

Robert Hunt
Chair of the Buddhist council of New Zealand
On behalf of the Executive Committee.

11 December 2022.

Statement for seminar on religious studies in New Zealand schools

There are many forms of Buddhism and a wide range of countries and cultures of origin for the Buddhist practitioners found in NZ. We hold in common the main teachings of the Buddha.

As context we would like the following to be understood -
There is no injunction in Buddhism to convert those of other faith or non-faith, nor any reason for compelling anyone to experience the practices that are the centre of our religious life. We believe that folk who engage in their own sincere inquiry into the nature of the mind and the heart may seek out the Buddha's teachings if that is their leaning.

We do not support religious instruction in schools. Buddhist young people are likely to feel isolated or alienated if they have to decide to attend or withdraw from religious instruction held while a school is "closed".

We acknowledge that Christianity has the largest support base of any religion in Aotearoa New Zealand. But it does not follow from this that those of another faith or no faith should be required to attend classes or assemblies where prayers to the Christian God are offered.

We have no objection to invocation of good values, and support prayer and/or karakia in universal forms to create unity and shared aspirations for good.

Turning now to the question of religious studies in schools. In principle we support dispassionate and informed teaching about the diverse religions practised in Aotearoa. However we question whether religious diversity is being taken seriously in developing the curriculum for religious studies.

We have had no contact from the Ministry of Education or anyone else about the religious studies curriculum in schools.

Our first concern is that our religion is not misrepresented. We would rather that religious studies was not taught at all than taught by teachers who are not capable of properly answering the questions that arise for students learning about the teachings of the Buddha. For this reason we can appreciate that the process of developing even-handed and sensitive education in this area must be given proper investment and time.

We have repeatedly raised with senior members of Government our concerns about a large blindspot in understanding the role of religious diversity. Government agencies and officials repeatedly and reductively describe faith communities in terms of ethnicity. Lost in this simplistic description is how faith practice is central and unifying for the identity of faith communities.

What is the point of greater inter-religious understanding for society and what challenges in daily life are faced?

Our Buddhist faith images are regularly put at foot level or treated as variants of garden gnomes, or appropriated by raves as symbols of drug highs, or decapitated heads of the Buddha used as trophies and decorations.

We do not believe this significantly defiles our faith. The truth of our practice is internal and enduring. However, it is disrespectful and misleading, and degrades wider social cohesion. We would appreciate some basis in education for greater respect.

As a Buddhist we regularly face these things. I recently used the toilet in a NZ restaurant and found the Buddha's image painted

above the cistern with a crude slogan about defecation. I politely pointed it out to the proprietor as offensive but did not go public.

As a non-theistic religion we can easily understand atheist and agnostic perspectives. We believe their views deserve consideration in religious studies, and in any education that seeks to support wider empathy within a pluralistic society.

We support – a broad level of religious studies being included with social studies.

We support – high schools having an optional stand-alone subject of religious studies starting at year 11

In our view religious matters are sensitive, and appreciation and tolerance cannot be cultivated if there is any element of compulsion.