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Uncommon Good: Peaceable Dialogue for Partisan Times



MORLING
COLLEGE



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As a former high school teacher, youth worker, and pastor, Dave is passionate about pluralist dialogue and the public expression of Christian faith in a post-Christendom context, toward the flourishing of all. Based in Brisbane, he lectures at Malyon College in the areas of evangelism, apologetics, worldviews, faith–work integration, and practical theology, as well as lecturing at Christian Heritage College’s Millis Institute for Liberal Arts, in the field of philosophy. Dave is also the director of Traverse (the Malyon centre for bridging church and culture), and co-founder with his wife, Nikki, of the intentional Christian community, Christ’s Pieces. His 2016 PhD project, entitled “Schools, Scripture and Secularisation”, considers the telos of competing curricular visions and the place of Sacred Texts in secular education.

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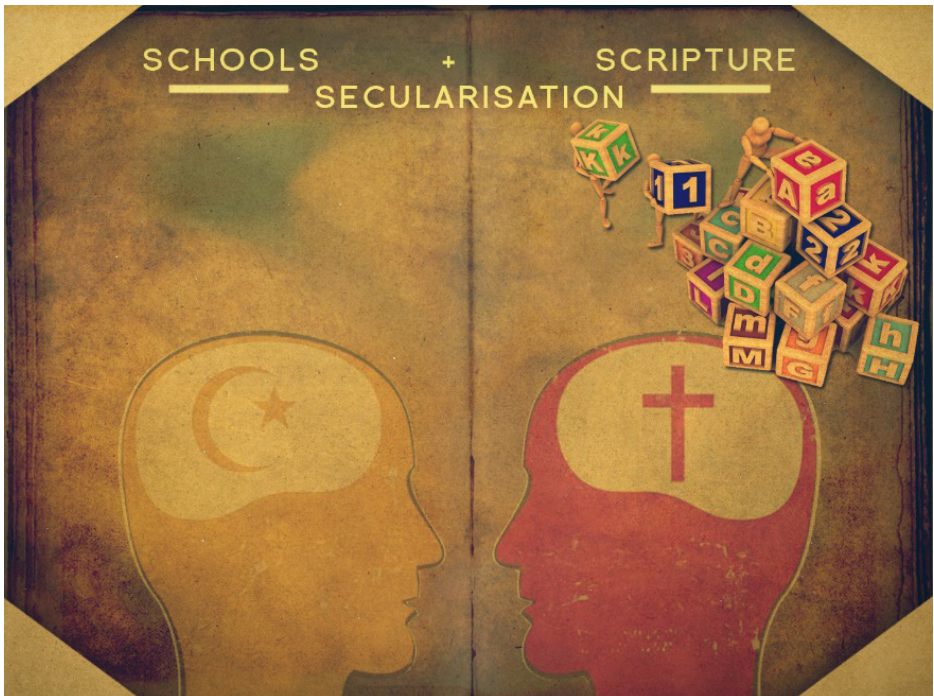
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ABSTRACT

How should Christians engage the public sphere today? In the eyes of the church's detractors, the church's cultural forays are reducible to argumentative apologetics, lingering colonial privilege in political lobbying, and triumphalist crusades to reclaim societal influence. How, then, might followers of Jesus retain their missional particularity, whilst humbly interacting as one perspective and voice among many? We need a vision for and model of *Christian partnership in partisan times*.

Based on his doctoral work in Australian public education, Dave commends the praxis of *peaceable dialogue*. This approach involves a shift from combative discourse (*paralogos*) to the dialectical exchange of our deepest world-forming narratives (*dialogos*). Dave believes this process will unearth wisdom that serves holistic flourishing. By God's grace, disparate factions may learn how to journey together toward a truly common good in the here and now.



UNCOMMON GOOD: PEACEABLE DIALOGUE FOR PARTISAN TIMES

*It was the best of times,
it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom,
it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief,
it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of Light,
it was the season of Darkness,
it was the spring of hope,
it was the winter of despair.*

Thus begins Charles Dickens in his classic, *A Tale of Two Cities*. He wrote this in 1859, the same year as Darwin's *Origins of the Species* shook the scientific and theological establishments. Dickens wrote this about the lead up to the French revolution, climaxing in the Jacobin Reign of Terror. It was a time of progress; it was a time of regress. It was a time of tumult.

This novel is a classic precisely because its themes are perennial. Every period of history has its highs and lows. Still, without sounding too alarmist, I can't help but feel that our millennial optimism is cooling as

we tip into a global winter of despair. For we live, it would seem, in a peculiarly partisan time.

Partisan: *'pa:tizan*, an adjective. Meaning? "Prejudiced in favour of a particular cause." Synonyms include biased, one-sided, bigoted, sectarian, and unjust. Could this be us, today? What an awfully dark assessment from a friendly Baptist out of sunny Brisbane! Apologies for this dour start. But, I'm wondering whether you, too, sense this shift in seasons.

Missiology values contextualisation. So, where on earth, and in history, are we—especially as relates to the place of religion in the public sphere?

(Post)Secular and Partisan

My primary observation is this: the mid-twentieth-century enlightenment confidence in a peaceful secularisation process has dissolved. Fundamentalist religion, militant atheism, and other passionate persuasions haven't disappeared, despite our rage for order. Granted, the loss of association with the church and institutional faith is accelerating;¹ many westerners have shifted their focus from the heavens above to this immanent frame below.² The average young person lives according to a "midi-narrative" of "individual and secular happiness"³—feeling good right

1 Steve Bruce, "Post-Secularity and Religion in Britain", *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 28, no. 3 (2013), 369.

