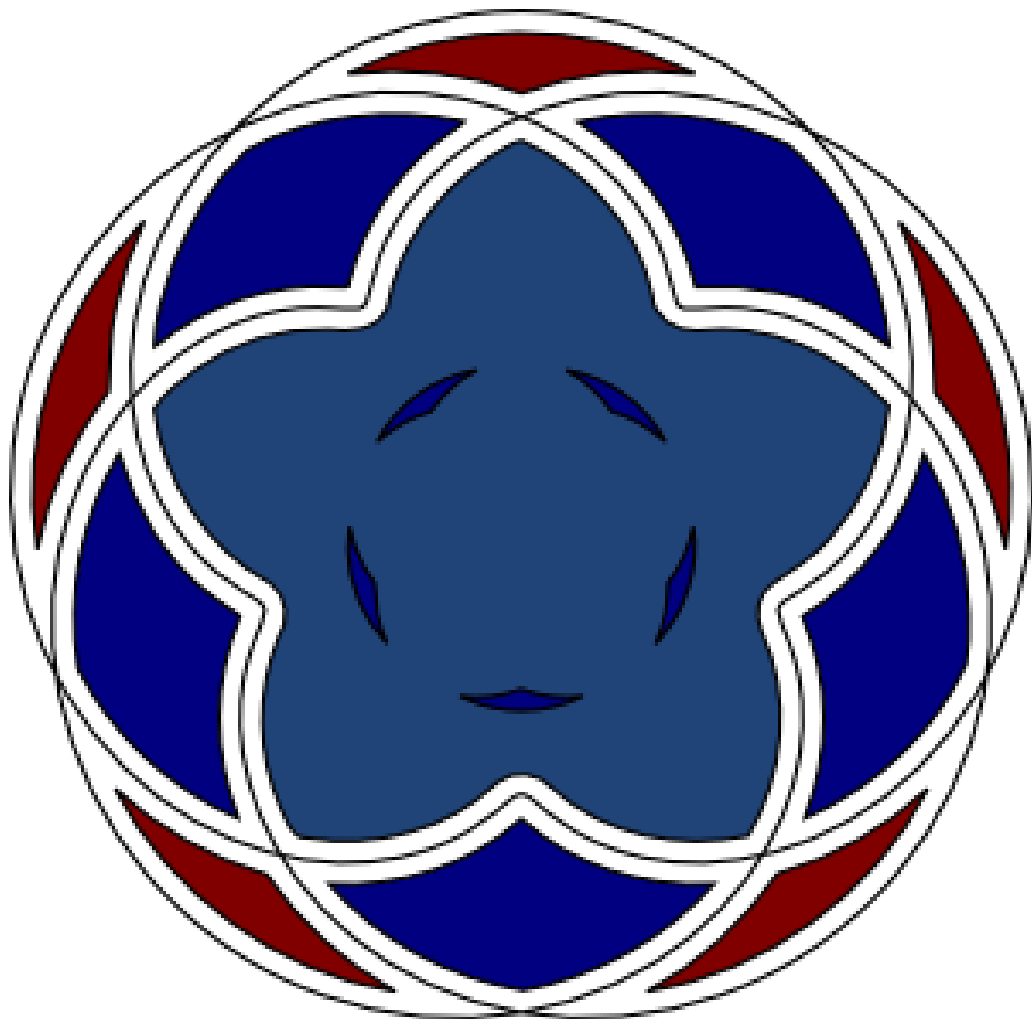


1997-2012
15 YEARS ON: ANOTHER LOOK AT
THE FIVE STRAND APPROACH
TO RELIGIOUS AND VALUES EDUCATION



DR PETER VARDY

Take another look at THE FIVE STRAND APPROACH to Religious and Values Education!

Dr Peter Vardy

In September 2012 it will be 15 years since the AHISA national conference at Geelong Grammar School which launched the five strands approach to Religious and Values Education and led to a resurgence of interest in the subject. The world has changed a great deal since 1997 and 15 years is a long time in schools.

Apart from economic boom and bust, the threat of terrorism and protracted wars in the Middle East, apart from growth in China and the inexorable march of SmartPhones, iPads and FaceBook, we have witnessed a change in peoples' attitudes to religion and to Religious Education.

