

# The Need to Teach Abrahamic Religions

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In 1872 Australia decided that its state education system should be *'secular, compulsory and free'*. There is now, therefore, very little academic religious education in State schools in Australia or New Zealand. Historically, the addition of the little word *'secular'* is understandable. New countries wanted to escape the consequences of having educational opportunities controlled by religious groups often closely allied with colonial powers. Yet, today, the result is that state education does not help young people to have any understanding of religious issues. Many young people see Religion as irrelevant, and most others believe that it should be a matter of personal decision later in life. Real choice however, is only possible if students are helped to critically engage with the issues.

Tensions in the modern world challenge the view that religion is irrelevant as well as the secular perspective which would make it a personal choice for young people to enquire into it or not. Australia and New Zealand trade with countries where religion underpins the whole of life and to think that young people can be a *'citizen of the world'*, travelling freely as Australians and New Zealanders love to do, without any understanding of the complexity of religion, is naive. Australian armed forces are engaged in conflict in areas where an understanding of religion is vital. The *'secular'* premise underlying state education needs to be re-evaluated. No-one would suggest that religious indoctrination should be introduced, but helping young people to engage in religious issues and the complexity of the differences that arise is part of any good education system.

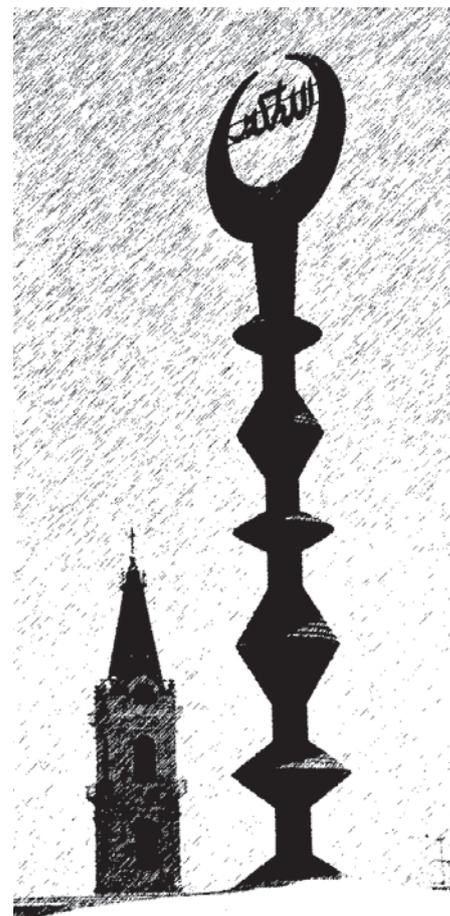
Islamic countries control the majority of world oil reserves and, as a result, have built up great wealth which is now being used to invest in the national infrastructures of western countries and in big businesses which we all depend on. Islamic finance is now a £700 billion a year industry with London as its worldwide centre. In the last thirty years it

has become increasingly sophisticated and international banks want to recruit graduates with a background understanding of Islam and Islamic finance. The Chinese in particular, when selling to Islamic countries, will generally offer Islamic financial instruments as part of the trading package whereas many Australasian countries have not even considered doing this. They have fallen behind in this respect and may lose out when competing with China for investment from Islamic states or when Islamic countries wish to choose between tenders from different countries.

Islamic investors are not simply *'capitalist'* as the term is understood in the West. Islam demands the highest ethical standards, prohibiting Muslims from charging interest on loans or being involved in the selling of drugs, alcohol, tobacco or sex, and demanding that they should support the poor and promote Islamic values where possible.

Saudi Arabia has been the chief U.S. ally in the Middle East and has profited hugely from oil, yet many Saudis seek to use their money and influence to export the values of an extreme understanding of Islam known as *'wahabism'*. The Royal Family is unpopular – many see them as too liberal and Americanized and too detached from realities in a country with huge youth unemployment and resulting social problems. A lot of Saudis along with many Muslims in other countries would like to see the sacred sites of Mecca and Medina under a different form of administration but if a fundamentalist government came to power in Saudi Arabia it could disrupt the whole world economic order.

The state of Israel was founded in 1948 in territory which had not housed a Jewish state since Europe hailed Caesar, but which many Jews believed was part of God's gift to them as the descendants of Abraham. Israel's existence in a culturally significant and long-held Islamic land was – and is –



## Tensions in the modern world challenge the view that religion is irrelevant

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bitterly resented in some quarters and this resentment resulted in several wars. Israeli forces were incredibly efficient in defence and actually succeeded in conquering and expanding beyond their agreed borders. Despite clear U.N. resolutions affirming that Israel is occupying foreign land and calling for withdrawal, successive U.S. governments have supported Israel's expansion as well as Israeli settlements in strategic areas through Jerusalem and the West Bank. This perceived unjust favouritism is at the root of much of the hatred of *'The West'* in Muslim countries, hatred which has spawned radical politics and fundamentalist religious movements and terrorism.

