

Courts to decide on religion classes

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Two of the arguments against scripture in state schools are that it leads to segregation and it should not be publicly funded. Jenny Dillon reports.

Sex, politics and religion, once taboo subjects in polite conversation, are now common fodder for robust debate and protest in our communities.

But no subject is so divisive and capable of generating such intense passion as religion, especially when it comes to its place in Australia's public schools, as evidenced in the rancor that surrounds the move by a group of Melbourne parents recently to have special religious instruction (SRI, or scripture classes) removed from the curriculum of public schools in that state.

The recent trend of taking religion out of the churches and into the judiciary began in January last year when Queensland father of six Ron Williams won the right to have heard in the High Court of Australia his challenge that federal funding of chaplains in public schools, which four of his children attend, was unconstitutional.

He is relying on Section 116 of the Constitution that states that the "Commonwealth not legislate in respect of religion".

Although Williams objects to his children being taught sections of the Old Testament as fact, he insists this is not the issue he is fighting. "This is not about getting chaplains out of schools, it's about the government funding them, which I believe is against the Constitution," he said.

Then in March, a small group of Victorian parents claimed in the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal that their children were being discriminated against because they had opted out of SRI.

The parents' support group, Fairness in Religions in School (FIRIS), said it had no idea when a decision on the claim would be delivered. It could be a while. Williams' final trip to the High Court in Canberra was in August last year and he has since been waiting for a decision on his challenge. He's a man with the patience of Job, but even he finds it interesting that the High Court's decision the following month on offshore processing of asylum seekers took just a few days.

His eight-month wait seems short compared with the eight years it took for a group of NSW parents to convince, in December 2010, the NSW government to allow ethics classes in public schools for those children who chose not to attend scripture classes. And they had to engage the help of the Federation of Parents and Citizens of NSW and the St James Ethics Centre to win their battle.

"We believed our students could do something meaningful if they weren't in scripture," said the P&C's spokeswoman Rachael Sowden. "If they weren't in scripture, they weren't allowed to learn anything because this would disadvantage students who did go to scripture," she said.

"We didn't want to take scripture lessons away from those who wanted it. We wanted to have something else for those who didn't want it."

The Victorian parents have taken the opposite view and won't even consider buying into the ethics option. "We're against ethics," said their spokesman Scott Hedges. "What's wrong is that churches are here in our schools in the first place. Children should not be sorted and grouped according to their religions."

Their argument is that the Victorian Department of Education discriminates against children not in scripture classes by separating them from other students. The group's particular target is ACCESS Ministries, which represents a diverse collection of Christian religions and has volunteers giving scripture lessons in 850 of

Victoria's 1300 public primary schools.

Another group, The World Conference of Religions for Peace, represents other faiths such as Baha'i, Buddhism, Sikhism and Hinduism and has volunteers in another 84 schools. Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Islamic faiths also have some representation in Victorian schools.

FIRIS's campaign draws heavily on a 2008 audio in which ACCESS Ministries CEO, Canon Dr Evonne Paddison, talked about how Christian churches had failed to connect with young people.

"Let's face it, our numbers are in decline," Paddison said as she called on the ministry to take advantage of the "God-given open door to children and young people ... our federal and state government allow us to take the Christian faith into our schools and share it", adding that "schools are our great mission field".

ACCESS Ministries, which receives support from Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, the Uniting Church, the Salvation Army, Assemblies of God, Lutherans, the Church of Christ and others, has since clarified the audio with a video and a fact sheet on its website.

But Hedges said ACCESS Ministries was "running an evangelical mission to convert children to Christ" because their parents didn't take them to church. "These people rock up with their bags of lollies, and the system takes advantage of the fact that most parents don't want to be seen to object."

Paddison refused to respond to Hedges' comments, with a spokeswoman saying she didn't want to "feed the debate" primed primarily by a "small, secularist group, predominantly inner urban, who want to impose their views on the rest of the community".

Through the office of the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne, Paddison said SRI enjoyed "huge community support, 70 per cent of whom describe themselves as being of religion".

SRI has the support of primary school principal groups with NSW Primary Principals Association president Jim Cooper saying "there's not a huge amount of angst out there".

As for ethics classes, he said: "The word out there is very positive."

Gabrielle Leigh, representing the Victorian Principals Association, said Victoria was different from other states because devolution was now so entrenched. While Victorian law made it much easier for religious groups to set up classes in Victorian schools, the schools' autonomy ensured that it couldn't happen without community support.

More problematic for Victoria, she said, was that scripture lessons had to be supervised and teachers couldn't take time out to do other things such as class preparation. "The scripture teachers are volunteers and not qualified teachers, so it's a logistical problem for us," she said.

The teachers unions, however, have thrown their support behind the agitating parents, with the Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union endorsing a resolution that government school education remains free and secular.

The AEU federal president, Angelo Gavrielatos, supports them too, drawing on history in a recent article. "The Public Instruction Act of 1880 was a landmark in Australian history; it provided for free, secular, and compulsory education where all children could sit 'side by side' and have equal access to education. It also ended subsidies for church schools.

"... Since religion belongs to the private, voluntary domain, with the right of all religions being equal, public institutions must not favour one set of private religions or dogmatic choices over another."

But while debate rages in the country's three most populous states, in South Australia it has been neutralised. It is the only state or territory in the country where it is no longer possible for religious instruction to be taught in public schools after changes to the SA Education Act in 1972.

A spokesman for the SA Education Department said it was important to note the distinction between “religious instruction” and “religious education”, which is available in SA public schools. “There are many opportunities for students to learn about the cultural and social significance of religions and beliefs systems in Australia and global society,” he said.

NSW P&C’s Sowden said the distinction between religious instruction and education was often lost of parents, with many believing their children were getting the latter. “Some parents mistakenly think their children are learning about comparative religions,” she said.

“It’s very important that schools make it clear to parents exactly what the lessons involve.”

Hedges agreed. The “separation according to religious beliefs” could be resolved by removing all religious instruction from schools during school hours, he said. Instead he advocated the more “inclusive” subject of religious education, an argument also supported in the Victorian AEU’s resolution, as well as by the NSW P&C’s southern equivalent, Parents Victoria.

While the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority is not presently developing religious education as part of the national curriculum, it has talked with various faith leaders to work with existing state religious education curriculums.

Sowden warned that schools had a “duty of care” to ensure parents were fully informed of religious activities in schools. She said situations have occurred where parents had let their children attend seminars outside school hours after the school issued permission notes that did not describe the evangelical nature of the seminars. “Schools need to make sure they both understand what’s involved in these lessons and seminars and that this information is conveyed to parents.”

Reader Comments

Jean McSkimming

Friday, 4 May 2012

Why are so many children at risk in our society? Child Welfare Agencies can't cope with increases. Our Christian Heritage taught family values, ethics, a community based on the 10 commandments works. Let us not throw out the "baby" with the "bathwater". Teaching scripture in schools can't harm children, but I know it certainly helps them to learn life skills that work.

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