

The Changes to Australia's History, Civics and Citizenship Curriculum Better Reflect the Role of Religion in Our National Life

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As a symbolic document, a national history curriculum needs to accurately represent the nation's religious past.

Religion remains a contested topic in the upcoming federal election — and particularly religion in schools.

Last year, when the then Federal Education Minister Alan Tudge rejected the proposed changes to the Australian History Curriculum because of — among other things — an unhistorical lack of reference to Australia's Christian heritage, many disparaged him for launching a fresh "culture war". Others agreed with Tudge's concerns, insisting that the draft curriculum represented latest attempt at "woke" engineering in our classrooms.

The reality of national curriculum writing is far less conspiratorial. The final version was prepared by dozens of committees organised by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) over several years, within fixed terms of reference. And no national curriculum will please everyone. They are official instruments used for the mass education of the children of a nation, and hence they are highly symbolic documents, designed for social organisation and formation.

The Australian Curriculum is finally approved by a show of hands by a group of eight elected education ministers — none of the ministers who voted in early April had ever previously worked in education, and only two had served for the duration of the Revision Process. Three commenced in their portfolio halfway through the final

redrafting of the Australian Curriculum. Spare a thought for the South Australian education minister who had only been in his role for nine days.

Such bureaucratic consensus processes often drift away from the *Zeitgeist*, particularly if the various committees are insufficiently representative of the whole population. And the drafts of the history curriculum were indeed flawed, in three ways:

- though well-intentioned, so much Australian First Nations content was included that it displaced necessary content from other histories;
- there was a conspicuous and historically unjustified absence of reference to Christianity — and to religions/spirituality more broadly — in its account of world history;
- other significant historical events, people, and themes, which would generally be considered to constitute essential knowledge for a free citizen of an English-speaking nation, were notably missing.

To their credit, ACARA responded promptly to the criticisms by bringing in an additional tier of expert consultants, who joined the existing panels to work on the next draft. The final version of the Australian Curriculum was published on Monday, 9 May, after all ministers signed off on it in early April.

Religion was more-or-less invisible in the draft k-6 History and Social Sciences (HASS) Curriculum. But the final version states it will include, among other things, a focus on “Australia’s Western and Christian heritage”, and now includes eight new references in F-3 — including study of religious festivals, buildings, symbols, and cultural practices. Year 4 includes the possible study of some prominent religious figures in the early colony — Bennelong, Rev. Richard Johnson, and an enhanced study of Lachlan Macquarie. Year 5 also includes some prominent Christians, such as Maria Lock, Mary Reibey, and Mary MacKillop. An important insertion in Year 5 is “Discussing as how religious tolerance might be achieved in a free democratic society”, along with a new recognition of religious groups in charity and volunteer organisations. Religion remains absent, however, from the Year 6 HASS Curriculum.

First Nations content has been reduced by about a third in the F-6 HASS Curriculum, but still dominates the Curriculum to a degree that will be unlikely to please all — and much of this content includes explicit or implied reference to First Nations spirituality. This may have an unintended effect of emphasising First Nations spirituality over all other religions. However, First Nations spiritualities are so dramatically different to imported colonial religions that the effect might be minimal. The embrace of Christianity by some First Nations people is also included in one new elaboration (Year 4), prominent colonial period Indigenous Christians are included — such as Maria Lock, Bennelong (Year 5), and the distinct Torres Strait festival “The Coming of the Light [Christianity]” (Year 3). In short, these additions will be unlikely by themselves to achieve the ambitious goal set out in the document’s introduction to celebrate “Australia’s Western and Christian Heritage”, but they at least provided more options for teachers.

The addition of new material related to Christianity in the 7-10 History Curriculum is far more substantial. It declares in its introduction that students will learn about “Western Civilization” and includes numerous references to Christian history and historical figures — all of them rich in terms of options for study. These include, for example, Jesus Christ, early Imperial Roman Christianity and Judaism, the influence of the Emperor Constantine, Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, Martin Luther, the (more balanced) role of the Medieval Catholic Church, Cromwell, the English Civil War, the abolitionist movement, the Christian Women’s’ Temperance Movement, Pope Leo XIII, the global missionary movements, First Nations Christianity, and Australian Religious Sectarianism. Christianity is also reinstated to its central place in early First Nations rights and protest movements.

Moreover, Medieval Europe, or the Renaissance, or the emergence of the “Modern World” is now mandatory in Year 8, where before they were just options out of eleven various others stretching across Europe, Asia, and the Pacific Islands.

Finally, the 7-10 Civics and Citizenship Curriculum is initially explicit in its references to Australia’s Christian heritage and culture, declaring in its introduction: “The curriculum recognises that Australia is a secular nation with a culturally diverse, multi-faith society and a Christian heritage.” Five elaborations occur in Year 7, including “identifying Christian traditions and values that have influenced the development of Australian society, democracy and law, including the impacts upon First Nations Australian communities and other groups within Australian society”. Thereafter, the Civics and Citizenship Curriculum makes no reference to religion, except the Salvation Army as a charity organisation, and the bold inclusion in Year 9

of “identifying and explaining possible reasons for the difference in perspectives about a civics and citizenship issue, such as marriage equality”.

The significance of religion in world history, and Australian history and civic life, is indisputable — something the original drafts of the Australian Curriculum had conspicuously failed to capture. As a symbolic document, in an ostensibly secular, but still quite religiously pluralistic country, a national history curriculum needs to accurately represent the religious past. To do otherwise is unhistorical, and thereby dishonours the heritages and beliefs of many contemporary Australians. The final version of the Australian Curriculum, though not ideal at every point, is a decent attempt to rebalance the account.

What happens next is complex. Most of the elements discussed above are not compulsory, and Victoria and New South Wales will now reshape each of the disciplines in the National Curriculum according to their own wishes. Only a few of the states and territories teach a distinct Civics Curriculum. Actual learning in classrooms will depend upon a whole new layer of new pedagogical resources. The textbook publishers will be surely swooping in. However, there are now more options in the final Australian History Curriculum for a more accurate representation of the role of religion in history and society.

How we live successfully and harmoniously as a pluralistic democratic culture is one of the great challenges of our age, but it is a noble one. It is the stupider and weaker stance to try and censor those with whom we disagree, and the silencing of history is well-trodden pathway to mass suffering. The final version of the Australian Curriculum, however, is a genuine attempt to move towards the reasonable centre — where, after all, a consensus curriculum document should, as far as possible, uncontroversially dwell.

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