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**The Contested Place of Religion in the Australian Civics and Citizenship Curriculum:
Exploring the secular in a multi-faith society**

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Abstract

In the absence of a dedicated subject for teaching general religious education, the inclusion of Civics and Citizenship education as a new subject within the first Federal Australian Curriculum provides an important opportunity for teaching the religious within Australian schools. The curriculum for Civics and Citizenship requires students to learn that Australia is both a secular nation and a multi-faith society, and to understand religions practiced in contemporary Australia. The term "secular" and the need for students to learn about Australia's contemporary multi-faith society raise some significant issues for schools and teachers looking to implement Civics and Citizenship. Focusing on public (state-controlled) schools, the argument here draws on recent analysis within the Australian context (Byrne, 2014; Maddox, 2014) to suggest that religion remains an important factor in understanding and shaping democratic citizenship in Australia, that this should be acknowledged within public schools, and that a constructivist, dialogical-based pedagogy provides possibilities for recognising the religious within Civics and Citizenship education.

Keywords

citizenship, secular, multi-faith, intercultural

Introduction

In his exposition of shared citizenship within “post-secular” societies, Jurgen Habermas (2008: 4) suggests that if we consider the ‘perspective of participants’, we confront the following normative questions: ‘How should we see ourselves as members of a post-secular society and what must we reciprocally expect from one another to ensure that in firmly entrenched nation states, social relations remain civil despite the growth of a plurality of cultures and religious worldviews?’. These questions pose significant challenges for public education systems that place importance on educating young people to be informed, active and responsible citizens within heterogeneous communities. In doing so they allude to the integral, yet contested, relationship between religious worldviews and democratic citizenship – a relationship which has received a growing amount of attention within educational research over the last decade (see, for example, Arthur, 2008; Gearon, 2008; Cooling, 2010; Arthur, Gearon and Sears, 2010; Gearon, 2014; Fancourt, 2015).

The inclusion of religion *within* Civics and Citizenship is a comparatively new feature of policy and curricular discourse on the subject in Australia. Previous policy initiatives relating to Civics and Citizenship education have had little (indeed largely nothing at all) to say about the relationship between democratic citizenship and religion (see, for example, SSCEET, 1989, 1991; CEG, 1994; ECG, 1999). Since 2011, the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority (hereafter ACARA) has been developing Civics and Citizenship as compulsory subject for years 3-8 (8-14 years of age) as part of the first ever national Australian Curriculum. Coming within the wider Humanities and Social Sciences learning area, the development of the subject has comprised a number of stages, including a shaping paper, draft curricula and public consultations, with the final curriculum for Civics and Citizenship was published in late 2013. Through its various stages of development it is clear that the religious element of the Civics and Citizenship curriculum has caused some level of consternation concerning its expression. The Shaping Paper (ACARA, 2012a) that informed the development of the draft and final curricula recognized the ‘contribution of major religions and beliefs and the voluntary, community, interest and religious groups, associations and clubs to civic life and to the development of Australian civic identity’. The final draft curriculum for Civics and Citizenship included the requirement that students learn, at Year 7 (12 to 13 years of age), that ‘Australia is a secular nation and has been described as a multicultural and multi-faith society’ (ACARA, 2013). In the final version of the curriculum, and following the election of a Liberal-led coalition Federal government that had criticized the lack of representation of Western

civilization throughout the Australian Curriculum, this aspect of the Civics and Citizenship content changed. The requirement became that students are taught that Australia is a secular nation and a multi-faith society, learn about the religions practiced in contemporary Australia, and understand the Judeo-Christian traditions of Australian society. The religious requirements within Civics and Citizenship come in Years 7 and 8, when students are between the ages of 11 and 14 (in most States and Territories Years 7 and 8 fall within secondary education. From 2015, it is only in South Australia that Year 7 remains in primary school). If the curriculum is followed as intended, by this age students would have developed a sense of the nature of parliamentary democracy in Australia, as well as the functioning of social and civic life. That is, they will (or at least should) be able to locate their learning about religion and faith in Australia within the context of a democratic and diverse political and social system.

