CRUCIFYING EDUCATION: THE RISE AND RISE OF NEW CHRISTIAN SCHOOLING IN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

There has always been a strong sector of church-led schooling in Australia. Since the 1970s this sector has become progressively stronger. Much of this strength derives from the presence of small Christian evangelical and fundamentalist schools. One explanation for the rise of these schools, aside from the mood of moral conservatism sweeping through the Australian community, particularly in the outer suburbs of its major cities, is the pro-choice attitude to education that market ideologies have fostered. This article looks at fundamentalist schooling in Australia and argues that its emergence as an alternative stream of education has many unsettling dimensions. It suggests that so-called ‘Jesus-centred’ education is a code for the transmission of deeply conservative, family values, which are at loggerheads with the ideas of diversity and tolerance.

There is a new threat to our Christian way of life in Australia... This new social attitude in political thinking, media presentation and in educational institutions is that of secular fundamentalism (Moyes 2003).

In the 1990s there was an ideological turn in Australia’s education, marked by a shift away from policies based on inclusion and equal provision. One of the manifestations of this shift was the emergence of Christian schools adhering to an evangelical doctrine of education. Reflecting the growing identification with religion in outer urban suburbs and the mood of political conservatism in the community generally, these schools are symptoms of the pro-choice attitude to education fostered by market ideologies.

In conjunction with media campaigns designed to ‘out’ the more fanciful predilections of teachers (Donnelly 2005), the state’s provision of schooling has been depicted as inefficient and shackled to political correctness. As a result of this ‘discourse of derision’ (Ball 1990, 31; Kenway 1990, 191) and the pork-barrelling of the non-government sector, state schooling is increasingly seen as a residual sector. Increasingly, the better performing parts of the sector are straitjacketed by educational bureaucrats and middle class parents who wish to protect it from further degradation; protection that often means purging the system of pedagogic adventurism done in the name of inclusion or equity, a process that has been called ‘conservative modernisation’ (Apple 2001, 5).

Within these contexts, in this paper we identify the enabling policy environment that has led to a proliferation of non-government schooling, and examine the way that New South Wales (NSW) Christian schools are using internet spaces to project themselves into the education market.

A Changing Policy Environment: Enabling Christian Schooling

Make no mistake, John Howard’s government is a radical one seeking to ‘redesign’ Australia holus bolus along neo-liberalist lines, and to rearticulate public policy in such a way as to grant the private sphere more scope in the provision of services such as health and education. As such, many aspects of the ‘wage earners’ welfare state (Castles 1994) have been cut to ribbons by the neo-liberalist agenda. Its effects are being felt in public institutions such as universities which now depend on their capacity to attract supplementary streams of revenue such as full fee paying students to survive; with more than a suspicion that their educational integrity is being compromised, if not corrupted in the process.

Yet the rules are selectively deployed. So-called ‘private’ schools receive considerable federal government subsidies, underpinned by the ideology of ‘choice’ as the paramount concern of the Commonwealth in education provision (Martin and Fitzgerald 2000). The emphasis on choice also perverts the market where supply drives demand, such that new schools are created in areas where there was no previous demand. Within the state’s construction of choice, ‘[r]ather than new schools opening as the result of parental demand, it would seem that initiative is increasingly coming from those wishing to run schools’ (Martin and Fitzgerald 2000, 49).

One of the key policy decisions of the Howard government enabling the proliferation of private schools was the undoing of the ‘New Schools Policy’. This had been a regulatory impediment to the establishment of new non-government schools and, as Nichols (2004) notes, there was ‘a clear leap in the number of new non-government schools, and new campuses of such schools, in 1997, following the election of the Howard Coalition Government and the subsequent abandonment of the “New Schools Policy”‘ (emphasis added). There were a number of implications flowing from this change in policy, such as allowing many smaller schools to be
opened and the relaxing of the regulations governing their administration.

Additionally, a new funding scheme, the Socio-Economic Status (SES)-index model for recurrent funding of new government schools, was introduced; a measure that replaced the Education Resources Index (ERI) that looked at a school’s financial need. Conversely, the SES:

by contrast, is a single measure that ignores the actual financial resources available to individual schools. It indirectly determines an ‘SES score’ for each school by reference to the Census Collection Districts (CCDs) of the family address of each student (Nicholls 2004, original emphasis).

A key component of the SES is that while some schools receive more funding, any school that might be detrimentally effected will maintain their funding (DEST 2005).

