



You can have too much religion; but you can also have too little

Intro

I started thinking about this two years ago, when I was collecting evidence from people from different religions about religion in school. And quite a few of them said children should not be learning about religion in school at all until they are at high school. But other people said children should be learning about religion as soon as they start primary school.

The case for starting at primary school

The idea that children should learn about religion at primary school was made to me by some Christians, and Jews, and Buddhists, and Hindus.

Why did they think it was important?

Several Jewish people said it was important for children to learn about other religions from the start, so they could understand and respect other faiths. One said she and her husband specially sent their sons to a state school instead of a Jewish school - because they want them to learn to live with non-Jewish people as preparation for their involvement in society. The mother gave evidence of how harmful it was that one of the schools their children attended didn't respect their Judaism, such as their separate holidays like Hannukah, and their special food restrictions, like not eating ham.

A Muslim leader, who had been the president of the Federation of Islamic associations, said there is a lot of anti-Muslim feeling in New Zealand, because the Media mainly report Islam in terms of extremists, and don't report what ordinary Muslims are like.

A Buddhist leader said this should also include teaching children about non-religious beliefs, like atheism and humanism.

These examples are all about *contemporary religion*

I noticed that most of the examples these people gave were **about contemporary religion**, not the history of these religions, or their sacred books. For instance, another Muslim leader said he'd like schools to teach children to learn the entertaining stories that Muslims teach to their children.

And I noticed that a number of atheists who criticise Islam, focus on sayings in the Koran that are hostile to other religions - and don't ask whether these passages are practised by Muslims today. I know from my own experience that atheists often give a similar treatment to the Bible, and dig out examples of genocide and intolerance - not acknowledging that most Christians have

similar objections and would not dream of taking these as an example of how they should live. So it would help to break down prejudice about RELIGIONS.

And when I attended a Jewish service, I was surprised that the people who welcomed me there stressed that they didn't believe that the story of Abraham wanting to kill his son as a sacrifice to God was a model for us. They said Abraham was just a man of his time, when child sacrifice was common.

These examples are not recommending children should *practice* these religions

I also noticed that these PEOPLE were not suggesting children should **practice** these religions. A Hindu woman, who is secretary of the Hindu council said she didn't expect children to practice Hindu prayers, and she was opposed to state schools which encourage children to take part in Christian prayers.

These people are not suggesting children should be evangelised

And these leaders also opposed the idea that children should be evangelised, or taught that one religion is true, which is what happens now in Christian bible in schools classes.

So it's only a certain type of religious teaching that these people are wanting

So it's only a certain type of religious teaching that these people are suggesting: it should help them understand other people; but not debate which one is right.

And this is the kind of teaching about religion that we are promoting in the secular education network. The word "secular" is used in different ways, but we mean: impartial, not favouring one religion, and not opposing any religion. The Aim of this teaching is to build up better understanding of other people's religion.

The present law lets schools bring in volunteers to teach the onesided kind of religion; And that's why we've applied to get the High Court to rule that this law is against the bill of rights act. It says that state organisations, including state schools - should not discriminate on the basis of religion. But the Education Act 1964 **encourages** schools to discriminate. We believe these two laws are inconsistent.

And the neutral kind of teaching about religion is already part of the social studies curriculum. When I started studying religion in schools, I looked up the social studies curriculum, and noticed it has many religious sources for teachers to teach their children, but I had this impression that it was not being used. So I wrote to the Ministry of Education, and they confirmed that it's part of the dcurriculum. But when I asked whether this teaching actually happens, they said they didn't know, because they don't monitor it. They're not allowed to. I protested to the ombudsman's office and they confirmed schools don't have a right to monitor it.... and they quoted the Education Act 1989, which

makes schools independent. The ministry can only intervene in restricted cases, and religion is not one of those cases.

So we are asking the court to rule that that law is also inadequate, and is inconsistent with the Bill of rights act.

So what is the case for leaving religious subjects till high school?

But what about the view that children should not learn about religious subjects till high school? I've heard that view from a number of atheists. In fact when our campaign began, in 2012, I think most atheists were opposing it.

Their reason is quite straight-forward. They recognise that children can't be shielded from other religions forever, but they say the time for including it is high school age, because by then children have learned to think critically, and are able to make up their minds.

But as we've been separating the evangelistic kind of Christianity from the neutral kind of teaching, those numbers have been dropping, at least from the atheists who are part of the Secular Education Network. Many of them now agree with the religious people that this should be taught in primary school.