The inclusion of the religious within Civics and Citizenship comes against a context where the teaching of religion that has occurred in public schools has largely been through forms of Special Religious Instruction – optional, predominantly Christian-based, religious teaching typically provided by faith-based organisations (Bouma and Halahoff, 2009; Byrne, 2012a; Goldberg, 2013; Maddox, 2014a; Gross and Rutland, 2015). According to a recent review of the Australian curriculum conducted by the current Liberal-led Coalition Federal government, the curriculum does not handle the place and contribution of religions ‘in a comprehensive or detailed fashion’ (Australian Government, 2014: 196). This finding, alongside the absence of a tradition of teaching general religious education in Australian public schools, raises important questions regarding *how* schools and teachers will include religion within Civics and Citizenship.

This article focuses on the inclusion of the religious within the new national Australian Curriculum subject of *Civics and Citizenship*. It draws on recent work which has suggested that religion remains important in understanding democratic life and communities in Australia, and suggests that as religion remains an important factor in understanding and shaping democratic citizenship in Australia this should be acknowledged within public schools increasingly characterized by their heterogeneity. To this end, it is argued that a constructivist, dialogical-based pedagogy aimed at encouraging inter-religious and intercultural understanding provides possibilities for taking the religious seriously within Civics and Citizenship education. The need for the sort of analysis provided here is pressing given that the Civics and Citizenship curriculum is currently being interpreted and implemented in Australian schools, and is given particular importance when we

consider both that Australia has an ‘inarticulateness in matters of religion’ (Maddox, 2009a: 361) and that ‘religion in public education has not been well researched’ (Byrne, 2014: 167).

Following this introduction the arguments are constructed around two main sections. The first sketches different interpretations of the secular and secularisation found within political/theological theory, and draws on recent work that has pointed to the endurance of religion within Australian political and public life. The second, more extensive, section focuses on the extent to which, by bringing together inter-religious dialogue and intercultural understanding, a constructivist dialogical approach may provide a useful possibility for incorporating learning about and from religion within Civics and Citizenship education.

Secularisation, the secular and the “persistence” of religion in Australian public life

In contrast to theories of secularisation that have posited the decline of the religious in contemporary societies, a serious body of work has established that religion remains (and in some contexts is increasing as) an important factor in political communities (Casanova, 2006; Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and Van Antwerpen, 2011). Recent work by both Marion Maddox (2014) and Cathy Byrne (2014) has done a great deal to explore the idea of secularism in the context of the continued role of religion in Australian public and democratic life. Recognition of the key features of this continued presence is important because, as Casanova (2006) reminds us, the actual experiences and patterns of secularisation can differ across societies. Drawing on the work of both Maddox and Byrne, this section seeks to explore these key features. To understand them is essential if we are to explicate their specific implications for teaching and learning in Civics and Citizenship (something to which both Maddox and Byrne briefly allude, but which I explore further in the next section) and if we are to try and avoid what Gearon (2012: 152) has identified as the ‘misrepresentation’ of religion within education.

To consider the implications for the teaching of Civics and Citizenship of what Byrne (2014) has referred to as the ‘persistence’ of religion in Australia requires us to think seriously about how the relationship between the secular and the religious can and should be understood within the context of democratic citizenship in Australia. The intention here is not to provide a full account of the endurance of religion in Australian public life (this has been provided recently in much fuller accounts than be accomplished here by both Maddox, 2014 and Byrne, 2014). Rather, it is to depict a general and summarized picture of the continued importance of religion as a factor within

democratic citizenship in the Australian context in order to highlight some key factors influencing how we might understand and approach the religious within Civics and Citizenship.