To place these moves in context, in 2000 the relative levels of Commonwealth funding to the non-government sector (including the Catholic systemics) and the government sector was $972, 505 million and $571, 319 million respectively (Vinson 2002, 362); a ratio of almost 2 to 1. The total Commonwealth and state expenditure on government and non-government schools between 1996-97 and 2000-01 saw a 27% increase on government schools and a 45.1% increase on non-government schools (Vinson 2002, 363). Alas, in NSW a component of this new funding environment is also the willingness of the NSW Labor government to underwrite it (Vinson 2002, 357-64). What this points to is a notion of private welfare, paralleling that of tax breaks as corporate welfare.

This means that non-government schools can offset some of the challenges they would otherwise have to face in a fully ‘marketised’ system of education. In effect, the redistribution from the public sector to the private sector is an ideological manoeuvre, designed to promote the belief that private is better and that parents are foolhardy to entrust the educational fate of their children to state schools. It serves also to habituate children to state schools. It is to safeguard children from pedagogy that deviated from the ‘right way’.

Heaven Only Knows...

Although it was once suggested that the rising levels of education in the community would spell the death knell of religion, the opposite has occurred: religion is undergoing revival, even in the academy, where fundamentalist students are as active as never before (Blue 2005; Holding 2005, 39). In particular, there has been an upsurge of Christian schooling in Australia with a proliferation of Christian fundamentalist schools. In fact the small religious schools have steadily grown over the last decade and a half. In 1991, for example, the number of schools identifying themselves as Christian Protestant ones was 151; in 2003, the figure was close to 260, employing some 5,000 teachers. During the same period, enrolments in the sector grew from 30,000 to 75,000 students (AACS 2003; Crimmins 2003).

In this sector Christian schools in NSW are defined as being non-systemic; and are self-declared in terms of their adherence to ‘Christian principles,’ specifically through strict biblical interpretations; part of ‘authoritarian populism’ or ‘religious fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals who want a return to (their) God in all of our institutions’ (Apple 2001, 11). In NSW there are 90 of these schools, and while we would be loath to say that there is cohesion between them, there is evidence of their singular purpose, with these schools coming under umbrella organisations such as the
Australian Association of Christian Schools (AACS) and the Christian Schools Australia (CSA). The CSA’s charter for schools states that a ‘Christian school is a Christ-centred and Biblically based educational community’ (CSA 2005), while the ACAA charter states that the task of the Christian school is ‘to teach the children to understand the world from a Christ-centred perspective and to equip them for their calling in life in subjection to Jesus Christ as Lord’ (AACS 2003). Both the AACS and CSA subscribe to the notion of the scriptures as ‘God’s infallible and inerrant revelation to man. It is thus the supreme standard by which all things are to be judged, and the authoritative guide for all life and conduct’ (AACS 2005). As Maddox points out, since ‘biblical inerrancy is usually shorthand for creationism (rather than evolution) and ‘male headship’ (not gender equality), voters might wonder how much their government endorses’ (Maddox 2005a). Interestingly, there is a specific role for government here, in that ‘all citizens owe obedience to the legally instituted governments of our nation which derive their authority from God and are responsible to Him for promoting and maintaining public security, justice and welfare’ (AACS 2005).

Of the new schools opened in NSW between 1997 and 2001, 24 were designated Christian schools (Martin 2005). Nonetheless, many Christian schools predate Howard’s government and some were opened as early as the 1970s. During the intervening years they have gradually extended their age reach, initially serving the primary years K-7, before adding, because supply is now the market driver, the secondary years, including Grades 11 and 12. Thus, it is now possible for students to spend their entire educational lives in a Christian school of some kind and to undertake undergraduate and postgraduate studies at any one of the several Christian colleges and universities. And while bodies such as the Board of Studies in NSW, and their counterparts in other states, are able to ensure that these schools meet the state’s syllabus requirements and basic educational standards there are, nonetheless, features of these schools which should give grounds for concern to educational legislators.

For example, these new Christian schools are funded at a higher rate per student than other non-government schools. Table 1 illustrates that, within estimated total Commonwealth funding from the SES for non-government schools in 2004, NSW Christian schools actually received more per student than other non-government schools.

