

Freedom from Religion

Clay Nelson © 1 March 2015

Last Monday I spent six hours at the Human Rights Commission in a mediation that ultimately seeks to abolish religious instruction in public schools. It is known as “Bible in Schools.” I joined David Hines, a member of this congregation, and three others to engage three members of the Ministry of Education. While to actually abolish religious instruction will require a law change, the hope going in was to seek policy changes that would make the programme less onerous in the meantime. While the proceedings are confidential, I can say the meeting was positive overall and promising, but far from conclusive. Much work still needs to be done.

Each of us who participated expressed different motivations for being there. The two most moving were by parents of young children who have been targeted and bullied by staff, teachers and peers for having opted out of the programme. One mother told of enrolling her child in a local public primary school where no mention was made that there was religious instruction. After some weeks their five-year old daughter came home repeating Christian doctrine. Things she would tell them were: “Somebody came to our class to talk about God.” “Today we learnt about Jesus.” “Today we learnt how the world was created by God.” Perhaps the most troubling day was when she came home from school saying she wanted to meet God and asking her parents to attend church.”

The mother went to the teacher to get answers, who explained that it was the school’s “Values in Action” programme and that it was not “religious.” “It just happens to use Bible stories to demonstrate values.” She was prepared to accept this answer but her partner was more sceptical and increasingly concerned that this programme was inappropriate. The issue became a source of tension between them.

Finally, to reassure her partner, she attended a “Values in Action” class. She did not find what she expected but a very evangelical presenter who at one point threw her hands up in the air in good televangelist fashion and called Jesus a hero. At that point she conceded her partner was right and they removed their daughter from the classes.

This upset their daughter who had to go to what her friends called the “naughty room.” She promised her parents she wouldn’t be naughty any more if they would let her go be with her friends. They felt under pressure to put her back in the class. They eventually would take time from work to take their daughter out of school during the class to protect her from being mistreated. That did not fully resolve the issue. While packing up at the end of Bible class, the volunteer would target their daughter and impart such ideas as:

People who have children should be married (her parents weren’t).

People of the same sex should not be allowed to get married.

The earth is 6000 years old.

Dinosaurs never existed.

She was also encouraged to evangelise her family.

Shortly after my arrival in New Zealand I was made aware of the Bible in Schools programme. Coming from a country founded on the importance of separation of church and state (no matter what the Tea Party and the likes of Pat Robertson say to the contrary), I was quite taken by surprise that such a programme existed in our public schools. I knew such a programme violated at least the spirit of New Zealand’s Bill of Rights and was clearly contrary to the human rights act that promotes freedom of religion, which requires freedom from religion. I was mystified how a Sunday school class that would be more at home in a conservative Evangelical church became

common place in many public schools in a country where nearly half of its citizens indicated in the last census no religious affiliation.

It didn't start out that way. The Education Act of 1877 established that primary school education would be "free, secular and compulsory" in New Zealand. This did not sit well with conservative Christians who wanted religious observances in school and their form of Christianity taught. They maintain to this day that secular did not mean anti-Christian but anti-denominational because of the rivalry between Christian religions since colonial days. They formed the Bible in Schools League to push for a change to the Education Act. Between 1877 and 1935, 42 bills were placed before parliament calling for the inclusion of religious exercises and Bible readings as a part of the curriculum in schools. The battle for keeping public schools secular was extremely polarising. In 1912 The Observer newspaper published a cartoon showing a fine upstanding secular state schoolteacher being held at gunpoint by a member of the Bible in Schools League. The gun is labelled Act of Parliament. He's saying, "Either you drop your conscience or your living!" Secular education was under threat from religion. If the proposed Act had been passed there was a legitimate concern that teachers might have been dismissed, or may have been denied appointment if they refused to give religious instruction.

