

Teaching religion in public schools. Why bother?

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Kylie Orr



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I am a non-practising Catholic who married an atheist. I'm also a non-practising virgin. Perhaps that last point is superfluous.

My son attends the local government primary school where "CRE" (Christian Religious Education) is an optional part of the curriculum. With my husband an outspoken atheist, I was convinced he would not endorse our son attending CRE. When he said, "sure, why not?" I was stunned.

The minor detail we overlooked was the "Christian" part of CRE. You see, I thought it was just "Religious Education". I support an education in religion – open the young boy's eyes to the many different belief systems in the world; teach tolerance and understanding and perhaps he will find something that rings true for him. He is only six, so I was anchoring all this on the assumption that, in time, he will make his own decisions about his spiritual beliefs, armed with an accurate cross section of information.

The lack of attention to the most influential component of CRE, the "Christian" part, has put us in a spot of bother. It started when the child came home and proudly announced that God made everything. He showed his atheist father a workbook with the following activity.

Fill in the blanks:

G_D created the sun
G_D created the sky
G_D created the earth

Meh. I thought it was pretty harmless. Perhaps even mildly amusing. God is up there with Santa for me. It's nice to believe if that's what floats your boat. If your faith brings you joy, and helps you lead a better life, go for it. If you are Christian and find it offensive that I have put God on the same level as Santa, I apologise. If you are of the Santa faith and find it offensive that I have put him on the same level as God, I apologise. If you think Santa IS God, then come join my camp.

We could take the child out of CRE, but after three terms of attending, he would see that as punishment and there's no point making a dinner party out of a simple supper.

I attended a Catholic primary school and my husband, who didn't, knows more about the bible than me. I spent most of my church time counting hats and watching adults try to pick their nose behind handkerchiefs. Fortunately, our church had in-built entertainment in the form of an alter boy who was a sandwich short of a picnic. He liked to swing on the life-size cross behind the priest and call out people's full names at the top of his voice in the middle of service. "HELLO KYLIE ORR!" coupled with an enthusiastic full-bodied wave. He made muffling laughter in church a true physical challenge. I paid miniscule attention to the mass, or the mass brainwashing that was apparently taking place. This is why I was unconcerned about the topic matter of my son's CRE class.

My husband was not so nonchalant.

He flipped his lid and started ranting about brainwashing and how if this is the best Christianity can come up with to teach their religion, then it's not saying much for the religion. Sharing basic values of the Christian philosophy was ok, but teaching six year olds creationism was where he drew the line. He challenged my six year old, asking for proof of God's existence, even recommending some questions he could ask his CRE teacher next week.

"Not to mention, how uncreative a teaching exercise to have a "fill in the blank" task with the same word and same missing letter! Education is supposed to teach them to think and analyse not to repeat after me!"

He doesn't yell much, my husband. But he yelled about this. For a long time. So, I let the man vent. I reminded him the kid's six and probably will have no recollection of the class when he's twenty and that perhaps we'll not sign him up for CRE in Grade One. The mistake I made was asking the husband how religious brainwashing was any different than his obsession with his football team. I reminded him that he told our sons *"you can barrack for anyone you like, but if it's anyone other than Carlton, you can't live here."*

Hilarious to me but not too intelligent given the man's state of mind at the time.

We have reached a compromise. The child will finish the year attending CRE and he will learn guitar during the class next year. I have asked my husband to shut his piehole unless there is sweet apple pie coming out. It's not fair to our six year old to pummel him about the existence of God when he is simply repeating what he learnt that day. And for a six year old, their teacher is the closest thing to God anyway.

I calmly explained to my son that some people believe in God and some people don't. Daddy doesn't (I wonder if he'd pick up on that prior to our little chat).

My husband interjected with *“I believe in cabbage”*. Thanks. Thanks very much. I ignored the overgrown child and continued counselling the actual child with the need to respect other people’s beliefs and reiterated the most important thing is to be kind to others. Vague. Wanky. But age-appropriate.

This little drama in the Orr household has made me wonder why they actually teach religion in public schools? I would understand some class exercises about different beliefs, perhaps a simple introduction to religious philosophy geared to six year olds, but to specialise in only one religion at a non-religious school is a little odd. Before you start your own rant about how we should have read the permission form properly and then we could have avoided the drama, I want to point out I welcomed the confrontation. I like my children to be exposed to diverse experiences and this was my son’s first real super challenge with his father on the topic of religion. I’m looking forward to son Vs husband in next week’s instalment: *“Politics and George W Bush - What the W really stands for.”*

Do you think specific religion should be taught in non-denominational public schools?

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