2 Tom Frame, *Losing My Religion* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009), 104. Cf. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

3 S. Savage, S. Collins-May, B. May and G. Cray, *Making Sense of Generation Y: The World View of 15-25 Year Olds* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006), 36–37.

now, and tempted to live as if God is irrelevant.⁴

Nonetheless, on a global scale, religion is on the rise.⁵ Higher birth rates and new conversions are changing the landscape; and unprecedented global migration is bringing this diversity to our doorstep.⁶ Modernisation hasn't gutted religious authority.⁷ Rather, we are simultaneously post-Christian and post-secular, challenging the privileging of any one perspective, whether religious or non-religious.⁸ Far from drifting off, religion and religious issues are returning to centre stage in social policy.⁹

Justice vs. Just Us

You may be thinking, so *what?* Well, it matters because we've hit a cultural impasse. Many of our constitutional and

societal structures were formed to keep religion in its place, after those pesky religious wars in the seventeenth century. This was no secularist plot. Rather, political Christianity broadly agreed to a privileged position as Chaplain to the culture, in exchange for stepping back from the State; they bracketed divisive religious questions to politely keep the peace, soothing tensions between argumentative Protestants and Catholics. Most people called themselves Christian, so religious belief reduced to background noise in fields as diverse as law, health, welfare, and education. Now, however, we have burgeoning cultural diversity, each group wanting its own say; religious themes have overflowed private containment into civic debate; and this unspoken agreement is dissolving.¹⁰ Think, for instance, of the widespread rejection of Christian Religious Instruction in schools.

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- 4 Craig Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998). In the Australian context, see Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton, and Ruth Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y* (Mulgrave, Australia: John Garratt Publishing, 2007), 82, 311. Cf. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton on "moralistic therapeutic deism" in their book, *Soul Searching* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162, 171.
 - 5 Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World* (Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999), 2–3, 10–11; Pew Research Center, "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050: Why Muslims Are Rising Fastest and the Unaffiliated Are Shrinking as a Share of the World's Population", April 2, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/> (accessed April 29, 2016).
 - 6 Peter Beyer, "Secularization from the Perspective of Globalization", in *The Secularization Debate*, ed. William Swatos, Jr., and Daniel Olson (Lanham, MD: Association for the Sociology of Religion, 2000), Loc. 1248–1439 [Kindle e-book]; Ronald Kuipers and Mebs Kanji, "Probing the Links between Security and Secularization", in *After Modernity?* ed. James Smith (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 70, 277n6; Ronald Inglehart, *Human Values and Social Change* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2003); Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2009); Scott Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
 - 7 Hans Joas, "Does Modernisation Lead to Secularization?" in *Secularization Theories, Religious Identity and Practical Theology*, ed. Wilhelm Gräß and Lars Charbonnier (Münster, Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2009), 25–34.
 - 8 Lieven Boeve, "Religious Education in a Post-secular and Post-Christian Context", *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 33, iss. 2 (2012), 143–156. Cf. Rob Warner, *Secularization and Its Discontents* (London: Continuum, 2010), 115–16, 181–82.
 - 9 Jonathan Fox, "World Separation of Religion and State into the 21st Century", *Comparative Political Studies* 39, no. 5 (2006), 537–69; Jürgen Habermas, "Notes on Post-Secular Society", *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2008), 17–29; Judith Butler, Eduardo Mendieta, Craig Calhoun, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds., *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
 - 10 Cf. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Tariq Modood, "Muslims, Equality and Secularism", in *Religion, Spirituality and the Social Sciences: Challenging Marginalisation*, ed. Basia Spalek and Alia Imtoui (Bristol: Policy Press, 2008), 37–53.

Either kick it out, or make it comparative. For in our century, multiple ways of being modern have collided. Leaders promised a cosmopolitan society, a multicultural fusion of food, music, and ritual. Instead, it seems that our deep differences are leading toward an apocalyptic clash of civilisations, inside our national borders.¹¹

Aussie culture typically treats religion as irrelevant, so we've been taken unawares. Religious literacy is a pressing need in a globalised world characterised by multiple visions of the good life which compete in close proximity. Religious rhetoric is on the rise. Scriptures are superficially referenced in supporting or challenging complex political positions surrounding terrorism, marriage, abortion, immigration, and the environment, to name just some of the major issues facing us today.¹² As Stephen Prothero points out, "Religion is now emerging alongside race, gender, and ethnicity as one of the key identity markers of the twenty-first century".¹³ Or, as Jacques Berlinerblau, an ardent secularist, explains, ignorance of metanarratives that shape the lives of people groups is "a looming public liability" for we live in a world where "Sacred Texts are not the irrelevant artefacts that nonbelievers

once thought they would be".¹⁴ Ignorance of foundational sacred stories is irresponsible this side of 9/11, under a new Reign of Terror.

This is a massive civic concern. Democracy is premised on people understanding what they're voting for, moving past idiosyncratic preferences to fairly weigh competing perspectives.¹⁵ Furthermore, at precisely the time we need to understand our differently believing neighbours, we've forgotten how to dialogue.¹⁶ In Os Guinness's words, the foundations for religious liberty and freedom of speech are dissolving; a concern for "justice" has reduced to the privileging of "just us".¹⁷ In this Tinder-age of swipe-left, swipe-right, we've settled for simplistic binarisms: either/or, yes/no, like/dislike, right/wrong, accept/reject, good/evil.¹⁸ Awash in impotent information but often ignorant of the arguments, we're increasingly choosing sides based on novelty, or familiarity, or reflexive preference. Forget left versus right, atheist versus Christian, and other classic dichotomies; it's simply us versus them, whatever the agenda. Even our super-heroes are divided! Choose your side: Batman or Superman; Ironman

11 José Casanova, "Cosmopolitanism, the Clash of Civilizations and Multiple Modernities", *Current Sociology* 59, no. 2 (2011), 253; Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

12 Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 10–14.

13 Ibid., 3–5.

14 Jacques Berlinerblau, *The Secular Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2–11, 130.

15 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 100–101: "Democracy cannot exist when [people] prefer ideas and opinions that are fabricated for them."

16 Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere", *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006), 1–25.

17 Os Guinness, *The Global Public Square* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 141–44.

18 Alicia Eler and Eve Peyser, "Tinderization of Feeling", *The New Inquiry*, January 14, 2016, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/tinderization-of-feeling/> (accessed April 29, 2016).

or Captain America? Identity politics is twenty-first-century tribalism. In this brave new combative world, polarisation accelerates.

Uncommon Good

Global studies have reported an alarming shift at the state level toward totalitarian rule, whether of the left- or right-leaning variety, whether of a secular or religious bent.¹⁹ The middle, pluralist, and democratic conceptions of government and culture—where the public sphere is a safe space for all to contribute, within constitutional bounds—this is being eroded. Instead, most governments are moving toward either an explicitly singular religious identity (think India), or restricting public religious expression in a hard-edged secularism (think France, and perhaps even Australia). The ideological divide is growing.

