



Religion in schools is coming but ... key questions are still unanswered

David Hines © 9th October 2022

Introduction

After two years of waiting, I'm excited that a government proposal for religious education in state schools is about to be revealed.

But I'm also concerned, because very important questions have still not been answered, like:

- Will it include teaching about non-religious views?
- Will it be neutral and professional, or will it be a soft-sell of our main religions.
- I know the release will include a report on the subject by Professor Paul Morris, but I don't know whether his suggestions are going to be:
 - slashed back or
 - Whether this will be the start of a thorough public discussion. That would be my hope. But
- Releasing it on November 18 also makes me suspicious. That is just before the Christmas break ... this is a favourite way of burying something controversial.

I spoke to Paul Morris about this two days ago, and he shared the same worry. He has been trying to get hold of Ms. Tinetti to clarify what has happened to his report. Not surprisingly, he doesn't want to comment on it today.

But I **do** want to comment today ... so we will not be caught by surprise.

The governments original steps in religious education started in 2019, after the killing of 50 Muslims in Christchurch.

Later that year, the Religious Diversity Centre, held two forums of New Zealand religious leaders, and made half a dozen recommendations to the Prime Minister. They said religious education was needed to help stop the prejudice that led to the mosque killings.

I got a copy of those recommendations

- I noted that they all wanted religious education.
- They wanted it to be part of secondary school as well.
- They did not mention the removal of religious instruction. That was a massive gap in my opinion.

The next step was when the idea got picked up by the government

In a cabinet paper in October 2019, Education Minister Chris Hipkins said had accepted the RDC offer. The Ministry of Education and RDC would start a conversation about it, **emphasising a shift from religious instruction to neutral religious education** (conducted by professional teachers).

So it was **Chris Hipkins** who introduced the idea of stopping religious instruction.

I became even more interested in the idea when the Secular Education Network court case fell through. I was one of the leaders of that campaign, and when we lost, I felt we didn't have the money or energy to start another court case, so we should work with Prof Morris's report – Not necessarily agreeing with it, but trying to amend it if we had different values.

It was the only game in town.

Many atheists would like religion removed from schools altogether. But **other non-religious people are in favour of religious education, so long as it includes lessons about non-religious philosophies as well**. In particular, this is true of humanists.

Then in 2020, Paul Morris took up the job. He did a survey of what New Zealanders think about religious education

He focussed on members of religious and non-religious groups. The non-Religious people made up about a third of the responses.

I responded to the survey, and took copy of the questions he asked.

1. Whether there should be a special role for Christianity

2. Whether the religions covered would include Taha Wairua Maori spirituality
3. Whether it would include teaching about atheism and other non-religious belief systems
4. Whether it would include secondary schools
5. Whether it would mean the end of religious instruction
6. Whether it would mean the end of religious observances, such as Christian songs in school assemblies.

All good questions.

His brief from the government

was to consider these views, to report on the ways religious education was dealt with in other countries, and to come up with recommendations.

Unfortunately, his report was then shelved for two years

Starting in July 2020, I made numerous requests under the Official Information Act to see what Prof Morris had recommended. The Ministry refused.

My third application for this material was investigated by the Chief Ombudsman for 20 months. I felt this was shocking abuse of the Official Information Act. It says governments should respond in four weeks. The delay was because the Ministry kept bringing up new issues. After that long wait the Ombudsman's decision went against me. He said the Ministry had a right to discuss the issue in confidence.

But he said it was about to be released soon anyway.

So I asked another Official Information question. How long would that be. The reply came back from Associate Minister Jan Tinetti. About eight weeks. But she refused to answer any other questions, except to say that there would also be a release of a briefing paper she received late last year.

My next decision was to share this information other religious and non-religious leaders

They included the Secular Education Network, a Jewish leader and the Religious Diversity Centre.

And finally I shared it with the NZ Association of Rationalists and Humanists. Their spokesperson on this was Sara Passmore ... And she returned the favour and gave me a vital piece of information also from Ms. Tinetti.