The Education Act of 1964 was intended to resolve this debate in a pragmatic way by legalising what is called the Nelson System (I confess I find its name a little embarrassing). This system allowed for the "closing" of schools so that volunteers (not qualified teachers) can teach Bible in Schools under the guise of being values education. It also let the Ministry of Education drop responsibility for what had become a hot potato. Essentially the Act set in stone the polarisation. From then on secular has come to mean having nothing to do with religion and furthermore being hostile to it and religious education is now equated as the "Bible in Schools." It established the conservative Christian position as normative, confirming the privileged status of Christianity in New Zealand by legitimising confessional Christian instruction in state schools.

The curricula for these classes are developed, maintained and promoted by the Churches Education Commission (or CEC), which is the former Bible in Schools League. I have to hand it to them. The materials I've seen are slickly produced. They are values-oriented and age-appropriate, but they are clearly evangelical and designed to proselytise our primary age children. After I lent my name to the Secular Education Network action to end Bible in Schools in 2012, the media quickly came knocking. How could an Anglican priest be against teaching the Bible in schools? After one interview on TV One's Breakfast programme I was inundated by hostile email and phone calls. One correspondent who was a Bible in Schools volunteer ecstatically referred to the schools as being "a rich mission field." I couldn't pass up a gift horse. I, of course, made the media aware of it. Simon Greening, the head of the CEC, followed me the next day on TV One to say that the volunteer had been chastised--I believe for his honesty. He had let the cat out of the bag.

In 2006, staff at the Ministry of Education made an attempt to mitigate the worst abuses in the Nelson system by developing new policies that included requiring all parents to be fully informed about the curriculum being taught and requiring them to opt their child into Bible in Schools, not "out" as is presently the case. We have learned through requests to the Official Information Act that shortly before the proposed policy changes were to be announced they were withdrawn after the Minister of Education received a letter from two Anglican Archbishops, David Moxon and Brown Turei, denouncing the changes. It is not surprising, as Anglicans are members of the ecumenical Churches Education Commission. But the first Anglican

bishop of New Zealand, George Selwyn, might have been surprised. Selwyn was opposed to New Zealand having an established church and rejected efforts by Parliament to make the Anglican Church a state-supported institution.

I suspect Selwyn's views were shaped more by the flaws, failures and corruption of the established church in his homeland than by the writings of American revolutionaries such as Thomas Paine, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams who midwived the idea of separating church and state. But his resistance to Parliament's efforts recognised that it was unhealthy for both the state and religion to be hand in glove. Perhaps he was aware of Thomas Paine's observation, "Persecution is not an original feature in any religion; but it is always the strongly marked feature of all religions established by law."

From my American experience I have known that author Robert Heinlein had it right when he wrote, "Almost any sect, cult, or religion will legislate its creed into law if it acquires the political power to do so." James Madison lamented "[T]here remains [in some parts of the country] a strong bias towards the old error, that without some sort of alliance or coalition between Govt. & Religion neither can be duly supported. Such indeed is the tendency to such a coalition, and such its corrupting influence on both parties, that the danger cannot be too carefully guarded against." Later he would condemn the establishment of the chaplainship in Congress as "a palpable violation of equal rights as well as of Constitutional principles. The danger of silent accumulations and encroachments by ecclesiastical bodies has not sufficiently engaged attention in the U.S."

Madison was prescient about what would happen in the US. The religious right never accepted Jefferson's belief that a wall of separation between church and state was intended by the Constitution. They never stopped trying to breach it. Two notable successes under the Eisenhower administration were inserting *under God* into the Pledge of Allegiance and changing the motto of the country from *e pluribus unum* (out of many one) to "In God We Trust," which is now printed on US currency.