I promise to move beyond this depressing spiel in a few moments, for I truly believe that this is an age of opportunity, an age calling for wisdom. However, we need to squarely face our partisan predicament. Charles Dickens didn't make his case with academic data. So, let me assemble a montage for this age.

This is the age of terror attacks by Isis, and counter-war declared on Islamists by culture warriors. It's a time of New Atheists

decrying all public belief as immoral, and Bondi surfers abusing women in burkas. This is the age of Donald Trump and high walls to keep the Mexicans out, and of Australia First in fisticuffs with the socialist alliance. This is the age of mass migration, confused cultural markers, and debated sexual identities. This is the age of marriage plebiscites, safe schools, high court challenges over chaplaincy, and countless debates about ethical issues from abortion to euthanasia, injection rooms, and legalised prostitution. This is the age of empty rhetoric and the Q&A sound-bite, of deceptive polls and false promises, of manoeuvring for personal power and more prime ministers than a primary school child should have to recall. If ever there was a truly "common good" it has become uncommon; the image of "common good" lies shattered on the floor, trampled by countless tribes and party politics.

And yet. Call it the desire of our hearts or simply political correctness, this is the age where talk of inclusion, of tolerance, of inter-faith cooperation and coexistence is commonplace. We face unprecedented challenges on a global scale—of financial crisis, environmental degradation, refugee integration, and so much more. This, then, is the age where governments cannot finance all their community-building projects to face the future with courage. "Big society" is crying out for partnership with any group, irrespective of affiliation,

19 See, for instance, Pew Research Center, "Latest Trends in Religious Restrictions and Hostilities", February 26, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/02/26/religious-hostilities/> (accessed April 29, 2016); Thomas Harvey, "The State and Religious Persecution", *Lausanne Global Analysis* 5, iss. 2 (2016), <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lga/2016-03/state-and-religious-persecution> (accessed April 29, 2016).

that lives for societal flourishing.²⁰ Education is increasingly about dissimilar people simply learning to live together in peace. If constructively engaged, this season could be the spring of hope.

Our Challenge

How, then, might followers of the Prince of Peace, those tasked with the ministry of reconciliation, step into this gap? How should Christians engage the public sphere today? How might we retain our missional particularity, whilst humbly interacting as one perspective and voice among many?

In this lecture I want to commend a vision for Christian partnership in partisan times. We must shift from what I've called *paralogos*, where we simply make arguments for our tribe. Instead of combative discourse, I'm commending the practice of *dialogos*. We must pursue the dialectical exchange of our deepest world-forming narratives to unearth wisdom that serves holistic flourishing. By God's grace, disparate factions may learn how to journey together toward a truly common good in the here and now.

This is a positive vision. (Something good may yet come from Brisbane!) What I'm not offering, however, is a bird's eye

perspective, or a one-size-fits-all solution. The picture will look different in each setting. Having spent this last semester teaching ancient philosophy in a liberal arts college, I've grown suspicious of our Platonic desire for universal answers and timeless forms. With Aristotle, I believe that the best solutions emerge from close attention to the particulars, rooted in time and space.

So, I want to tell you a story. It's the story of my dissertation, centred on the role of religion in public education.²¹ I will touch on the specifics of the argument. What's most relevant, though, is the process of bringing a Christian theological vision to bear on issues of common concern, in an age of divisive agendas. In this test case, the greatest transformation was less in society and more in me: as an apologetically oriented evangelical, I'm still learning how to fruitfully engage a pluralist public square.

I tell this story in part because my world-class university merely offered a survey to debrief the permanent head damage my PhD inflicted over the last four years. What better opportunity to unwind and heal than by confessing to relative strangers in a public lecture! Mostly, however, I tell this story for I think there may be some resonance with your own efforts to represent Christ in these partisan times.

20 Adam Dinham and Robert Jackson, "Religion, Welfare and Education", in *Religion and Change in Modern Britain*, ed. Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto (London: Routledge, 2012), 272–94.

21 David Benson, "Schools, Scripture and Secularisation," unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Queensland, 2016, <http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:384064> (accessed April 25, 2016). For an extended 2015 version of this thesis, entitled "Sacred Texts in Secular Education," see https://www.dropbox.com/s/hwyd8trml4u8azy/SacredTextsSecularEducation_DavidBenson2015.pdf?dl=0 (accessed April 25, 2016).

WHY LISTEN TO US?

Let me pick up this tale on March 6, 2013, in a nondescript conference room at the University of Queensland. Picture that you're sitting in the room with me and about fifteen other academics, mostly secular educators in the supposedly non-committed Studies in Religion department. Now, add a few sceptical philosophers and postcolonial historians, and stir. It's my first year confirmation as a doctoral candidate, having recently transitioned out of pastoral ministry. My project is entitled, "Schools, Scripture and Secularisation: A Christian Theological Argument for the Incorporation of Sacred Texts in Australian Public Education". In short, I'm looking at the place of a diversity of Sacred Texts in secular schools, focused on Years 7 to 10, in the Australian Curriculum. Might Scriptures such as the Bible, Qur'an, Bhagavad Gita, and the Tripitaka play a role, integrated into mainstream subjects like History, and Civics and Citizenship? Can they advance the purposes of ACARA, being the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, who put this whole thing together?

So, I've just presented what I hoped to do in this project, and thought I'd preached up a storm. (Turns out it was a tornado.) Then the Q&A begins. Actually, it was more of a "comment time". Questions

were rare.

"What makes you think that Christians will ride in on their white horse and fix the whole system up?" "Come on, let's be honest, you don't care about other Scriptures and religious perspectives. You just want a back-door to impose the Bible." "Christians have been privileged for centuries, and look at the damage that's done. Safer to keep your views out of education." "I don't want this for my kids. We pay for a secular education, which means it should be free from religion." The most bracing question came from a core panel member, whom I'll call Fred. You can fill in the blanks for the appropriate expletive. He asked, "Why should I give a f*** what evangelicals think about education?"

Let's sit with this last question for a minute, as I did in the debrief with my academic advisor! In one sense it frames this talk. It's a key question for us to answer in these partisan times. Except, let's blank out *education*. I want you to insert the field you're most passionate about. *Why should our society give a f*** what evangelicals think about _____ [x]?* About education, about journalism, about law, about health care, about truth ... about anything, really?