Secular is defined within the Civics and Citizenship curriculum's glossary as 'relating to the worldly rather than religion; things that are not regarded as religious, spiritual, or sacred. For example, a secular society is one governed by people's laws through parliament rather than by religious laws' (ACARA, 2013). The meaning of the concepts of the "secular", "secularism" and "secularisation" in their contemporary and wider usage are not, however, unambiguous (Gearon, 2012; Arthur, 2013), and the process associated with each are complex and contested (Goldstein, 2009). As Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and Van Antwerpen (2011: 5) remind us:

Secularism should be seen as a presence. It is *something*, and it is therefore in need of elaboration and understanding. Whether it is seen as an ideology, a worldview, a stance toward religion, a constitutional framework, or simply as an aspect of some other system - of science or a particular philosophical system - secularism is, rather than merely the absence of religion, something we need to think about.

Following the influential work of José Casanova (2006: 7), we can understand secularisation as relating to three particular claims regarding the place, role and extent of religion within contemporary contexts (see also Taylor, 2007 for a similar categorisation). First, the *regression of religious beliefs and practices' in modern societies*, often identified as an empirical fact on the basis of common statistical measures (such as religious attendance and self-identification). This regression has been felt particularly in Western Europe and has been attributed to a process of rationalization, since the Enlightenment, that has brought into question the validity of religious faith and beliefs. Second, the *retraction of religious beliefs out of public life and into the private realm*, exemplified in John Rawls' (1996) principle of public reason. According to this principle only arguments that are based on, and can be justified through, reason (rather than belief or dogma) should be considered acceptable in public discourse. This effectively requires citizens to "bracket out" certain viewpoints – including those based on a particular faith or religious foundation – in their civic deliberations, rendering public deliberation an inherently secularised process (see also Audi, 2000). Taken together, the first two theories of secularisation presented by Casanova inform a particular understanding of term "secular" which is abstracted from its duality with religion, and which is constituted by "irreligion" rather than a meaningful relationship between the religious and the secular (Casanova, 2011). The third form of secularisation within Casanova's schema refers to the *'differentiation of the secular spheres (state, economy, science)... from religious institutions and norms'* (Casanova, 2006: 7; emphasis added). This formulation can be understood both as a

normative goal – one might desire the separation of religion and institutions of the state – or as an empirical fact in the sense that in a number of democratic societies key institutions of the State are constitutionally separated from organised religion (most clearly illustrated in the establishment clause of the First Amendment of the United States of America’s Constitution).

Considering the three forms of secularisation within the Australian context highlights the continued presence of religion in Australian public life, as well as its impact on democratic citizenship. First, though some suggest that Australia, as with nations such as the UK, is experiencing declining levels in religiosity, the picture is more complex than this. Official figures concerning religious attendances and levels of self-identifying as members of a particular religion do evidence a decline (Stevenson, et al., 2010). With regard to the latter, the most recent census data in 2011 provides evidence of a continued slow waning in the levels of religious affiliations compared to previous censuses, and an increase in the number of those with no religious affiliation (22.3%). These trends do not *in and of themselves* mean that places of worship have *no* relevance the lives of Australians. Evidence points toward the claim that ‘Australia and its cities are places where religious affiliation has been strong and where organized and expressive forms of spirituality and religion have become increasingly diverse’ (Stevenson, et al., 2010: 324; see also Bouma, 2013). In other words, religion in Australia can be said to be changing in its nature, rather than declining *per se*. Of particular relevance here is Bouma’s (2006: 5) clarification in his contextual analysis of Australian society and culture that:

it is essential to correct a misapprehension that dominated the late twentieth-century discussion of religion and secularity: secular societies are not irreligious, antireligious or lacking in spirituality... Rather, in secular societies religion and spirituality have seeped out of the monopolistic control of formal organisations like churches. This has resulted in increased diversity of both organised religion and private spiritualities.