The threat of fundamentalism has become more apparent. Seeing passenger planes crash into buildings made everybody question how anyone could see this as God's work, how anyone could have such certainty in their own beliefs that causing their own violent death alongside the death and injury of thousands of innocents seems a reasonable response. The difficulty inherent in defending liberalism became glaringly obvious; this led some to reject it and others to try to enforce liberal values, but either way liberalism declined.

We have seen the rise of “celebrity atheism” in the west, building the belief that “*religion is the root of all evil*”, that it is based on ignorance and even anti-intellectual and that vulnerable young people should be “protected” from religion by parents and even governments. Popular science, always decades behind the curve of research and informed opinion, has now reached the apex of materialism, the height of faith in Darwinism and a near-certainty that science will soon have all the answers.

War and the threat of war, when combined with recession, hardship &

increasing migration, has led many to retreat into the familiarity of their own communities and become more suspicious of difference. Social conservatism has come to dominate large parts of the world and has fostered a swing to the right in politics. Social Networking, the decline of real communities and the growth of “virtual” ones has enabled people to choose who they interact with and choose not to have to encounter difference. Status is uncovered at a single tap, numbers of “friends”, interests and activities advertised to the world, human beings forced into categories and turned into data to be bought and sold.

Quantity of information has replaced quality in knowledge and understanding. Very many people value the traditional over the innovative, the measurable over the difficult to define and conformity over independent critical thinking; this has had an effect on education, on what parents choose for their children and why and on which policies they vote for.

Nevertheless, the Postmodern era is in decline. Whereas today’s parents grew up in a world where it was fashionable to espouse relativism, to reject metanarratives and see life as meaningless to the point of absurdity, their children see the results of intellectual apathy, of people giving up the quest for truth when it got difficult or adopting “a truth” because it was convenient, and want something more. Although the language of values has been discredited, young people today want to be able to discuss right and wrong, even good and evil; they want to engage with other people and are open to faith and belief in something ultimate.

Today’s children are often miserable, often more so in so-called “developed” nations. Neither Australia nor New Zealand provided data for many of the tables drawn up in the comprehensive UNICEF report into child well-being in developed nations in 2007,¹ but where data was available it suggested that this principle applies in Australasia as much as in other parts of the developed world.

Factors which seem to contribute to low self-esteem, insecurity,

¹ <http://www.unicef.org/media/files/ChildPovertyReport.pdf>

negative feelings and engaging in risky behaviour include school and poor relationships with peers and parents, which mean that today’s young people spend little quality time talking to other people and often feel alone and stressed about expectations placed on them now and for the future..²

It must be for schools and teachers to provide opportunities for young people to explore their feelings and ideas, to contextualise their experiences and develop their full potential (including beliefs and values) in a rigorous manner. Few parents are equipped to do this; their own education may have been lacking and they spend little time with their children in any case. Children need a rounded education and society needs them to have a rounded education; child wellbeing leads to a well-adjusted, flourishing adult population.

² These changes and their relevance to education are set out in the preamble to http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/Shape_of_the_Australian_Curriculum.pdf (see pages 4-5) and also in the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, December 2008, p.13.

A Whole School Approach

The original “Five Strands Approach” aimed to help Australasian schools ensure that Religious and Values Education, soon named “RaVE”, was rigorous and relevant and part of a whole-school determination to take the less easily measurable aspects of education seriously, a whole-school intention to prepare young people to become rounded and thinking adults, social, moral, spiritual and cultural beings rather than just economic units.

It was no accident that the movement began with a national conference of AHISA Head Teachers in 1997. It was clear from the beginning that for RaVE to be successful it needs to be part of a broader vision and strategy as well as driven by inspirational and authoritative teaching. Without commitment from school management, governors and the wider educational system there is a tendency for RaVE to be marginalised and for students to perceive it as “less important” than other subjects.

It is also no accident that RaVE has flourished in schools where the Head Teacher has remained committed - or has been inspired to appreciate the potential in RaVE by a close colleague – and that RaVe may have faltered in schools where a new Head Teacher has arrived who has had little opportunity to appreciate what the Five Strands Approach is all about.

