search for meaning and an ethical approach to life is seen by young people as irrelevant to the modern world whilst religion is often dismissed as a matter of primitive beliefs which are immune from rational debate. This impression must be countered if spirituality or the search for meaning and values (which may, of course, be found through humanism or some non-religious perspective on life) on which young lives can be based is to be taken seriously. The Five Strands approach suggests that the best way to achieve this is to help young people to think through issues for themselves and to probe their intricacies. It is also recognised, however, that new and imaginative teachings styles may have to be introduced.

Religious education should also seek to produce a change of attitude by pupils who may live in a world dominated by the media and by materialism. It should also seek to take seriously the traditional values for which the school has always stood: Courtesy; concern for those less fortunate; an unwillingness to be proud; a willingness, where appropriate, to admit weakness and vulnerability and a commitment to friends, family and the wider community are all values which religious education should foster. However a wider dimension should also be recognised which Václav Havel, poet, playwright, philosopher and now president of the Czech Republic, describes as bringing people to 'live in the truth' combining integrity, personal responsibility and a sense of duty to God or whatever is considered ultimate in one's life.

Many parents feel that one of their main motives for choosing a school is so that the values side of education can be taken really seriously and there will be few parents who, if the new approach is carefully explained, will not be enthusiastic supporters. There has been ample evidence for this already with the schools who have taken this approach on board receiving strong support from their parent bodies. Of course there will be some who feel that the task of a school is simply to inculcate children into their own prejudices but these are likely to be a small minority.



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