Bouma’s claim here attests to the continued, if changing, relevance of religion in people’s lives (see also, Boeve, 2012). A number of commentators have also cited the importance of increased religious diversity brought about by recent trends in immigration (Stevenson, et al., 2010; Byrne, 2014), whilst others have pointed also to the growth of particular forms of Christian faiths including Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism (Maddox, 2014; Byrne, 2014).

Second, and with regard to the retraction of faith-based ideas from public life, the Australian context continues to evidence the endurance of religions in democratic discourse. A central element of this has been the presence of faith in Australian political debate over the last fifteen years (Crabb, 2009; Maddox, 2009a;) Maddox's work has provided an extensive illustration of the influence of his Methodist upbringing and faith on John Howard, the Australian Prime Minister between 1996 and 2007, a period during which 'religion acquired a political importance long absent from Australian public life' (Maddox, 2009b). Similarly, in the lead-up to the 2013 Federal election, political journalist Annabel Crabb (2013) claimed that 'on paper, this should be the most theologically-charged campaign in Australian history', with the incumbent Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, describing himself as 'an old-fashioned Christian socialist' (Crabb, 2013) Though stating his Catholic faith, the opposition leader, and now Prime Minister, Tony Abbott made clear his view that 'while faith is a splendid thing in private life it can often be quite a misleading guide in public life' (Crabb, 2013). In addition, there are also numerous examples of religious groups in Australia making significant contributions to political debate on public policy and lobbying the government on particular (as, for example, in the Catholic Church's criticism of the cuts made by the Coalition Government to the Foreign Aid budget following the 2013 Federal election (Zwarts, 2013)).

Moreover, while religion continues to play an important role in Australian political discourse, it is also evident as a marker in the civic life, engagements and commitments of Australian citizens and residents. For example, faith organizations play a substantial role in the provision of welfare services within Australia, as well in the fields of international aid and development (Davies-Kildea, 2007). While there is a lack of specific evidence from the Australian context, research from other contexts suggests that affiliation with faith communities supports engagement in participatory forms of citizenship (Annette, 2013). Drawing on a large-scale study of young people's values and character in England, Arthur (2011: 310; see also Putnam and Campbell's work in the United States) found that:

if a pupil holds religious beliefs and is engaged in religious practice of some kind, it was more likely that they would also see influence on their character as coming from their local community... [and] those pupils who were religious in practice, whether Muslim or Christian, certainly had higher levels of self-understanding and demonstrated a greater commitment to society.

As Maddox (2009a: 356; comment in brackets added) contends ‘Historically, and still today, churches’ – and I would supplement this with other sites of religious worship – ‘have offered one avenue for civic involvement, leading some church members into more direct political engagement’.

Third, questions regarding the politically secular status of Australia typically centre on interpretations of Section 116 of The Australian Constitution, the text of which states that:

The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.

How Section 116 is understood is subject to its interpretation by the High Court of Australia. While Australia has no official State religion, various measures, such as the direct funding of some faith schools by Federal government as well as the controversial Federal funding of the National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program, have been permitted and are not viewed as being in contradiction to Section 116. According to Maddox (2009a: 350) this wider interpretation ‘allows the Commonwealth to give assistance to religion in general (the justification for state aid to religious schools) but not to favour one religion over another (Catholic, Protestant, Muslim and Jewish schools all benefit)’. Maddox (2014b) highlights the view of constitutional lawyer George Williams in light of these cases, who claims that Australians ‘assume’ there to be a ‘strong separation of church and state... but it’s not actually very strong... In fact, nobody’s ever succeeded in the High Court in arguing for separation’.

In each of these three areas we can see the complex relationship between faith, notions of the secular and civic life in Australia. Involved in each are issues that are both empirical (i.e. the extent and actual nature of religious practices within Australia) and normative (i.e. the role, recognition and representation of religion within the public sphere). The next section considers how teaching and learning might be approached within Civics and Citizenship education in ways that interrogate meanings of secular and the religious within a contemporary democratic and multi-faith society.