Moving East from Israel, past Jordan , Iraq is a torrid battleground between largely Christian 'coalition' forces and various Muslim groups. In 2003 U.S. led armies invaded Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein, the leader of the minority Sunni group which had long oppressed the majority Shiite population and once an ally of the US against the Iranians, on the grounds that his government lent support to terrorists. The chaos which followed the fall of Hussein allowed a civil war to break out between a whole range of smaller Shiite and Sunni factions, which has cost hundreds of thousands of lives and is still claiming hundreds of lives every day and which is serving as a training ground for militants from all over the world.

Further east still, Iran is a strictly Islamic state with ambitions to be the dominant power in the region. Many fear the rise of this sophisticated and ancient society because many there have a deep resentment of western values and politics which was fostered by the brutal regime of the last Shah and the support offered by the U.S. to Iraq during the 1980s. Iran seems to be sponsoring and equipping insurgent groups in Iraq and it is well known that some in Iran wish to eliminate the state of Israel altogether. Further, the country has the means to act on the world stage, given substantial oil-wealth, a large well trained army and arsenal of powerful (maybe even nuclear) weapons. Is it any wonder that

some U.S. government advisers (open to pre-emptive action after 9/11) want to move on from Iraq to Iran and other members of the so-called '*axis of evil*'?

In 2002 coalition forces invaded Afghanistan in what was supposed to be a short mission to depose the Taliban, the fundamentalist Muslim government, which was enforcing inhumane policies and harbouring Osama Bin Laden, who planned 9/11. Today the war is still going on, the Taliban has regrouped and there is a real possibility that they will assume control of much of the country. In Pakistan , General Musharraf was recently forced to resign to avoid impeachment, having angered stricter Muslims and nationalists through his policy of cooperation with the U.S. The new President is unlikely to be able to control the fundamentalist tribes in the mountains bordering Afghanistan, which will thus continue to provide a secure haven for Bin Laden and others and to provide a safe location for centres of radical education and training. U.S. special forces have already carried out attacks against targets inside Pakistan without permission from the government and the prospect of relations between the countries souring, given the volatility of the region and the fact that Pakistan has nuclear weapons, is frightening.

Understanding these and other conflicts is only possible if the complexities of relations between different religious groups are

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understood. Christianity, Judaism and Islam are the three great monotheistic faiths (although some Hindus might reasonably argue that Hinduism also believes in a single God) but the divisions within these faiths are enormous. Within Judaism there is much intolerance between Orthodox, Reform and Liberal groups, Islam has always had many splinter groups, each of which accused the others of being heretical, and Christianity has split into many different Churches and sects many of which proclaim that they alone have the full truth. It would be all too easy, in a post-modern and relativistic culture, to dismiss all claims to religious truth and to see each disparate faith tradition as culturally and sociologically determined, however underneath the many and deep differences there is a unity which stands in contrast to much of modern culture and contemporary outlooks.

The towering figure of Abraham is accepted as the founder of Judaism and thus the movement which gave rise to Christianity. He is also seen as the father of the Arabic people through his son Ishmael, and thus the human originator of Islam. This wandering nomad may have lived about 3500 years ago, though some western scholars consider him to be a composite or even fictional character – his name literally means '*father of the people*'. Yet regardless of this, his story is told in the Hebrew Bible, Old Testament and Qur'an and holds a great significance for Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. Abraham represents a man who had absolute faith in a single all-powerful God and thus developed a special relationship with God, which led to Abraham's descendants receiving the protection of the law and the prophets. He is the model of faith which they all seek to emulate; he stands for truth and accountability, standards which are worth dying for and around which we can build a better world.



For most people around the world, religion is central to life. Everything that they do originates in a desire to submit to God, to serve God and work to God's glory. Australian state education treats religion as of marginal importance and largely ignores it, but this smacks of isolationism and is increasingly difficult to justify in a modern world changed by communications technology and long-distance travel, racked with war and terrorism, fearing economic crisis and social meltdown. Religion both does much to explain why the world is the way that it is and offers many people the opportunity to grapple with the big questions, what it really means to be human, an opportunity which they need more than ever.

DAN is planning a major national conference at the Old Parliament House in Canberra with international speakers to help schools with resources and training on teaching the Abrahamic religions. The conference will be an opportunity for teachers from across Australia and New Zealand to meet and together to challenge national and state government policy, stating clearly that the importance of good academic religious and values education, cannot any longer be ignored.

For many, the phrase 'Abrahamic religions' is new, but it is going to become much more common in the future. Oxford University has just appointed its first Professor in Abrahamic Religions and two years ago Heythrop College launched the first BA in Abrahamic Religions in Europe.

For those who believe passionately in the importance of sound, academically based religious and values education, the challenge and opportunity provided by teaching Abrahamic Religions is very real. It is a tremendous opportunity in an increasingly secular culture to remind State and Federal politicians, as well as the senior management of some schools, that curriculum time needs to be devoted to this important area and that failure to do so may be an educational failure.

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