How would you answer this? How should we answer this? *Why listen to us?*

Benedict vs. Wilberforce

This not-so-subtle beat down pushed me concurrently in two directions.²² For one, I was tempted toward what's called "the *Benedict option*".²³ Sometimes a culture becomes radically dysfunctional, or so rejects the gospel and Christian influence, that we must shake the dust off our sandals and exit the city before we lose our saltiness and assimilate. Perhaps like our phobic age. Under the rhetoric of redressing Christian hegemony to make space for multiculturalism, we have fallen into *oikophobia*; we have "repudiat[ed] ... inheritance and home".²⁴ In some quarters it has become kosher to lambaste followers of Jesus, a form of open hostility labelled Christianophobia.²⁵ With fewer Christians in general Western circulation, we've lost control of our public image; we're re-presented by a largely ignorant and highly antagonistic cultural élite. This "mediatisation" has resulted in popular caricature that invites further scorn and suppression of our perspective.²⁶ How

can we work for the common good, and function as agents of reconciliation, when we're perceived as one more tribe, a partisan force speaking for "just us"?

In this season, then, like Benedict and a string of monastics across history, perhaps it's time to retreat to the political desert and regroup? Let's become a light removed to the hilltop, a counter-culture that is truly Christ-like, *for* the sake of the world. Fred's antagonism to my project made it clear that I had transgressed a boundary. Taking my particular theological perspective and applying it to the pluralist public educational sphere was tantamount to ideological terrorism. I was tempted to forget public education altogether, and instead play within the quarantined sandpit of private Christian education and other parallel institutions which might care what I thought.

At the same time, my evangelical heritage pushed me toward "the *Wilberforce option*".²⁷ There was always a danger my thesis could be received as triumphalism

22 John Sandeman, "Two Ways To Face the Future", *Eternity* 67 (March 2016), <http://www.biblesociety.org.au/news/wilberforce-and-benedict-two-ways-to-face-the-future> (accessed May 3, 2016). Cf. Rod Dreher, "Wilberforce Vs. Benedict", *American Conservative*, October 29, 2015, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/wilberforce-option-benedict-option/> (accessed May 3, 2016).

23 Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3d ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), xvii, 297–306 at 306; Rod Dreher, "The Benedict Option, Reactionary?" *The American Conservative*, April 26, 2016, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/the-benedict-option-reactionary/> (accessed May 3, 2016).

24 Roger Scruton, *A Political Philosophy* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 23–25. Cf. Neil Postman, *The End of Education* (New York: Knopf, 1995), in which he rejects the bending of all education to suit the political and "muddled god" of Multiculturalism. In this model students learn that dominant authority is evil, in favour of tribal ethnic identities that fragment unifying narratives which may contribute toward the common good (50–54).

25 George Yancey, *Hostile Environment: Understanding and Responding to Anti-Christian Bias* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

26 Elaine Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 12–13.

27 Cf. Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner, "How Christians Can Flourish in a Same-Sex-Marriage World", *Christianity Today*, November 2, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/november/how-christians-can-flourish-in-same-sex-marriage-world-cult.html> (accessed May 3, 2016); Rod Dreher, "Wilberforce Vs. Benedict", *American Conservative*, October 29, 2015, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/wilberforce-option-benedict-option/> (accessed May 3, 2016).

rather than a gift enabling transformation. Silence, retreat, and compartmentalisation would get my project signed-off with fewer hassles. But, it felt like a coward's way out: abandoning the fight and the charge to speak in preference of self-preservation. Like William Wilberforce in his battle against slavery, this path calls us to re-arm for the cultural wars, prepared to suffer as we prophetically speak out for righteousness in Christ's name.

So, at the time, and as a good apologist, I determined to go on the counterattack. I went *paralogos*. Dozens of responses were bouncing around my brain. What, then, should I say?

A Partial Apologetic

Should I play the *historical card*? Fred, this egalitarian universalism you desire in education—that all would be included in a free exchange of ideas in a frame of “individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy”—this is part of Christianity's legacy.²⁸ You should listen to us because Christians, even evangelicals, were key architects in the educational system.²⁹

To be sure, this argument has a point, even as I let it go. It aligns with many of our apologetic projects to demonstrate the influence of Christianity in Western history.

In the eyes of our detractors, however, this argument amounts to big-noting. It continues a lingering colonial privilege in our political lobbying as we claim the right to the microphone and the duty of all citizens to listen. This time, however, has passed. We are expected by many cultural critics to sit silently in the naughty corner, a type of penance to redress our excessive control and disproportionate power in bygone eras. I affirm the need for the church to challenge historical revisionism. Even so, simply speaking more and reminding people of why Christian views matter are hardly the basis for a meaningful conversation and shared pursuit of a common good.

So, take two: *why should you listen to us?* I was quite defensive when responding to Fred, which was counterproductive. But, I did my best to explain that, even if this was my agenda, just to privilege Christianity, our democratic politics and the hierarchical nature of educational leadership would block any such attempt. If you're worried about one group controlling the rest, then perhaps you should attend to research by scholars like Professor Gary Bauma who show that “anti-religious secularists are the gatekeepers of education policy and teaching in most Australian institutions”.³⁰ Furthermore, there is no neutral position on such contentious matters as religion

28 Jürgen Habermas, *Time of Transitions* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2006), 150–51. Cf. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 117, 369–71, 683–84, 696–97.

29 Roy Williams, *Post-God Nation* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2015), Ch. 6.

30 Cited by Cathy Byrne, “Spirit in the ‘Expanding Circle’: Why Learn about Religion in Australia in the 21st Century?” MA thesis, University of Queensland, 2007, 42.

in schools.³¹ Evangelicals have no right to attempt to monopolise a pluralist conversation. Nor does any other ideology, religious or secular.³²

As such, Fred, I'm suggesting that a Christian perspective *may* have something to offer society at large ... just like the University values Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, and Indigenous perspectives in their scholarship. Can we, as a recognised demographic within a cosmopolitan society, not speak and engage?

Quite a mouthful. At the time, I was pretty proud of my response. But if you boil it down, essentially what I said is this: "Fred, the reason why you should give a f*** what evangelicals think, is because in our multicultural society, every voice has a right to be heard; and because there are a lot of us with considerable power saying similar things, you'd be wise to listen, for we just might have something useful to say that strengthens a secular institution you love." Winsome, I know.