The possibility of an inter-religious, intercultural approach

In the absence of a dedicated subject of religious studies, Civics and Citizenship provides an important opportunity for exploring notions of the secular as well as for opening up learning about a range of faiths in Australian public schools. Civics and Citizenship provides the main subject discipline in the Australian Curriculum through which schools can respond to the condition described by Habermas cited at the beginning of this paper; namely, how one should think, feel and act as a participating citizen of religiously diverse communities. Recognising the role of Civics and Citizenship in this regard, however, begs two important questions. First, what sorts of pedagogical approaches might enable students to engage in the complexities alluded to in the previous section concerning the relationship between the religious and the secular in contemporary Australia?, and second, what are the likely challenges for teachers in advancing such learning? In response to these questions, this final section considers the potential role of inter-religious dialogue and intercultural understanding in providing a mechanism for exploring both the secular and the religious within Civics and Citizenship classrooms.

International research literature on education for citizenship points to the benefits in engaging students in deliberative learning, particularly in terms of understanding the interests and viewpoints of others (see, for example, Peterson, 2009; Hess, 2009). At the same time, the idea that dialogic learning can play a role in developing inter-religious understanding has gained increasing recognition over the last decade across a range of contexts (Jackson, 2008; Baumfield, 2010). A core intention of dialogic learning is to enable students to exchange viewpoints so that they can make their own perspectives known and also hear and *understand* the perspectives of others. It is this intention that is central to both inter-religious dialogue and intercultural understanding. Relevant here is the fact that *Intercultural Understanding* forms one of seven “general capabilities” that sit across the Australian curriculum. The general capability seeks to develop a range of personal and interpersonal knowledge and skills. These include students’ learning to explore and adopt a critical stance toward their own perspectives as well as investigating and critiquing the cultural perspectives of others. There is a clear intention that this should occur ‘through their interactions with people, texts and contexts across the curriculum’ and should involve them in conceptualising and balancing contested and divergent beliefs (ACARA, 2012c: 1).

Establishing classroom environments that are conducive to students being open in their exchange of viewpoints and where they feel safe to explore conflicting ideas requires particular pedagogical considerations. The work of Michael Grimmitt, is instructive in this regard. Grimmitt (2000: 217) proposes a constructivist model as a dialogue within which:

religious content is *always* brought into a dynamic relationship with critical and reflective thought... is *always* related to the constructions that pupils are using... the sequence of learning is *always* from encouraging egocentric interpretations of experience within *situated thought, through alternative contextualised interpretations* (as represented by interventions from pupils or the teacher), to *evaluative judgements* about the interests which each interpretation serves and expresses.

Exploring different perspectives (the religious and the non-religious) in this critical and contextualized way provides a possible approach through which students in Australian classrooms would not be concerned solely with the internal and structural cohesiveness of religions, but are also focused on how religions are expressed, presented and involved within the public and political sphere. This would involve students constructing their own meanings and understandings on the basis of a given stimulus, which are then challenged and revised in light of engagement with further stimuli, including teacher questioning, discussions with peers, and the representation of competing positions through various narrative-based media.

The form of inter-religious dialogue suggested here, is a process that requires a degree of “openness” on behalf of participants. As Wood et al. (2006: 7) explain while ‘openness in itself is not the guarantee of interculturalism, it provides the setting for interculturalism to develop’. In this sense – and recognizing the religious – intercultural dialogue requires those of religious faith to engage with secular ideas and those of no particular religious faith to engage with theological ideas. It is through a shared commitment to the give and take of dialogue that tensions between those of different religious commitments, as well as those between religious commitments, non-religious commitments and anti-religious commitments, can be explored. Moreover, through an ability to ‘seek clarification, articulate difference and formulate challenge’ such dialogue supports the development of a sense of self and identity central to education for citizenship (Castelli, 2012: 209; see also Byrne, 2012b). By recognizing the relational space that exists between the self and the other:

dialogue allows differing views and values to confront one another and develop.
Dialogue allows individuals to make their own ethical judgments by listening, reflecting, finding arguments and appraising, while it also constitutes an important

point of developing an understanding of one's own views and those of others.
(SNEA, 2000: 8).