Back in 1997 I founded the Dialogue Australasia Network with Paul Sheahan (then Headmaster of Melbourne Grammar School), John Inverarity (then Headmaster Hale School, Perth), Chris Gleeson (then Headmaster St Ignatius College, Sydney) and Beverley Zimmerman (Newcastle Catholic Education Office) because schools needed leadership on this issue. We aimed to provide this through conferences, a journal and a website and through teacher professional development opportunities. The organisation was successful and peak membership exceeded 450 schools, but responsibility for membership was often devolved from busy managers to classroom teachers and in some schools the holistic vision, which originally gave rise to the Five Strands Approach, was lost.

Since 2004, and especially since 2009, the focus of DAN has been on training and resourcing classroom teachers and, whilst this is obviously important work, the equally important task of helping educational leaders to have and act on a broader vision has been left to one side. Further, increasing numbers of schools are using the “Five Strands Approach” without subscribing to DAN, or are doing excellent work in developing their own ethos and curricula entirely independently or in association with local education offices. Charles Sturt University pioneered the provision of rigorous initial teacher training in Australia; some highly-trained specialists are now in schools.

The state education system has also made progress, leaving the entirely secular and value free (in both senses) approach to education behind in favour of a broader vision. The “National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century” (1999) acknowledged that “*Schooling provides a foundation for young Australians’ intellectual, physical, social, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development*”, and the “Values Education Study” (2003), which acknowledged the need for an integrated approach to Values in the curriculum, starting with the ethos and working to provide implicit opportunities through structures and all academic subjects and explicit opportunities for students to develop as whole people.

Building on these studies, in 2005 the Government issued Australia’s first official values education policy: The National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools (NFVEAS³). The implementation of which has led some schools to offer a broader education and to consider how their offering relates to the social, moral spiritual and cultural development of young people.⁴

As was the case in the UK when policy endorsed implicit “values education” during the last Labour administration, the Australian experience has been uneven. Defining values outside of a religious framework is not easy, and it can lead to accusations that schools are

³http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/_resources/Framework_PDF_version_for_the_web.pdf

⁴ See <http://www.valueseducation.edu.au/values/> for a range of current documentation, training and resources.

being encouraged to foster social conservatism. Teachers often feel nervous about what is expected and without training and time, confidence and conviction, their planning and delivery of opportunities tends to be a “tick-box exercise”.

The Government is obviously not satisfied with Values Education as it stands, and is making plans to address the need for opportunities for students to develop socially, morally, spiritually and culturally through the new Australian Curriculum, which is based on the educational goals for young Australians outlined in the 2008 Melbourne Declaration, namely to become...

1. Successful learners:

- develop their capacity to learn and play an active role in their own learning
- have the essential skills in literacy and numeracy and are creative and productive users of technology, especially ICT, as a foundation for success in all learning areas
- are *able to think deeply and logically, and obtain and evaluate evidence in a disciplined way* as the result of studying fundamental disciplines
- are creative, innovative and resourceful, and are able to solve problems in ways that draw upon a range of learning areas and disciplines
- are able to plan activities independently, collaborate, work in teams and communicate ideas
- are *able to make sense of their world and think about how things have become the way they are*
- are on a pathway towards continued success in further education, training or employment, and acquire the skills to make informed learning and employment decisions throughout their lives
- are *motivated to reach their full potential.*

2. Confident individuals:

- *have a sense of self-worth, self-awareness and personal identity* that enables them to manage their emotional, mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing
- have a sense of optimism about their lives and the future — are enterprising, show initiative and use their creative abilities
- *develop personal values and attributes such as honesty, resilience, empathy and respect for others*
- *have the knowledge, skills, understanding and values to establish and maintain healthy, satisfying lives*
- have the confidence and capability to pursue university or post-secondary vocational qualifications leading to rewarding and productive employment
- *relate well to others and form and maintain healthy relationships*

- ***are well prepared for their potential life roles*** as family, community and workforce members
- embrace opportunities, make rational and informed decisions about their own lives and accept responsibility for their own actions.