Stuck

Fred's mouth was stopped—for that moment at least—and I pictured myself alongside Wilberforce, speaking up for what was "obviously" the godly path. But it left me unsatisfied. I doubt his perspective was changed. Fred certainly didn't perceive me and my fellow evangelicals as partners in public education. We remained a partisan force on the periphery, too dangerous to invite into a genuine conversation about the common good—lest we secure a foothold, shore up our voting bloc, dismantle free and secular schooling, and takeover the institution.³³ Permitting religions in public education may be a "slippery slope" where dialogue precedes domination.³⁴

It's hard to admit that Fred's fear is legitimate. But it is, isn't it? In the eyes of our detractors, the church's cultural forays are reducible to argumentative apologetics, political lobbying, and triumphalist crusades to reclaim societal influence. At its worst, our activism becomes a crass "claim it all for Jesus".³⁵

31 See, for instance, Peter James and David Benson, "School Chaplaincy, Secularism and Church–State Separation in a Liberal Democracy", *University of Queensland Law Journal* 33, no. 1 (2014), 131–152; David Benson, "Gore-Tex Curriculum Resists the Good Book", *Wondering Fair*, September 21, 2011, <https://wonderingfair.com/2011/09/21/gore-tex-curriculum-resists-the-good-book/> (accessed May 3, 2016).

32 As Trevor Cooling argues, "Education is always based on a vision of what it means to flourish as a human being. This vision will be derived from a worldview. ... all knowing is underpinned by a worldview that can be religious or non-religious. Being nurtured in the faith of our family and community is inherent in the learning process. The claim that education can therefore be worldview neutral and that beliefs should be privatized is rejected." See *Cooling, Doing God in Education* (London: Theos, 2010), <http://www.stapleford-centre.org/files/files/DoingGodinEducation.pdf> (accessed May 3, 2016), 15, 40.

33 Cf. Peter Meadmore, "'Free, Compulsory and Secular?'" *Journal of Education Policy* 16, iss. 2 (2001), 113–123.

34 Muriel Fraser, "Introduction", in *Realising Secularism*, ed. Max Wallace (Milsons Point, NSW: Australia New Zealand Secular Association, 2010), 8, 15.

35 See James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 123–131; cf. "Education", *7CulturalMountains.org*, 2013, <http://www.7culturalmountains.org/pages.asp?pageid=63699> (accessed May 3, 2016).

Three years on, I'm more sympathetic to these objections. British public theologian Elaine Graham explains our situation well. We are stuck "between a rock and a hard place": between the "rock" of resurgent religious conviction in the public sphere, and the "hard place" of secularism which sees itself as a sheriff to keep at bay squabbling citizens in the wild west.³⁶ In this context, it seems safest to risk-averse technocrats, especially agnostic and atheistic administrators, to simply expel religion from schools.³⁷ However, in light of the postmodern shift, silencing anyone's worldview is essentially illiberal indoctrination.³⁸ Miroslav Volf is helpful here. He suggests that our challenge is avoiding both the exclusion of religious convictions which are displaced to the private realm, and the saturation of religion where one faith imposes its vision of the common good onto all others.³⁹

To be sure, there is a place for directly challenging suppression of speech. Religious freedom is essential to our gospel mission. So, we must be prepared to speak up—to use power wisely—and

not dismiss courageous monologues as though gentle conversation plus community consensus is an absolute good.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, this vying for a voice seems in tension with the kenotic stance of our Saviour (Phil 2:5–11).⁴¹ In the face of his accusers, Jesus was tight-lipped. He bore reproach and asked questions only inasmuch as it may open the attitude of the Other and work toward communion (Isa 53:7; Mt 26:62–63; Jn 18:33–19:30; Acts 8:32; 1 Pt 2:21–24). When you combine the current hostility to Christian perspectives with my lack of power to implement any theological vision in public education, perhaps this sacrificial stance is most faithful?⁴² It may even be most fruitful. But it's hard to categorise. It slots somewhere between Benedict's silent retreat and Wilberforce's powerful rhetoric.

What, then, might this look like in the educational sphere? What theology and practice could undergird and animate this enterprise?

36 Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, 12–13.

37 Cf. Damon Mayrl, "Administering Secularization", *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 52, no. 1 (2011), 111–142.

38 Alan Reid and Pat Thomson, *Rethinking Public Education* (Deakin West, ACT: ACSA, 2003), xvii, xxii; Andrew Wright, "Religious Literacy and Democratic Citizenship", in *The Fourth R for the Third Millennium*, ed. Leslie Francis, Jeff Astley, and Mandy Robbins (Dublin: Lindisfarne Books, 2001), 201–219. Cf. Iris Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

39 Miroslav Volf, "Exclusion or Saturation? Rethinking the Place of Religion in Public Life", *ABC Religion and Ethics*, March 11, 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2014/03/11/3960854.htm> (accessed May 3, 2016). See also Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011).

40 Cf. Acts 16:37; Os Guinness, *A Free People's Suicide* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012); Lesslie Newbigin, *Signs Amid the Rubble*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 75–76; Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth To Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991); Duncan Forrester, "Speak Truth to Power: Theology and Public Policy", in *Developing a Public Faith*, ed. Richard Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003), 175–88; Duncan Forrester, *Beliefs, Values and Policies: Conviction Politics in a Secular Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

41 N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 97.

42 Cf. Carl Trueman, "The Rise of the Anti-Culture", *First Things*, May 4, 2016, <http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2016/05/the-rise-of-the-anti-culture> (accessed May 6, 2016).

An Irenic Alternative?

As Gerben Heitink argues, “public Christianity” at the societal level must be “diaconal”. That is, in the public sector, *diaconia* describes the vocation of the church to act as humble and altruistic servants (*diakonoï*) who follow Christ in emptying themselves of power out of love for the Other.⁴³ We must be satisfied with making modest changes from below rather than offering dictates from above.⁴⁴ Any change will be the result of faithful presence and cultural persistence in altruistic service, built on cooperative endeavours that serve the common good.⁴⁵ Lesslie Newbigin never shrank from bold proclamation. At the same time, this missiologist affirmed that conversation must always surround the public expression of the gospel in a pluralist society.⁴⁶ In seeking to understand where we have come from, and where we are going, we must listen to diverse stories that claim to chart the path. In Newbigin’s words: “The Christian will be eager to cooperate with people of all faiths and ideologies in all projects which are in line with the Christian’s understanding of God’s purpose in history.”⁴⁷ This calls for attention to our common questions and the metanarratives we tell. We must

ask, “What is the meaning and goal of this common human story in which we are all, Christians and others together, participants?” This calls for *dialogos*.

