



ON DONNELLY AND THE DANGERS OF DOGMATISM IN OUR SCHOOLS

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Conservative education commentator, Kevin Donnelly is on a moral crusade, arguing on ABC's *The Drum*² that Australia is a Christian nation under threat and that we 'need to acknowledge and celebrate Australia's Judeo-Christian heritage'.

This is the latest in a series of recent thought-pieces on the place of Christian doctrine being enshrined in Australian culture, including pieces published in News Corp and Fairfax papers, ABC's *The Drum* and other online opinion sites.

For example, in a recent Quadrant³ piece, Donnelly made the claim that, 'given that Christianity is Australia's dominant religion, both in terms of its historical and cultural significance and according to the census figures, it would seem only logical that it, along with the Bible, be included in the curriculum'.

In another piece for the Sydney Morning Herald⁴ on 18 April, he further exhorted the value of Christianity as a safeguard against Islamic extremism. Donnelly concluded the piece by saying, 'it is vital that Western, liberal, democratic countries like Britain and Australia as key members of the Anglosphere are clear about what makes them unique and what it is that safeguards our peace and prosperity and that we must defend'.

Let's leave to one side the problematic overtones of racial, cultural and moral superiority that come from claiming Christianity as the ascendant religion, never mind the neo-colonial refusal to consider that there might be non-Western systems of belief, knowledge and spirituality that have as much a place in contemporary Australia. And certainly let's not mention the ancient and rich array of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander belief systems and spiritualities that pre-existed Western culture in this country by millennia.

However, what can't be left to the side in reading Donnelly's recent offerings to the nation's press, is the very clear message that he is sending to our school students, teachers and parents. Donnelly sees religious doctrine, in particular an overtly Western and Christian set of ideologies, as an essential part of the school curriculum.

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² Donnelly, K. (2015). We are a Christian nation under threat. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-21/donnelly-we-are-a-christian-nation-under-threat/6486830>

³ Donnelly, K. (2015). Religion's place in a secular curriculum. <https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2015/04/place-religion-secular-curriculum/>

⁴ Donnelly, K. (2015). Teaching Western values in school will help beat Islamic extremism. <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/teaching-western-values-in-schools-will-help-beat-islamic-extremism-20150408-1mfnlj.html>

This position is certainly not unique, given the legislated protection of up to one hour per week religious instruction in Queensland state schools and the state government's long term investment in school chaplains. What is troubling, however, is the creeping of religious ideology into our schools being pushed by the federal government through its twice-High Court rejected school chaplaincy program, and the choice of Donnelly to review the Australian curriculum. It is important to note the Prime Minister's strong position that the funding should explicitly be made available for chaplains, rather than secular youth workers and counsellors.

We should be concerned about such ongoing blurring of the boundaries of secular education and the increasing access to schools being given to religious groups, such as the Scripture Union in Queensland, who employ the vast majority of school chaplains in the state. Under the previous coalition government, the program was expanded in 2012 to include 150 state schools. The program is funded until the end of next year, and at this stage there is no indication on what the current Labor government intend to do.

It is worth spending some time covering the wide media exposure recently given to Donnelly's views on Christianity and school education, given his privileged position as the federal government's 'go-to guy' on curriculum reform.

In a piece for *The Conversation*⁵ on 23 March 2015, Donnelly prosecuted his case, advocating either for standalone theology classes or saturating art, history and English with religious elements. This is unsurprising, given that in a piece for *The Weekend Australian*⁶ on 18 April, Donnelly argued that Christianity should not continue to be ignored and undermined by the curriculum.

This line of argument is further emphasised in his *Quadrant* piece from April, where Donnelly lamented that due to the 'secularisation of Western society and the impact of postmodern theory on the academy, the significance and importance of Christianity, both historically and in terms of its continuing value and importance, are being undermined and trivialised'.

Taken as a whole collection, these recent publications can clearly be seen as strident defence of Christianity – or at least a white, Catholic, Australian man's version of it – being forced onto all Australian schools. There is a word for it: dogma.

This would all be fine if Kevin Donnelly wasn't hand-picked by the federal education minister, Christopher Pyne, to lead a review of the Australian curriculum last year. However, despite Pyne's very public promises that the review would be fair, balanced and objective, there are serious ongoing concerns about Donnelly's obvious bias impacting on the review's validity and claims to impartiality.

Consider the following statement: 'the history curriculum ignores Australia's Western heritage and the significance of the nation's Judeo-Christian values and beliefs'.⁷ This comment was made by Donnelly in 2010, four years before being appointed to co-chair the curriculum review.

Go a little further back to 2006, when he was linking the Cronulla riots to the teaching of multiculturalism in schools and arguing for an increased emphasis on Anglo-Celtic culture

⁵ Donnelly, K. (2015). Religion and belief systems have a place in the school curriculum. <http://theconversation.com/religion-and-belief-systems-have-a-place-in-the-school-curriculum-38969>

⁶ Donnelly, K. (2015). Christianity the cornerstone of democratic values. <http://newsweekly.com.au/article.php?id=56923> or <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/christianity-the-cornerstone-of-democratic-values/story-e6frg6zo-1227308445354>

⁷ Donnelly (2010). The Rudd/Gillard education revolution: an evaluation. <http://australianconservative.com/2010/12/the-ruddgillard-education-revolution-an-evaluation/>

and the Judeo-Christian tradition.⁸ There are many more similar examples stretching back through Donnelly's long career as a conservative education commentator.

Cut forward to 2015 and Donnelly is making the same arguments. In his *Quadrant* piece from April, he argued that, 'in relation to the national curriculum, based on the continual references in the curriculum to celebrating "choice and diversity" (the new code for multiculturalism) and the emphasis on teaching intercultural understanding, where the implication is that all cultures are of equal worth, the underlying philosophy is one of cultural relativism'.

The curriculum review's findings were never going to be impartial, given Donnelly's strong ideological stance on the place of Christianity in our classrooms.

So what did the curriculum review find? It argues that 'the Australian Curriculum did not pay enough attention to the impact of Western civilisation and Judeo-Christianity on Australia's development, institutions and broader society and culture'.⁹ The review goes further, to claim that 'Australia's Judeo-Christian heritage and values and belief, is not properly dealt with in subjects like history, literature and civics and citizenship'.

Following the release of the review, a piece in *The Conversation*¹⁰ pointed out that while there were 73 references to pedagogy and teaching in the report, there were 174 references to religion and Christianity.

At the risk of labouring the point, there is clearly an issue of bias in the curriculum review. In the seven months since the review's release, Donnelly has engaged in a clear campaign across the Australian media landscape, using his position of privilege to sell a dogmatic vision of religion in schools.

We should always be wary of allowing dogmatism, religious or otherwise, to creep into our schools.

There are much bigger issues in education, including the pressing need for an equitable funding system that provides support for those who are disadvantaged and lack appropriate access and resources. Perhaps the money being spent by both the federal and Queensland state government on school chaplains might be put to better use. Time will tell what our state education minister, Kate Jones, will do. I just hope she isn't spending too much time reading what Donnelly has to say.

⁸ Donnelly (2006). Perils of multiculturalism. <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=4015>

⁹ Donnelly, K. & Wiltshire, K. (2014). Review of the national curriculum: final report https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/review_of_the_national_curriculum_final_report.pdf

¹⁰ Taylor, T. (2014). Pyne curriculum review prefers analysis free myth to history. <http://theconversation.com/pyne-curriculum-review-prefers-analysis-free-myth-to-history-32956>