3. Active and informed citizens:

- ***act with moral and ethical integrity***
- ***appreciate Australia’s social, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity***, and have an understanding of Australia’s system of government, history and culture
- understand and acknowledge the value of Indigenous cultures and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians
- are committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice, and participate in Australia’s civic life
- ***are able to relate to and communicate across cultures, especially the cultures and countries of Asia***
- work for the common good, in particular sustaining and improving natural and social environments
- ***are responsible global and local citizens.***

I have highlighted the particular goals which the Five Strands Approach to RaVE has always sought to address (though that is not to say that the approach does not contribute to other goals as well). It is clear that within Independent Schools where it is implemented the Five-Strands RaVE curriculum will contribute substantially to students achieving the educational aims that will otherwise be addressed through the prescribed content of other subject-areas, and if I may say it, probably to such students achieving these aims more fully.

The Australian Curriculum has, of course, attracted a good deal of criticism, not least for the implicit values which it represents and espouses which, according to John Roskam, the Executive Director of the Institute for Public Affairs, and to “*The National Curriculum: A Critique*” (launched by the federal Shadow Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne, last year) the National Curriculum

“ignores the influence of Christianity; neglects Australia’s role in developing the principles of democratic liberalism in the 1800s; presents a narrow and politically partisan assessment of the concept of human rights; is hostile to the role of private enterprise and capitalism and adopts a postmodern

approach to the teaching of English.”

Importantly for RaVE, the curriculum does ignore the influence of Christianity and largely fails to ensure that students have the tools to reflect on the nature of ideas such as liberalism, rights or ethical standards and form their own views in relation to a critical appraisal of the options rather than in relation to pressure to conform with poorly articulated principles which are never clearly argued for.

We could and should be aspiring to higher standards.

Whilst it will obviously be difficult for any Australian Government to go against the 19th Century declaration that Australian Education should be “secular, compulsory and free” explicitly, we have to acknowledge that times have changed and a Victorian approach to education, formed in response to colonialism and religious indoctrination, is hardly going to serve the citizens of tomorrow’s world.

An article in “*The Age*”⁵ was recently entitled “*Australian Religious Education 19th Century*”. It reported on the possibility of non-confessional Religion and Ethics being included as part of Civics and Citizenship in the new curriculum and on a Sydney Curriculum Board forum, which heard that Australia’s approach to teaching about Religion is antiquated and misguided.

Many people in Australasia mistakenly believe that RaVE is actually Religious Instruction. To avoid such confusion and definitively I would like to say that it is not!

If faith-schools choose to instruct students in the beliefs and practices of their particular tradition that is not part of RaVE; it should be in addition to the RaVE curriculum and not in place of it.

I would go further and argue that ideally Religious Instruction and RaVE should be carried out by different teachers, in different classrooms and that the lessons should be labelled in different ways on the timetable. How else are teachers to embrace the non-

⁵ November 21st 2011 see <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/australian-religious-education-19th-century-20111120-1npdm.html>

confessional, academic, critical and inclusive approach necessary for good RaVE?

In 2007, in Madrid, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) published one of the most important statements about the value of teaching about Religions and Beliefs. Drawing on a conference in Toledo, which brought together 36 experts from around the world, the “*Toledo Guiding Principles on teaching about Religions and Beliefs in public schools*” concluded ⁶

- i. *Knowledge about religions and beliefs can reinforce appreciation of the importance of respect for everyone’s right to freedom of religion or belief, foster democratic citizenship, promote understanding of societal diversity and, at the same time, enhance social cohesion.*
- ii. *Knowledge about religions and beliefs has the valuable potential of reducing conflicts that are based on lack of understanding for others’ beliefs and of encouraging respect for their rights.*
- iii. *Knowledge about religions and beliefs is an essential part of a quality education. It is required to understand much of history, literature, and art, and can be helpful in broadening one’s cultural horizons and in deepening one’s insight into the complexities of past and present.*
- iv. *Teaching about religions and beliefs is most effective when combined with efforts to instil respect for the rights of others, even when there is disagreement about religions or beliefs. The right to freedom of religion or belief is a universal right and carries with it an obligation to protect the rights of others, including respect for the dignity of all human beings.*
- v. *An individual’s personal religious (or non-religious) beliefs do not provide sufficient reason to exclude that person from teaching about religions and beliefs. The most important considerations in this regard relate to professional expertise, as well as to basic attitudes towards or commitment to human rights in general and freedom of religion or belief in particular.*
- vi. *Reasonable adaptations of policies in response to distinctive religious needs may be required to avoid violation of rights to freedom of religion or belief. Even when not strictly required as a matter of law, such adaptations and flexibility contribute to the building of a climate of tolerance and mutual respect.*