But atheists are not the only people who express this idea. Several Jewish people I've spoken to, say it's not the school's job to teach religion; it is the mother's task, and it would be harmful if non-Jewish people started taking over this task. But they say, by age 12, Jewish children are accepted as having independent minds, and then would be the time for them to learn about other religions.

The right of children to be independent from their parents

But I notice a common thread in the views of this group of Jews and atheists. They both want the **parents** to make the choice about religion, while the children are young. And I'd suggest that there are three things wrong with it:

1. One is that many children become religiously independent long before they are 12. I'm one of them; I was questioning Christianity quite critically from when I was 7, and I have heard a number of Christians and atheists who were the same.
2. Another reason for children learning about other religions from an early age, is the one we've already highlighted ... the need to get on with people of different beliefs. If children at say, five, are not ready to pick a religion of their own, they may still need to learn about other religions at that age ... not in depth, but just to be aware of their classmates, who may be taking part in the customs of their parent's religion, or lack of it.
3. And a third reason is that children have a right to be independent of their parents. A child who has a a religious background has a right to question that background. And a child who has an atheist background has a right to form their own ideas about religion ... from an early age. The school should not be just reflecting the views of the children's parents. This was one of the reasons for making schools compulsory back in the 19th century. Reformer Robert

Stout, who was a Unitarian, said schools must save children from the ignorance of their parents. There were many children back then whose parents didn't want their children to go to school at all – they wanted them to work on the farm. So school is part of children learning to be independent, and that includes being independent of their parents.

This right for children to be independent of their parents

This right for children to be independent of their parents is recognised in our education law, but not until age 16. At that age, children can opt out of any classes for religious reasons, whether their parents support them or not.

And at younger ages, children can be opted out, if they have their parents support.

But Tanya and I believe that right should be given to children of any age, but especially from high school age. Why pick that age? Well that age is already recognised from an educational point of view. From intermediate age: ie from years 7 and 8, children start to be able to specialise in some school subjects, and from year nine, at high school, they can specialise even more ... and can drop maths, for instance.

There are practical reasons as well as maturity reasons for this. There are just so many learning options, that a choice must be made, and at that age, most are able to make it.

The right to be bored with religion

But if we accept high school as the age when children can start to select their own education, and drop maths if they've had enough of it. Why shouldn't they have a right to drop religion at that same age. For three reasons:

4. The greater selection of subjects makes it impossible for schools to teach everything.
5. Children at that age should be making their own choices of what kind of specialisation they want to make.
6. And by that age, they should have a background knowledge of all subject areas, so they are not missing out on religion altogether; just specialising in it less, if they are not interested.

Many religious people stress that religion is important, and everyone needs to be aware of it. Yes but ... just because it is important to churchgoers like us, doesn't mean it is equally important to everyone else.

However there is a place for religion in high school

However, let me put another side to it. I am not saying there should be no teaching about religion in high school. I'm suggesting it should be optional. **For those who are interested**, I think this could be an appropriate stage for a more in-depth and more critical study of religion and non-religious worldviews, for those who want it.

Now that goes against something that the Secular Education Network has been saying about religion in schools. They have been objecting to Bible in Schools classes, among other reasons because it splits classes up on the basis of religion and leads to discrimination against those who don't go.

I think that factor is reduced at high school age because:

1. At high school, classes are already being split up for subject choices of other kinds.
2. And the split would not be made on the basis of one religion - these classes would teach about a variety of religious and non-religious views.
3. The teaching would be done professionally, on a neutral basis, Unlike Bible in School classes where children are learning that Christianity is infallible, they would be learning it as part of their knowledge about diversity. on that basis, you might find that atheists would be interested in studying religion, and vice versa. And if not, they they would give these classes a miss.

Coda - law and syllabus

I should stress that this sermon has been talking about the syllabus, and what should be in it and at what age.

The law deals only with the broad limits to the syllabus ... that it should be neutral; that it should be objective, and that it should respect the children's maturity.

And so for those who want to change the law, there are two stages:

1. One is to point out the faults of the present law, and to do this in terms of law and evidence. That is a fairly narrow task. The present law has only about eight paragraphs that deal with this. The court will probably set a timetable for this in the next month or so, and the court hearing will probably be three months or more after that.
2. If the court agrees the law is defective, it then gets referred to parliament, who would have to ask what kind of law should take its place. And at that point parliament would need to get wider evidence: there might be thousands of people wanting to make submissions. And hundreds of experts would analyse the issues, much more thoroughly than I have done. That would possibly happen in the second half of next year.

Meanwhile I would appreciate your views on these issues today, or over the next months. My thinking has changed several times in the course of this campaign, and will no doubt change some more, in the next months.