Faithfulness to Christ, then, calls us to work for the *shalom* of the secular city (Jer 29:7). We are to employ ourselves toward creational fullness, peace, and flourishing, in right relatedness with God, neighbour, and the created world.⁴⁸ Our creational mandate must not be swallowed up in the church’s redemptive mission of evangelism, discipleship, and particularly loving fellow believers.⁴⁹ Our ministry of reconciliation extends beyond saving individuals and shoring up the ecclesia, to embrace diverse communities, public institutions, policy governance, environmental sustainability, and even educational curricula. As such, we cannot settle for permission to evangelise, securing our say in schools, and leveraging our power to determine the path that all citizens in a pluralist society should follow.

We need an irenic alternative to both Benedict and Wilberforce—a more nuanced playbook than retreat or advance, which helps us imagine what it means to peacefully partner with those beyond our religious clique. Some

43 Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 293. Cf. Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 183–91.

44 Heitink, *Practical*, 242, 294–97.

45 Cf. Hunter, *Change the World*; John Stackhouse, Jr., *Making the Best of It* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

46 Newbigin, *Signs*, 75. Cf. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

47 Lesslie Newbigin, “The Gospel and the Religions”, in *Christianity and Plurality*, ed. Richard Plantinga, Jr. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 355–56. Newbigin, *Signs*, 75.

48 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 69–72. Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Educating for Shalom*, ed. Clarence Joldersma and Gloria Stronks (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

49 Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*, 205–220 at 215.

call this co-belligerence.⁵⁰ I prefer less military language like “common action for the common good”.⁵¹ Perhaps it’s most constructive to simply re-label this task: “our mission” for God’s glory.

Recovering Conversation

This is the heart of my work with Malyon College. I direct *Traverse*, a centre for bridging church and culture.⁵² It’s about fairly representing the church to the world, and the world to the church, that all may flourish in a post-Christendom context. And yet, it’s an awkward posture to hold. At one workshop, I taught on different models of the church relating to culture. There was Niebuhr with his four types: would Christ have us be of culture, above culture, in paradox with or outright transforming the culture?⁵³ Then we looked at Andy Crouch’s frame, with his four occasional gestures and his two perennial postures, of purposeful work through culture keeping and culture making.⁵⁴ All good stuff, to be sure. Even so, it took a friend, James Alley, who works as a graphic artist in this conflicted space, to raise a more primary and Christ-like stance yet. James observed:

*Andy Crouch’s gestures—**condemning, critiquing, consuming and copying** culture—they do provide a helpful framework for engaging culture ... but it’s still somewhat disassociated. I’m wondering if perhaps Christians have begun to lose the hospitable art of **conversation** with culture. I can’t say I blame secular culture for not wanting to engage. If the church does not intentionally create a space for dialogue with culture and instead delivers weekly monologues, why should the culture listen? ... Only dialogue works to close the [cultural] gap from both sides.⁵⁵*

Are we that boring person at a party who incessantly talks but never asks? How boring and offensive! Touché! As post-Christian citizens like Fred ask us why they should give a f*** what evangelicals think about any public institution, have we stopped for long enough to listen to what they truly desire?

Subtly, my doctoral supervisor encouraged me in this direction from the first. I was determined to argue for just the Bible in the Australian Curriculum; he asked whether I would extend the argument to alternative Scriptures held as sacred

50 Daniel Strange, “Co-belligerence and Common Grace”, *Cambridge Papers* 14, no. 3 (2005), 1–4.

51 Cf. Andy Crouch, “What’s So Great about the Common Good?” *Christianity Today*, October 12, 2012, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/november/whats-so-great-about-common-good.html> (accessed May 4, 2016).

52 See <http://traverse.org.au/> (accessed May 7, 2016).

53 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 50th anniversary ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

54 Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008).

55 James Alley, personal email, March 8, 2016.

by diverse communities in our pluralist democracy. My exclusive attention to the Christian perspective wouldn't fly in a public university. It forced me to move beyond a concern for "just us"; it invited me to imagine why committed Christians might partner with other groups for a common good, and how to proceed in these partisan times. In short, I discovered that my doctoral discipline was ideal for this fraught journey. Thus, I commend practical theology to you, not simply as an interesting methodology. Rather, I am convinced that the praxis of "peaceable dialogue" which lies at the heart of this field—what I have called *dialogos*—is a necessary missional posture in partisan times.

I am speaking here of public theology. This ministry of reconciliation is "bilingual".⁵⁶ It brings a Christian perspective into genuine conversation with those who shape the public sphere and speak to matters of widespread concern; it works for the peace of all creation in the here and now by revealing and reconnecting what initially appear to be competing visions of holistic flourishing.⁵⁷ Beyond identifying superficial similarities, public theologians must discern underlying narratives and symbolic structures which animate human interpretations of experience.⁵⁸ In a post-Christendom multicultural setting, this necessitates patient listening and consensual acting amidst deep-seated differences in beliefs.⁵⁹

How might this work out in practice? Let me illustrate with reference to my doctoral process.

PEACEABLE DIALOGUE AS A MISSIONAL POSTURE

It all starts with a rich question that is of interest to disparate parties. Here's mine: What is, and what should be, the place of diverse Scriptures in Australian public education? In short form, I was setting out on a four-year journey to research the role of Sacred Texts in secular education. Secularists, agnostics, spiritualists, pluralists, and religious citizens alike have a stake in the answer. Each group has its own knee-jerk reaction, typically a response that privileges "just us". Should we exclude Scriptures to secure freedom from religion? Might we use these texts as fodder only for what's immediately relevant to the here and now, otherwise ignoring supposed revelation? Do we give equal voice to Indigenous, Eastern and pagan stories, prioritising previously excluded accounts on the grounds of affirmative action? Should we concentrate on one text most pivotal to Australia's history and identity? It's a messy question that requires dialogue, for it's about a common concern.

From this question, then, I needed a methodology to explain, understand,

56 Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, 69–71, 97–104, 210–33.