⁶ see pages 76-77 of the document, which may be downloaded from <http://www.osce.org/odihr/29154>

- vii. *Where compulsory courses involving teaching about religions and beliefs are sufficiently neutral and objective, requiring participation in such courses as such does not violate the freedom of religion or belief (although states are free to allow partial or total opt-outs in these settings).*

The Toledo Guiding Principles obviously endorse the rationale for the Five Strands Approach, the approach taken by many Australian Independent schools since 1997, and are foundational in many countries around the world – from Eire to Turkey to the USA. In 2009 Australia became a “Partner for Cooperation” with the OSCE – surely the time has come for Australians to re-examine their attitudes to teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools in line with the research and the experience of so many other countries?

There is obviously a long way to go, and even if non-confessional religion and ethics gets beyond the discussion stages in National Curriculum planning, it seems unlikely to make a substantial impact unless the case is made consistently and at all levels.

I have been surprised by the general silence on this issue from DAN's executive board and from committed member schools and urge people to contribute to the debate before it is too late. Surely our 15 years of experience in delivering rigorous non-confessional RaVE in Australasian classrooms makes us uniquely qualified to comment on the place of Religion and values in the National Curriculum?

As a Brit I am reticent about diving into an Australian discussion – but I know from experience in the UK how important this discussion really is. In 1988 the UK reinforced its legal requirement for all schools to deliver RE, (and specified for the first time that this should address all the major world religions and take up 5% of curriculum time) but at the same time it introduced a National Curriculum in all subjects except RE!

The resulting confusion allowed for an unprecedented growth in examined Religious Studies at 16+ and 18+ (last year over 500,000 students took GCSE RS, 40,000 took AS and 27,000 A2 – the subject was much more popular than Geography and was catching up with

History). Nevertheless, this growth did not represent real growth in what we would call RaVE.

Increasingly narrow papers in the Philosophy of Religion and Ethics came to dominate the curriculum for all students after the age of 14, opportunities to study religions or religious texts, to learn from stillness and silence at a senior level all-but vanished from RE classrooms in England.

I have to acknowledge my own involvement in this; my textbooks, teaching resources and training days (focussed on the Philosophy of Religion and Ethics) were extremely popular with teachers - and offered them an easy way to get excited about their subject and to enthuse young people, to attract numbers and secure their positions in school. I kept expecting other academics to do the same for Biblical Studies or Comparative Religion, but nothing happened...

The lack of a National Curriculum in RE when one was present and enforced in all other subjects, made it possible for teachers to shape the subject content according to what was popular and gave them every incentive to do so. Although RE had legal protection, managers always feel that RE is a “soft target” for cuts if it is not popular with students and parents; school inspections have few “teeth” to enforce the law on RE if the school community is satisfied.

As Professor James C Conroy found in the course of an extensive research project into RE in British schools, conducted from 2008-2011 and published recently, *“Most state schools spend £1 or less on each child per annum on materials and books for religious education. And even when RE is included in the examination portfolio of a school, teachers are too often expected to deliver the GCSE/Standard Grade syllabus in a shorter time than that allowed for other subjects.”* In an article in *The Tablet* (March 2012) He states *“RE in Britain is under-resourced, torn between competing aims, and has become overburdened by having to include other subjects (from sex to citizenship). While governments insist on RE’s importance in theory, they marginalise it in practice”*

It is worth noting that the “golden age” of RE in the UK is over and that the present coalition government have sounded a death-knell for the

subject in the last 12 months - by simultaneously labelling it a “soft” subject, excluding it from consideration in school league tables and removing all of the school inspector’s ability to criticise schools which do not offer it!

With the benefit of hindsight it would have been better if the content of RE curricula was specified along with the content of other subjects – or if the government had resisted the urge to prescribe content at all.

The UK experience has been that as soon as Government takes responsibility for curriculum content, schools and teachers see it as a maximum, not a minimum standard. Whatever policy documents say, in practice teachers will deliver what is specified more and more thoroughly rather than taking a risk and adding topics to the core curriculum. When they do not, they are often criticised by managers, parents and even pupils for forcing students to do “unnecessary work” and inhibiting their chances of doing well at what is specified.