Additionally, many of these schools are very small, having fewer than 50 students in the primary departments. Moreover, as supply drives demand these schools are able to open in locations where there were already public and non-government schools, such as Holy Saviour School in Greenacre (opened 2000, 28 students); Cornerstone Burrabadine Christian Community School in Dubbo (opened 1997, 10 students); and Dunmore Lang Christian Community School (a primary school) in Muswellbrook (opened in 1999, 7 students) (Martin 2005). It should also be noted that some schools also have significantly higher student numbers (e.g. Coverdale Christian School, Belrose, 720 students).

Fiscal generosity need not of itself signify that the Commonwealth endorses this re-christening of Australia’s education. It does not need to; for through a dexterous series of policy and rhetorical manoeuvres (some already cited) it has successfully atrophied government schooling, not just through fiscal starvation, but also through fostering parental anxieties about its efficacy in relation to school discipline and falling standards—re recuperating a ‘discourse of derision’ rehearsed in the state-aid debates of the early 1980s (Kenway 1990, 191). This has encouraged an exodus to the non-government sector on an unprecedented scale. Small evangelical schools, the majority situated in the outer metropolitan suburbs and ‘sea change’ areas are the main beneficiaries of this exodus. It is telling about the demographic from which Christian schools seek their enrolments that no such schools are to be found in Sydney’s gentrified suburbs, and whose children are more likely to be sent for ideological reasons to government schools or top-ranking private schools—many located close to the city—whose fees would be beyond the economic (and also transport) means of outer suburban families. Many in the religious bureaucracy hold that these bastions of educational privilege are themselves beyond the religious pale and are not following their charters—only ‘semi-Christian’ it has been suggested—and need to be forced back into the fold (Marr 1999, 242).

Thus, the new Christian schools have priced their

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Christian Funding</th>
<th>Other non-government Funding</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>$99,533,376</td>
<td>$379,317,956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>25,750</td>
<td>114,936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>$3865</td>
<td>$3300</td>
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Table 1: Estimated Commonwealth funding (SES) to NSW non-government schools 2004 (Department of Education Science and Training 2003).
fees at a level outer metropolitan families can afford—between $3000 and $4000 dollars per annum with pro-rata reductions for ‘siblings’—and which makes them affordable for families whose motives are not necessarily Christian but who wish to ‘buy into’ some form of ‘private’ education for their children.

Deifying the Web: Christian Schools in Cyberspace

As electronic forms of ‘impression management’ websites have become an inescapable part of Australia’s educational landscape and one of the principal methods by which families come to ‘know’ their schools (Kenway and Bullen 2001). These sites provide textual platforms that enable information about schools to be accessed expeditiously, and to be styled in such a way as to ‘crystallise’ their ethos. Schools are now using their websites’ much as they used prospectuses in the past, as marketing devices, as a way to promote schools to prospective parents, and to ‘cash in’ on the growing disenchantment with government schooling (Symes 1998).

To this end, the websites of Christian schools promote, not unexpectedly, their ‘religious’ credentials to an almost hyperbolic degree (see Figure 1). There is hardly a page of their architecture which is not imbued with Christian iconography, theological vocabulary (‘faith’, ‘Jesus’, ‘God’, ‘Creator’) and Biblical mottoes, particularly those stressing the virtues of a Christian upbringing (‘Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it’ (Proverbs 22 (6))). They advocate Christianity as a goal of life, which entails obeying and glorifying God’s word and demonstrating ‘the fruits of the holy spirit’. Schools are promoted as living by and enacting the word of God and following the procedures and pedagogies ‘Jesus would want’.

In contradistinction to the ‘child-centred education’ found in mainstream schools, it is claimed that Christian schools provide a ‘Jesus-centred education’. This is an example of ‘conservative modernisation’ mentioned earlier, a turning against the new and the progressive. One school (Bob Hughes Christian School, Chester Hill) proclaims that its staff is fundamentalist to and so on. The schools are proud to proclaim this fact and expect the same of their students and parents who are to replicate the Christian ethos of the classroom at home (Sutherland Shire Christian School). In this closed circuit of values there is the assumption that education stems from God and that the prime objective of teaching is to channel Christianity into the child with alacrity. Anything less is a travesty of God’s purpose for education. To this end, children are taught to reject ungodliness and to embrace the Lord’s word without demur.