The process involved in dialogue is relational in the sense that it involves and develops an understanding of the self *and* the other, requiring knowledge and understanding of one's own narrative and those of others. As Barnes (2002: 16) suggests, 'the task is to be respectful of otherness without slipping into the relativism of incommensurability'. Moreover, by focusing on the sharing of views and interests, inter-religious dialogue also makes it possible for students to understand that faiths are not fixed and static bodies of knowledge and belief, but have their own internal nuances and contestations (Copley, 2005; Reid, 2011). Evidence from the *Religion in Education: A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European countries* (REDco) project suggests not only that 'students wish for peaceful coexistence across difference and believe this to be possible', but also that students view this as dependent on 'knowledge about each other's religions and worldviews' (Jackson, 2008: 35). The study also found that 'students who learn about religious diversity in school are *more* willing to have conversations about religion/beliefs with students of other backgrounds than those who do not' (Jackson, 2008: 35; emphasis in original).

A further, and related, pedagogical question concerns the extent to which intercultural dialogue may enable students not just to learn *about* religion, but also to learn *from* religion. Understanding the notion of the secular as an important principle within Australian political life provides an illustrative example of how constructivist, dialogical approaches can enable learning from religion. A narrow interpretation of the secular understands it in terms of the absence and removal of religion from public life. From this perspective, the secular may be construed as, in a sense, being in conflict with the religious. This understanding can mistakenly result from viewing the secular as an achievement of Enlightenment thinking, resulting in a prioritizing of reason and rationality – that is ideas not dependent on faith, or to return to Rawls, comprehensive moral doctrines – in public discourse (see Casanova, 2006 for a developed critique of this reading). This line of argument, neglects, however, the fact that the secular has its roots *within* religious ideas (Casanova, 2006; Arthur, 2008). As Talal Asad (1993: 192) suggests, 'the historical process of secularization effects a remarkable ideological inversion... For at one time 'the secular' was part of a theological discourse'. Through an engagement with religious ideas, students are presented with more extensive possibilities for conceptual understanding – in this example, the concept of the secular – than would be the case if religious ideas were excluded. Following Byrne (2014: 20) this would enable students

to view the secular through a ‘theological lens’. In other words, religion itself can provide a viable intellectual resource for exploring the principle of the secular nation.

Learning *from* religion in this way also opens up various possibilities for young people to learn about themselves and their wider communities. One such possibility arises from the study of concepts – such as justice and community – that are central to citizenship but can also be approached from religious worldviews. Adopting a critical perspective that includes, rather than excludes, religious perspectives is likely to expose students to a range of understandings, thereby expanding rather than restricting the richness of political dialogue. Teece (2010: 101) suggests that students are thus enabled to:

widen and deepen their understanding of both what lies at the heart of the religious and their interpretation of the human condition. In this sense learning about and from religions can be said to be a dialogue between the [students’] life-worlds and the worlds of the religions.

By coming into contact with religious perspectives students are able to reflect on their own identities, including how these relate to social and political viewpoints and engagement. As such engaging with religious perspectives plays an important role in students’ development of reflexive standpoints (Jackson, 2015).