Further, the national curriculum will fail to deliver the much-vaunted consistency of experience which facilitates the movement of students between schools and between states. The scheduling of content must needs be left to schools and there is just as much chance that a student moving between schools will miss topics or duplicate them when both schools are following a national curriculum as when they are not.

Further, the national curriculum will encourage government to interfere more frequently and in more detail in what happens in schools and individual classrooms. In the UK the introduction of the National Curriculum was followed by the introduction of increasingly detailed national school-league tables, value added statistics and a degree of teacher performance-related pay. Competition was enabled and encouraged between schools and between examination boards – where there had been national ownership and control, this was devolved to private companies, trusts and charities. The result was that education became commercialised and everyone’s focus was on results and what could be easily measured, on systems designed to guarantee results and avoid risk and on ways to ensure that measured standards rose year by year...

Newspapers have recently exposed UK examiners for telling teachers who pay to attend training sessions what will be on examination papers - even for bragging that their exam is "easier" than those offered by other providers. Chief examiners are routinely offered book-contracts with leading publishers and are often tempted to ensure good sales by putting obscure topics on the syllabus that can only be covered with reference to their own texts. The UK system is corrupt and is failing our young people.

Many UK parents look enviously at the Australasian education system because they perceive it to be more traditional and values-based, to value the whole child rather than just pressurising them to get grades. Popular television programmes show families relocating to Sydney, or Perth or Wellington to access good schools – not just (as was previously the case) to get a bigger house!

It would be a pity if Australia ignored the warnings and chose to follow a path which will, in all probability, lead to a decline in educational standards and the loss of a national advantage (real or perceived). Wouldn't it be better to seize the opportunity offered by social and economic growth to implement a forward looking and different plan for education, one which will equip today's young people for the challenges of tomorrow's world.

As Eric Hoffer remarked *“In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.”* Just as teaching young people to operate Windows Vista or Office 2010 in IT lessons is rather short-sighted, failing to teach them to think critically, to appreciate diversity and different forms of knowledge and belief will not prepare fully rounded adults.

Teaching Values, Religion, Ethics is not just about imparting a received body of knowledge it is about developing awareness, skills and an attitude which will equip people to respond to culture, to other people, ethical challenges, big questions and difficult human experiences effectively.

Re-Examining the Five Strands

I believe that the time has come for us all to take another look at the Five Strands Approach to RaVE, think about why it is important, how it can be improved and how we can each contribute to improving the educational opportunities for the next generation of young people.

From the outset, the Five Strands Approach drew on best practice in RE in the UK, developed in the period following the 1988 Education Act into a model which many countries admired for offering non-confessional opportunities for young people to learn both about and from religions, encouraging them to see different traditions as various human answers to the “big questions” which affect us all, rather than as quaint cultural practices. This approach made it possible for those of all faiths and none to be taught RE side by side in classes delivered by teachers of any faith or none. It was hoped that the results of a comprehensive programme of such RE would be...

- A. **An increased interest in religion and beliefs as essential expressions of our shared human experience** rather than as “optional extras” or obsolete psychological or sociological crutches. An appreciation that there is more to life than can be explained or expressed in “scientific” terms and an understanding of the use of symbol, myth and story, shared silence, stillness or aesthetic experience etc. to communicate about the broader human experience.
- B. **A greater tolerance of difference and appreciation of common humanity**, leading to better community cohesion and reducing tension and possible conflicts between different religious or ethnic groups. The ability to understand the relationship between beliefs and actions, and the reasons for the diversity of points of view concerning issues which affect us. This should enable young people to predict how people will respond to such issues and help them to behave sensitively in future life.
- C. **Better social, moral spiritual and cultural awareness**, which feeds into academic progress within many other subjects on the curriculum and builds students’ sense of personal identity and value in the long term. An appreciation of the importance

of the outward expression of inward beliefs and values, the significance of ritual, dress, custom etc. to people and the reasons why people make strong judgements based on outward signs.

- D. **Stronger thinking skills**; specifically a better ability to analyse, evaluate and construct arguments in relation to many and diverse pieces of evidence, strong discussion skills including the ability to listen actively and to articulate a point of view clearly and persuasively. A willingness to challenge and re-evaluate personal beliefs in the light of new experience and evidence, and to expect others to do the same.