On the first of September Ms. Tinetti told them:

- “I am advised that the Ministry of Education did note that some groups such as Maori and Pacific people, were under-represented in the RDC research. The Ministry recognises that these important voices need to be explored ... I thought Wow... they are going to shoot holes in Paul Morris’s report.
- Tinetti went on: “The conversation about diversity and religion in schools is now being progressed through **the refresh of the national curriculum.**
- “... It will ensure that religious diversity is considered alongside other diverse perspectives including cultures, identities, values and faith.”

Ms. Tinetti also attached a link to the Ministry’s “draft content for the social sciences learning area”. This document was dated 2021, but it said a final draft will be available later **this** year.

So that’s three documents that are going to come up later this year. But no word of what is in them

In the curriculum refresh document, a key goal was that students would learn to understand eight “big ideas” including:

1. Maori history is the foundational and continuous history of Aotearoa New Zealand
2. Colonisation and settlement have been central to Aotearoa New Zealand for the past 200 years.
3. Access to power and its use and misuse shape life experiences

I was a bit shocked:

This is a political agenda that could have been written by Black Power.

To put it more delicately, it is very different context from the issues raised in Professor Morris’s questionnaire. He was talking comparative religion; the Ministry is talking about indigenous rights.

There was almost no overlap with the issues in Paul Morris' questionnaire.

One overlap, that I agree with, was a suggestion that the new religious education lessons will extend to secondary schools as well, though it doesn't say how. It seems that religious education might become a separate subject for years 9 to 13.

Another big surprise came to me From Muslim sources in February this year

On the website of the Federation of Islamic Associations, I learned that they have been invited to write up their stories for the Ministry of Education. They were asking teachers to help them in this work.

Then in February this year I invited a Muslim education leaders Sister Rehanna to speak here in the Auckland Unitarian Church. Her talk was interesting but it didn't connect with Paul Morris's project as far as I could see.

And a third Muslim contribution is now on the Ministry's curriculum resources website. It's written by the Muslim Women's Council, and it deals with some interesting topics. One was a story about how Muslim children are coping with the fallout from the Christchurch massacre.

It sounds like a very thought-provoking example of religious education. But I was concerned that I could not find any evidence that other groups have been encouraged to write up their stories. And it was not a neutral piece of teaching about Islam. It was one-sided. It put Muslims in a sympathetic light ... the way that Bible in Schools puts Christianity into a sympathetic light.

If other religions followed this example, it could lead to all religions telling their own stories their own way.

But there's light at the end of the tunnel

The most unambiguous piece of information in Jan Tinetti's information says the new guidelines were due to be tried out in schools **from the first term of 2022**; they would be further amended, and the new syllabus would then become compulsory in 2023.

So it seems that the forthcoming release of these background papers from Professor Morris and other sources may linked to the start of the social studies syllabus in 2023.

But that leaves very little time for any **discussion** of the policy. Professor Morris's report was originally proposed as the start of a conversation about the place of religion in schools, but that conversation has so far been conducted in secret.

So I am left with the dilemma: is there to be a further, open stage of consultation with the whole New Zealand public being invited to take part, or is the consultation over?

In conclusion:

So I'm inviting you to pick up the pieces... raising five issues. What would your goals be for religious education in New Zealand schools. I'm assuming for the moment that all of you would favour religious education, and that it should replace religious instruction ...

But what should be the goal of this education?

1. Is it that Children will gain confidence to express their own beliefs?

That is one of the positive bits of the document Ms. Tinetti referred us to. One of the key goals in the curriculum refresh document. Is that all children should recognise themselves as part of the curriculum.

But that is not new. It is similar to one of the goals the ministry had about 2016 when I wrote to them about the place of religion in schools then. **They replied It is to give them confidence to express their own views.**

Both good. Both quite similar.

2. A second possible goal: To help them learn with empathy the beliefs of others.

That would also be a very positive goal. It would fit with the original suggestion from RDC, of helping to deal with prejudices against Muslims and others.

But that too is not new. That was also the Ministry's views in 2016. They joined these first two goals together in one sentence... **to express one's own views and study with empathy the beliefs of others.**

I like that thought. And I even more like the idea of linking them together.