Yet, the aversion to modernity stops short of abandoning millennial culture hook, line and sinker. In the pursuit of providing its students with a rounded education evangelical education, for example, does not renounce ‘technology’. Some schools are proud to boast that they are prodigiously equipped (with God’s help) with computers for each child (Bob Hughes Christian School, Chester Hill). The difference between Christian schools and other schools in this respect is that its approach to technology is embedded in Christian teaching. A recent article discussing the faith-basis of mathematics, and supported with copious excerpts from the Bible, suggests that had Plato had access to the Old Testament he would have realised that mathematics was created by God (Fackerell 2002). This is the type of theological mumbo-jumbo counting as educational theory among some fundamentalists.

While to our knowledge there has not been a thoroughgoing ethnography of an Australian Christian school, there have been several undertaken in the US (Peskín 1986; Rose 1988). These studies reveal that such schools invariably adopt authoritarian pedagogies that are hard on free thinking, that devalue difference and diversity, disdain egalitarianism, and are deliberately fashioned to be places of piety, to be the antithesis of the ‘drugged,’ ‘sexualised’ and ‘bedevilled’ state school.
Although there is no evidence yet that Christian schools have the urge to transform key learning areas such as science and biology into more theologically correct areas as has happened in the United States, as the sector grows in influence they might well have the temerity to do so. Even if this does not happen, the prospect of a larger percentage of the population believing in creation rather than evolution, as is now the case in the US (Berra 1990), ought to be a matter of deep concern. When these epistemological fears are linked to McLaren’s (1987, 138), that Christian schools ignore egalitarian impulses and are fundamentally concerned with ‘privileging select social groups on the basis of race, class and gender,’ it is exigent that Christian pedagogy becomes the object of scrutiny.

Such scrutiny would likely reveal that Christian schooling is found wanting on educational grounds. However, governments trying to circumscribe its further growth through fiscal denial might face resistance. Previous attempts in the 1960s and 1980s to shackle non-governing schooling were less successful and the sector has gone from strength to strength. In the current climate of neo-liberal policy making the chance of such schooling being dislodged from the educational remit of governments is remote to the say the least.

Nailing It to the Cross
Conservative modernisation is alive and well in Australian education and is reflected in the increasing enrolments at Christian schools. Although it is possible to attribute this to the disenchantment with government schooling, it also relates to a programme of reforms directed at the destruction of the welfare state that governments, here and overseas, have instituted. The adoption of more conservative social philosophies favoured by the Howard government that have attempted to breathe life back into the traditional family structures, has given renewed vigour to the Christian right—as it has done in the United States—to exercise its influence over the policy agenda.

Although Australia remains a much more secular society than the US, albeit ambiguously (see Maddox 2005b), and therefore might remain immune to the Leviathan plans of the Christian right, it is plain if that it continues to gain more influence over that agenda, particularly through the mega-church movement, then Christian schools might become more numerous than they are at the moment. Although there has been much recent outcry against the obscene levels of funding provided to ‘rich’ private schools, the proliferation of Christian schools as an aspect of neo-liberal education policy directions has been much less in the spotlight, at least in Australia. This is partly because the funds involved are not huge and partly because it is easy to adopt a dispassionate attitude toward schools seemingly undertaking their missions in benign ways. Yet, this dispassion could be misplaced for the philosophies underpinning these schools are far from benign and are part of a full-blown crusade against contemporary, secular society that is being played out in the politics of Australian education.

References
Holding, P. 2005. ‘Howard’s Believers: Religion,
Culture and the Future of Progressive Politics'.


Martin, R. and D. Fitzgerald. 2000. 'Whatever you do, don’t mention the state aid debate'. Unicorn 26 (2), 44-52.


Endnotes

1 One of these is Southland College (formerly the Institute of Christian Tertiary Education) which is on the campus of the Pacific Hills Christian School, Dural, NSW. It offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in education with a strong Christian focus. Its Master of Education Studies — accredited in 1997 and recognised nationally, though by whom is not stated — consists of a range of units (none of them secular) devoted to justifying 'theocentric' schooling, e.g. ED502 Biblical Foundations in Education 1 (Old Testament) which provides 'a comprehensive biblical worldview as a framework for undertaking...[students'] role within education' (http://www.icte.edu.au/web)

2 These schools also have a presence at the various educational expo's held around Australia and that are now annual events in the educational calendar (Kenway and Bullen, 2001). There are two of these held in New South Wales: one is the more 'exclusive' Private Schools' Expo held at Sydney University and the other, the School's Expo, held at Rose Hill Racecourse, close to Paramatta. The location of the venues is significant, as is the fact that only at the latter is there a 'evangelical' presence.

Bio:


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