In summary, the Five Strands Approach recommended that schools implement a whole-school scheme of work for RaVE with reference to five interrelated elements, which characterise rigorous, relevant opportunities to learn about and from Religion and Belief.

1. **Textual Strand**

An appreciation of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures (and of the Judeo/Christian heritage which underpins much modern culture)

2. **Values Strand**

Offers both the opportunity to consider ways of determining right and wrong and the opportunity to consider contemporary challenges, how different religious and other groups respond to them and why.

3. **Philosophy Strand**

Introduces young people to central areas in Philosophy of Religion, including the nature of God, arguments for and against His existence, etc.

4. **World Religions Strand**

Become familiar with the main World Religions

5. **Affective Strand**

Appreciate the value of stillness and silence.

The strands should inform planning and students should be offered opportunities to address each at every level of their educations, rather than just sequentially. Obviously RaVE would be unbalanced if young people only learned about the Bible when in Primary School and only had the opportunity to address “big questions” in the Philosophy of Religion in Year 12! The “spiral” model of curriculum planning was used.

From the outset it was envisaged that the “Five Strands Approach” would be conducted within a framework which...

- Values every individual, celebrating achievements of all sorts and aiming to bring out the full potential of each child, not just training them to achieve measurable results in examinations.
- Allows RaVE to be non-confessional; does not seek to use these lessons to “impose” ideas or beliefs on young people, to “train” them to think in a certain way and not to question. Sees Religious faith as the result of a personal quest, where the journey itself is central, that there should be room for ambiguity and doubt, that thinking and questioning is what drives us along the journey and that the Five Strands approach to RaVE has as much or more potential for helping young people to understand and become part of a religion than traditional Religious Instruction.⁷
- Develops and defends a “safe environment” in which young people can express their ideas and ask questions without fear of censure or ridicule.
- Insists on high standards of critical thinking, listening and courtesy to others, praises enquiry and open-mindedness and the development of balanced and reasoned arguments.
- Has high expectations and helps students to meet them by providing a broad, balanced curriculum, well planned schemes of work, plenty of opportunities for assessment and

⁷ which reportedly sees less than 5% of young people attending a place of worship more than three times annually in the five years after leaving school!

feedback, both formal and informal, but which also appreciates that excellence requires more than structures, paperwork and grades and allows for personal judgements and insights to be valued.

- Sees learning as a holistic process and resists compartmentalising academic study – builds cross-curricular awareness and links wherever possible and allows for a diversity of learning experiences, including events, trips, visits etc.
- Expects teachers to be well qualified and well resourced, to plan and deliver lessons effectively, but which also celebrates their individuality, diversity and the unique contribution they can make to the life of the school.

RaVE is an academic subject which should to inform young people; to help them to take the religious and moral perspective on life seriously and to see that these issues matter to them as individuals and to society. This is not the same as catechises which aims to inculcate people into a particular tradition.

Our education system encourages young people to compartmentalise learning, and they fail to appreciate the connections between subject content and the continuity in skills between different areas of the curriculum. This means that they are more likely to reject a whole subject or areas because of a single negative experience, for example a personality clash with a teacher. It also means that young people are rarely efficient and effective learners; they do not fulfil their full potential. RaVE has a real opportunity to show the connectedness of things, to inspire and motivate young people to study and become more effective learners throughout life. It is able to put learning in context, show why it is important and why it is of real relevance in the real world. It is able to help young people to learn from the wisdom of the past and grow in their social and emotional understanding, “soft skills” which are ever more important in today’s world.

Increasingly, professions and vocations require an understanding of ethical issues. Those training to be Doctors or Nurses, Accountants,

Solicitors and Barristers, Police Officers, members of the Armed Forces and even those planning to go into IT, Business or Academic Research require an appreciation of complex ethical issues and an understanding of the existence of and the reasons for a diversity of attitudes to them.

The old ways of inculcating young people into a religious tradition simply do not succeed - even if they were considered desirable. Research in Catholic schools in one area in Australia shows that the number of Catholic children educated at Catholic schools who continue to attend mass once they leave school is less than 5%. Many young people feel no need for God and consider religion to be largely irrelevant in their lives. Without the opportunity to consider basic religious ideas and challenge the simplistic approach fostered by the media, how are young people to know what people really mean by God or a good life?