During Reagan's terms in office the religious right had a strong ally. He believed, "If we ever forget that we're one nation under God, then we will be one nation gone under." Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority flourished during his time in office. Disappointed that self-professed Evangelical, Jimmy Carter was not willing to bridge the church-state divide, they endorsed Ronald Reagan before the Republican Convention. According to Carter, in the autumn of 1980 "a group headed by Jerry Falwell purchased \$10 million in commercials on southern radio and TV to brand me as a traitor to the South and no longer a Christian." Reagan repaid them by supporting a Republican platform which included opposition to media outlets like National Public Radio that they believed promoted an "anti-family" agenda, the Equal Rights Amendment and Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, state recognition or acceptance of [homosexual](#) acts; [abortion](#), even in cases involving incest, rape or in pregnancies where the life of the mother is at stake, and support for Christian prayers in schools. Their support of Reagan was rewarded with an important plum. Reagan appointed the Executive Director of the Moral Majority to the Department of Education.

All of this paled when George W Bush became the first openly "born again" president, who believed "God wants me to be President." As President he prayed daily that he be as "good a messenger of His will as possible." He called his agenda "compassionate conservatism" which launched faith-based initiatives that provided government funds to churches offering social services to the needy, opposed stem cell research, sex education beyond calling for abstinence, abortion, and same-sex marriage. He believed intelligent design should be taught alongside evolution and

strongly supported charter schools that often had a strong evangelical focus. His evangelical idealism came to the forefront after 9/11. He was adamant that “evil must be resisted, defeated, and he and his country have been called by God to do it – to be freedom’s champion.” As far I was concerned his “War on Terror” was no different from Osama Bin Laden’s call for a jihad and it was the last straw. It was time to leave what was becoming a theocracy. While the election of President Obama, a constitutional lawyer, has slowed the dismantling of the wall between church and state, the foothold of conservative Christians in congress and the courts makes them more than troublesome as they make governing nearly impossible.

That is the future I fear for New Zealand. The CEC, having succeeded in getting the Nelson System into law, has done its best to hide its agenda by giving cute names to its curricula, like *Cool Bananas*. Schools fail to communicate to parents that their children are even in the programme and if they don’t like it they must go through different hoops to get their children out of it. They and the schools have rarely provided an attractive alternative for children who are opted out. They now brag on their website that they have instituted a school chaplaincy programme. Chaplains are there to “counsel” children at times other than the Bible in School class. There have been numerous complaints that they have been actively proselytizing our most vulnerable children on the playground and at lunch.

As abhorrent as I find these abuses by the CEC and the schools in league with them, I believe there is a bigger threat. The CEC agenda has given the word “secular” a negative connotation. A connotation that implies that being secular has nothing to do with religion when, in truth, it has everything to do with protecting freedom of religion. At a time when adherents to various religions are shedding blood around the globe in the name of their God, often in horrific ways, it is incumbent on us to understand the place of religion in society if we are to develop tolerance and understanding in our increasingly multi-cultural country. But that is not happening in New Zealand schools. According to Helen Bradstock, a University of Otago scholar, “Recent studies in Europe and the United Kingdom concluded that inter-religious education has real potential to promote multicultural awareness, social inclusion and an active form of tolerance which is evidenced in relationships with others. However, this research shows that religious education is most effective when difficult questions relating to conflicting worldviews are grappled with, debated and not avoided in the classroom.” However, she notes, while the New Zealand education system encompasses a radical strategy of critical multiculturalism and affirmative action for Maori culture, there is a conservative strategy of mono-culturalism and majority-rule with regard to religious culture. In other words, knowledge of world religions does not routinely form part of a child’s formal education in New Zealand. According to Bradstock, a search for the word “religion” in the curriculum document yields a zero result. Although cultural diversity is now embedded in the curriculum there are no curriculum guidelines, minimal resources and no training available for primary school teachers in the area of religious diversity. This is not the kind of freedom from religion we as Unitarian Universalists need to seek for the next generation. In my view, not until the Nelson System is abolished from the Education Act will teaching religion be replaced with teaching about religion. Preserving precious human rights depend on it. A more peaceful world depends on it. Making it happen depends on us. But if you speak out prepare for acts of intimidation and being maligned and bullied. Freedom comes at a cost.

Namaste
Blessed be
Amen