However, the Ministry's refresh document **doesn't** link them together. **The goal of empathy is not part of the curriculum refresh.**

3. A third possible goal is the need to appreciate the stories and values of our New Zealand culture?

That is strongly suggested by the curriculum refresh statement. But I feel they have **overstated** it.

For instance, it says that Maori stories are the foundation of New Zealand's stories. Sure, Maori stories are important, and they have been downgraded for many years as part of colonialism. **But do e now want to swing the pendulum in the opposite direction, and denigrate European values, Asian values, Pasifika values. I don't**

I don't believe it the school's job to tell children what their culture should be? That was a big mistake of Missionary schools in the 19th century, imposing European culture onto Maori. Surely a secular school should not take sides in something like this.

And surely our schools should not have their eyes closed to the rest of the planet. Surely we need listen to the experiences of other countries as well.

So I believe the school goal must be to widen their horizons. And that would be destroyed if the school itself was telling them which culture to follow

4. Do children have a right to be curious?

I think they do I think it is the most important goal of all, to encourage their curiosity.

And I came to that conclusion from two directions.

The first is a PhD thesis from a British teacher Helen Bradstock, who came to New Zealand to write it. I read it and invited her to give evidence in our court case. She recommended religious education as part of the role of a school. But her view is that it is there to give the children options to choose from.

She said the children brought up in a Christian home need to realise that they have other options. What would Buddhism be like? What would atheism be like? She was writing as a teacher herself.

And I Come to the same conclusion from a human rights point of view. When a child is say 16 ... they probably have a fair idea of what their beliefs are ... and have a right to assert those beliefs.

But when they are five, their main rights are the right to be protected from one-sided views however positive they might be in their own right.

And they cannot be expected to discover all these beliefs on their own. A teacher needs to offer them a smorgasbord to tempt their taste. And that teacher needs to be very sensitive, and very unbiased

So I maintain that the right to be curious is the chief goal of religious education in schools.

And the Ministry of Education **also** recognises the right of children to be curious. But it doesn't see a need to give them a wide set of options to choose from.

5. Finally, the need for critical thinking?

A number of atheists support teaching children critical thinking. I agree, that is a valuable skill in all school subjects ... but not particularly in religious education.

There are some children who may be from devout religious homes, and might feel threatened if their school was regularly criticising their parents beliefs.

And there might be some children from hostile atheist homes, who might be discouraged from making Christian friends if the school itself was regularly criticising them.

In both cases, I suggest the goal should be to take it at the children's own pace.

Not hiding from controversial issues ... the Muslim woman are surely right in teaching children how to cope with news about terrorism.

But dealing with them fairly.

The Ministry refresh document also encourages critical thinking... so it's part of their approach already ...not one we have to sell to them.

Part of critical thinking is comparing different religions

Sometimes even tiny religions raise wider issues. For instance, in Bible in Schools, children are taught that Jesus is supreme, and that he was crucified because the Jewish people demanded it. That is false, and has been the major source of hatred of Jews. Judaism is now a small religion, but a Jewish perspective needs to be presented wherever Christianity is being studied. Otherwise the lesson would be a lesson in prejudice.

This is also part of my training as a journalist. You cannot cover every possible news item, and you might be tempted to make your job easier by focussing on the views of a few main religions.

I believe all views are equal, so the answer is to cover as many issues as you can... but once you have chosen a topic such as a government policy, you balance it by considering the dissenting views,, even though it may be only one person who is affected.

That is critical thinking.

And those are the principles I hope to see in our new religious education system.

Meditation / Discussion starter:

Education about religions and non-religious views is needed in state schools because:

• it will help satisfy the students' curiosity	
• it will give them confidence to express their own beliefs	
• it will help them learn with empathy the beliefs of others	
• it will encourage critical thinking	
• it will help them appreciate the stories and values of our New Zealand culture	
• Religious education in schools is not necessary. Children can learn these things from their local mosque, synagogue or non-religious group etc	