The Anglican Lambeth Conference, which brings together Anglican bishops from all over the world every ten years, maintains that at the heart of Anglican Christianity lies a ‘**fearless love of truth**’. Catholic theology has always walked hand in hand with philosophy. It has made considerable use of philosophers such as Aristotle and has emphasised the importance of sound philosophical thinking in any understanding of morality or theology. Indeed the very word ‘catholic’ means universal and the breadth of the Catholic tradition is one of its major strengths which, today, is not always recognised in some quarters. Evangelical Christianity takes seriously a sound understanding of the Bible which goes beyond the superficial and Luther and Calvin both used reason to argue against their opponents. Judaism has always prized itself on sound academic thinking lying behind rabbinic reflection on the Torah and Islam had, at least in the middle ages, a profound respect for philosophy. It seems fair to say, therefore, that philosophy and the use of reason are central parts of the major religious traditions - although it must be accepted that there are still those who see R.E. as educating children into ‘the truth’ and who resist the idea of open-minded questioning which is essential to personal development.

There is little time and space in today’s schools and today’s lives for

young people to learn from stillness and silence, nevertheless this remains an important part of learning and developing into a fully rounded person. RaVE offers the opportunity to enact insights into the value of stillness, silence, mindfulness meditation and similar techniques which have been researched thoroughly in the past decade. These offer young people the chance to become calm, to think more clearly and focus on tasks, to be better able to deal with challenges and setbacks and to learn and develop more effectively. Seeing such research in the context of millennia of cultural and religious wisdom gives young people an accurate appreciation of the importance of the affective dimension.

Conclusion

Too often religious faith is seen by young people as irrelevant to the modern world and a matter of primitive beliefs which are immune from rational debate. This impression must be countered if religion or the search for meaning and values (which may, of course, be found through humanism or some non-religious perspective on life) on which young lives can be based is to be taken seriously. The Five Strands approach suggests that the best way to achieve this is to help young people to think through issues for themselves and to probe their intricacies. It is also recognised, however, that new and imaginative teachings styles may have to be introduced.

Religious education should also seek to produce a change of attitude by pupils who may live in a world dominated by the media and by materialism. It should also seek to take seriously the traditional values for which the school has always stood: courtesy; concern for those less fortunate; an unwillingness to be proud; a willingness (where appropriate) to admit weakness and vulnerability and a commitment to friends, family and the wider community are all values which religious education should foster. However a wider dimension should also be recognised. A dimension which Václav Havel (the late poet, playwright, philosopher and first president of the Czech Republic) described as *“bringing people to ‘live in the truth’ combining integrity, personal responsibility and a sense of duty to God or whatever is considered ultimate in one’s life”*.

Many parents feel that one of their main motives for choosing a school is so that the values side of education can be taken really seriously and there will be few parents who, if the new approach is carefully explained, will not be enthusiastic supporters. There has been ample evidence for this already with the schools who have taken this approach on board receiving strong support from their parent bodies. Of course there will be some who feel that the task of a school is simply to inculcate children into their own prejudices but these are likely to be a small minority.

Dr. Peter Vardy, March 2012

Dr. Peter Vardy was Vice-Principal of Heythrop College, the Jesuit-founded specialist Philosophy and Theology College of the University of London, from 1999-2011. He was a founder-member of the board of Dialogue Australasia Network.

Peter's original “Five Strands Approach to Religious and Values Education” (as outlined in his lecture to AHISA in 1997 and subsequently explored through pamphlets, lectures and training days) has shaped DANs philosophy and practical approach and has been used by governments, educational organisations and schools ever since. Peter runs teacher-training and student conferences in Religious and Values Education and Philosophy throughout Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Singapore and Europe and writes prolifically. Peter is the author of some 14 books, many translated into multiple languages. He often writes for the press, is a popular guest on radio shows and is the presenter of teaching videos and digital classroom resources.

For more information about Peter and his work, please visit

www.wombateducation.com (Australia & New Zealand conferences)

www.candleconferences.com (United Kingdom conferences)

www.what-matters.org (Books and related activities)