Engaging with diverse religious perspectives as part of Civics and Citizenship learning has a connected benefit. Religious perspectives hold the potential for engaging students with questions and insights concerning the meaning of the good within public life – including what constitutes a good life itself. Indeed, recognising the potential of religious perspectives in this regard seems essential. As Walter Feinburg (2014) has suggested in his recent exploration of justifications for teaching religious education in US public schools, the absence of religious education can serve to restrict rather than develop student autonomy as it limits the range of conceptions of the good that students encounter. It is in classrooms which recognise religious perspectives that young people can ‘learn to recognize strangers as inheriting a shared fate and as co-agents in building a common future’ (Feinburg, 2014: 401). Similarly, and as Grimmitt (2000b) suggests, through engaging with religious perspectives teachers will be supporting students to develop an empathetic understanding of the positions of others (which may of course include their peers) through dialogical interaction. Such understanding is central to the needs of deliberative and reflexive forms of democratic

engagement (Peterson, 2009). In this sense, the sort of pedagogical approach outlined above is instrumental to the extent that teachers build their curricular foci in ways that religious content can support students in their critical engagement with ideas and experiences (their own and those of others) related to democratic citizenship. Crucially, this includes students' own constructions as a basis for the development of further thinking and elaboration (Grimmitt, 2000a, 2000b).

So far in this section, the focus has been on the sorts of pedagogical approaches that might make genuine and effective inter-religious, intercultural understanding possible within Civics and Citizenship education. It would be remiss, however, to neglect the challenges in achieving this end. It was suggested in the introduction that there is some difficulty in conceptualizing religion in an Australian context given that public schools are premised on the basis of being compulsory, free and secular, and the absence of a tradition of teaching general religious education. In addition, official guidance for the curricular time allocated to Civics and Citizenship suggests it should equate to around twenty hours per year. Perhaps most crucially, there is a general lack of teacher preparation or professional development for teaching about either Civic and Citizenship education or general religious education in Australian public schools. No dedicated, specialist pre-service teacher education programs for exist at present for lower secondary education, with Civics and Citizenship typically subsumed within specialist courses for Humanities and Social Sciences (within which pre-service teachers learn to teach History, Geography, Economics and Business, alongside Civics and Citizenship). In addition, most pre-service teachers taking Humanities and Social Sciences as a specialism also study a second curriculum subject alongside this (English, Mathematics, Science, a Language or an Arts, for example). There is a similar lack of specialist support for in-service teachers. For example, the body responsible for the Australian Curriculum, ACARA, has not provided co-ordinated professional development for the new curriculum, leaving responsibility for this to the individual States and Territories, whom have tended to focus on the first two waves of subjects (Maths, English, Science, History, Health and Physical Education, Languages and Geography). This lack of education and development for teachers is notable and not inconsequential. Working in increasingly heterogeneous classrooms and preparing students for democratic participation in diverse communities, requires teachers to give some thought to their own positions vis-à-vis not only their students, but also the wider communities within which they work. To do so necessarily involves seeking to understand the variety of faith positions represented in their classroom and communities (including those of no-faith at all), as well as the ways in which these positions shape political and social standpoints and actions.

Conclusion

The barriers just identified are not insignificant, and they add to the need for greater recognition of the religious in the Australian curriculum for Civics and Citizenship. The analysis here has sought to explore some key issues surrounding the contested place of religion in the Civics and Citizenship curriculum in Australian public schools, including both empirical and normative questions relating to the role and place of religion in Australian governance and public life. It has also emphasised the role that dialogical approaches could play in strengthening the teaching of the religious in Australian public schools. Critical and reflexive dialogue provides possibilities for young Australians to develop their understanding of democratic citizenship in heterogenous communities in a way that encourages inter- and intra-personal development. For this reason, the importance of learning about religions relates not just to the rationale of Civics and Citizenship, nor for that matter to that of the wider learning area of Humanities and Social Sciences – though of course they connect fundamentally to these. Rather, and as suggested in the introduction, its importance relates to essential questions regarding the purpose and content of public education. Taught well, recognising the religious will involve students in exploring the nature of religion in Australia, including normative questions about the wider role of religion and faith in Australian public life. Such an approach is necessary if young Australians are to build a developed and holistic sense of themselves and others.

Notes on Contributor

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