57 Ibid., 230.

58 Graham, *Between*, 206–207, 229–33.

59 Marion Maddox, "Religion, Secularism and the Promise of Public Theology", *International Journal of Public Theology* 1, iss. 1 (2007), 93–100.

and change the status quo, in a Christ-like pursuit of shalom—of holistic flourishing for all involved.⁶⁰ I must explain the current place within ACARA's curriculum given to religions and their various revelations. Next, I must understand what ideally should be the place of Scriptures in secular schools; this required a critical conversation between secular and theological perspectives. Last, I must plan to change the situation, demonstrating to the satisfaction of competing parties a fresh approach that serves the purposes for which we educate.

Easy, right?! No wonder Fred was angry at the one-year mark. Could an evangelical, dedicated to his own “religious club” and immersed in his own story, submit an inclusive vision for all?

The genius, then, is that this method eschews an ideological starting point. Instead, this missiology begins with our current practices on the ground, moving critically into theoretical reflection, before eventually returning with wisdom that generates better practices. It's about “faith seeking truthful action”.⁶¹ *Dialogos*, then, breaks down the sacred–secular divide; it levels partisan walls in a cross-pollination of disparate views. Secular educational philosophy, sociological analysis, and a narrative theology of education converse,

toward a fusion of horizons. Each must listen to the other. In Stephen Pattison's words, this endeavour is built on the premise that “theology cannot supply all the knowledge and insight it needs if it is to fully engage with reality. Thus it is necessary to be interdisciplinary and dialogical in investigation”.⁶² Bottom line: faithfulness in our mission requires openness to multiple voices.

Toward these ends, I proceeded in five movements, each with a core question: What is going on? Why is it going on? What ought to be going on? Where is the common ground? And how might we respond?⁶³ [See Figure 1, page 19]. The collective answers to these questions would help me discern what actually is, and what should be, the place of Sacred Texts within the emerging Australian Curriculum.

Clear as mud?! There's no way I can even trace the contours of the argument in these remaining minutes. However, I'm hoping you get a feel for the structure and possibilities in this process. I am commending “peaceable dialogue” as a missional posture which the church can adopt and adapt to countless areas where competing causes collide.⁶⁴ It's a path toward an uncommon good in partisan times.

60 Cf. Heitink, *Practical*, 102–103, 164–66, 228, 235.

61 Cf. Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), 7–10; Duncan Forrester, *Truthful Action: Explorations in Practical Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), 22.

62 Stephen Pattison, *The Challenge of Practical Theology* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007), 17.

63 Cf. Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 4–10.

64 See, for instance, the discussion guide I prepared for *Logos* (an apologetics group): “Everything's Bent: Rethinking 'Normal': A Practical Theological Reflection on the Church's Response to Homosexuals”, 2013, https://www.dropbox.com/s/ps8kijsg6bxqyl5/Logos_EverythingsBentStudies_August2013.doc?dl=0 (accessed May 6, 2016). See also the workshop I ran, entitled “Praxis: Bridging the Divide”, at Malyon College, Brisbane, on March 5, 2016. For the facilitator notes, handout, and Powerpoint pdfs, respectively, click the preceding hyperlinks. The interactive group reflections are online at http://padlet.com/david_benson/bridge.

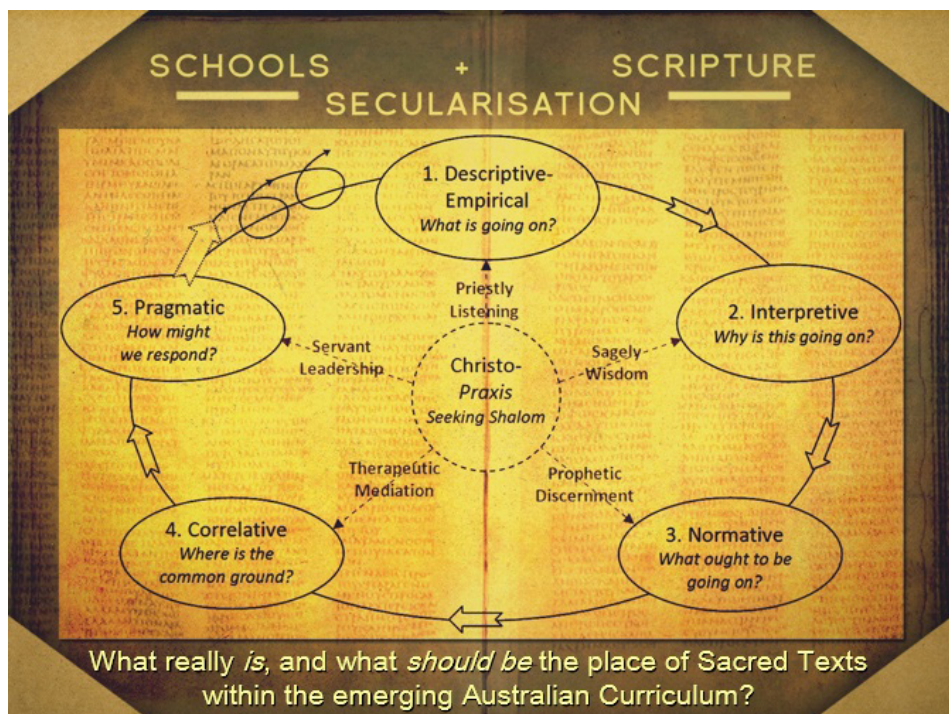


Figure 1: Five Movement Model of Practical Theological Reflection

DIALOGOS I | LISTEN: What is going on?

The first movement *in* dialogos is simply to listen. What is going on?

I need to be clear what this movement is not. It's *not* paralogos: combative discourse, dressed up as a dialogue. Think Plato's Dialogues (διάλογος) with snarky Socrates baiting his interlocutor. Or think Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho: genuine *dialogos* is not a rhetorical

device to recast the Other in your own image, or play their worst against your best for apologetic purposes. These are clever reconstructions that carry us to a predetermined end. No wonder dialogue in the Bible is typically presented as dissension and disputation—an argumentative technique accompanied by accusation, bickering, and positioning for power—rather than a peaceable praxis.⁶⁵ What starts out as “reasoning together” for the common good easily degenerates into labels and language games to

⁶⁵ Frederick Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 91. Cf. Jdg 8:1; Mk 8:16–21; 9:33–37; Lk 20:14; 24:38; Phil 2:14; 1 Ti 2:8; Jas 2:4 (ביר וינר in the Hebrew; διαλογίζομαι and διαλογισμός in the Greek). Thank you to A. J. Culp and D. Morcom, Malyon College's resident Hebrew and Greek scholars, respectively, for their insights on this point.

demonstrate the superiority of one's own tribe over, say, those nasty "secular humanists" and dangerous "Islamists".⁶⁶ According to Emmanuel Levinas, this is totalising—the kind of power move by which the Nazis eventually robbed the Jews of their voice during the Holocaust.⁶⁷

Instead, this first movement is ideally about a face-to-face encounter with one's neighbour, in all their particularity and vulnerability.⁶⁸ This relational encounter with an irreducible Other necessitates conversation, for "language presupposes interlocutors, persons engaged in discourse one with another".⁶⁹ It's about trading monologues and patronising representations of the Other for genuine respect, even radical hospitality toward my neighbour's flourishing. This is love.⁷⁰ It's a move toward reconciliation, peace, and ultimately, God willing, friendship. And it begins when I focus less on detached propositions, and instead listen for the deep story—a functionally sacred story—that animates the Other's existence in their "quest for the meaningful". Toward what telos does the Other aim?⁷¹

This is most relevant to education.⁷² While I didn't have personal access to the authors of the Australian Curriculum, I had recourse to hundreds of pages of their explicit reflections, at the philosophical level in their Shaping documents, and just as many pages in the curriculum proper online. Like a giant dot-to-dot, the challenge was to piece together their many points in a coherent picture, capturing their heartbeat. As Alasdair MacIntyre explains, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"⁷³ What story animated ACARA's curriculum? The challenge was to listen hard, and construct a tale which made sense of countless curriculum decisions.

So, back to my project. What is going on? That is, across the Middle-School Australian Curriculum, what place is given to religion and the study of Sacred Texts? I was especially interested in the telos of education: What is education for, and how might the study of Scriptures serve this end. Through content analysis

66 Cf. Merton, *Conjectures*, 54, 68–69, 78.

67 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 21, 24, 38, 64–65, 72, 302.

68 Ibid., 40, 74, 79–80, 290–91, 296.

69 Ibid., 48, 68, 70–77, 207. Cf. Michael Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 19, 42–43, 48, 64–65, 72–73.

70 Levinas, *Totality*, 172–73, 194–95, 214, 251.

71 Ibid., 26, 65–68, 73; Emmanuel Levinas and France Guwy, "What No One Else Can Do in My Place", in *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 297. Cf. David Ford, "God and Our Public Life", in *Liberating Texts? Sacred Scriptures in Public Life*, ed. Sebastian Kim and Jonathan Draper (London: SPCK, 2008), 29–56; Anthony Kronman, *Education's End* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 6, 9, 35; Mark Strom, *Lead with Wisdom* (Milton, Qld: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 5–26, 135–54.

72 David Carr, "Post-Secularism, Religious Knowledge and Religious Education", *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 33, iss. 2 (2012), 166–67. Cf. Warren Nord, *Does God Make a Difference? Taking Religion Seriously in Our Schools and Universities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 224–35; Neil Postman, *The End of Education* (New York: Knopf, 1995), x–xi, 7.

73 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 216.

I found that, at the philosophical level, ACARA desires for education to form students such that they can “understand, appreciate and respect” religious diversity. (Their words, not mine.) The Australian Curriculum centres on a story of social reconstruction. It seeks individual and communal transformation necessary to sustain a just and peaceable society in a pluralist democracy. Listening charitably, I determined that the telos of the Australian Curriculum was forming active citizens capable of making sense of the world and working together for the common good.

This was interesting to me, for I had already demonstrated that Scriptures are the wellspring for many communities to make sense of the world.⁷⁴ They shape their communities’ vision of the common good. So there was potentially a meaningful role for religious revelation in each subject, supporting ACARA’s aims. But the devil is in the details. When you explore the curriculum content itself, religious differences disappear, and Scriptures drop into the null curriculum. This disparity called for explanation.

DIALOGOS II | INTERPRET: Why is this going on?

So, in the second movement of *dialogos*, I needed wisdom to interpret. Why is this going on?

As Christians, we believe that the greatest wisdom for life is to be found in our particular Scripture. Nevertheless, in God’s common grace, no community of belief has a corner on wisdom. As evangelicals, we should reject the “encyclopaedic assumption” of fundamentalists that there is nothing to be said beyond the Bible.⁷⁵ The precedent was established as far back as Augustine to see all truth as God’s truth.⁷⁶ Indeed, it may be my neighbour’s alternative perspective that exposes my theological blind spots.⁷⁷ As such, my hospitality in analysis had to include secular accounts to explain this marginalisation of Sacred Texts in secular education, as together we make sense of ACARA’s inconsistent story.

Thus, I took on a sociological perspective, and focused on the concept of the “secular”. I found that an outdated understanding of the secularisation thesis seems to have shaped the practice of the Australian Curriculum writers. That is, religions and their Scriptures are unhelpfully seen as irrelevant, dangerous, indoctrinatory, repressive, and regressive. And as I shared earlier, these views are

74 Cf. Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

75 Roy Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, rev. ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 237.

76 Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Bk. 2 Ch. 40 §60–61, 397, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/doctrine.xli.html> (accessed May 6, 2016). Cf. Robert Pazmiño, *Foundational Issues in Christian Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 13, 98–101, 197–98.

77 Cf. Merton, *Conjectures*, 68.

highly questionable, especially from a post-secular perspective with the global resurgence of religion. This hidden curriculum falls short of ACARA's own aspirations, to be equitable and inclusive.

Even so, I had to hear the heartbeat of many educationalists who a priori exclude revelation. What were they really rejecting? In this, I discovered a zeal for justice, akin to the biblical prophets of old.⁷⁸ This enabled me to crystallise the concerns of secularists and multiculturalists alike into a "plural principle". Across any unit of study, the incorporation of Sacred Texts must meet the seven criteria of relevance to curricular aims, accountability to professional educators, diversity in perspective, veracity in re-presenting the Other and critically analysing truth claims, and respect for a student's right to have the final say in matters of belief and practice; it must ultimately foster the integration of a student's life toward holistic flourishing, and help form a robust, just, inclusive, and peaceful democracy. Within this frame, opposing parties could unite in finding a meaningful place for Scriptures in secular educational curricula.

DIALOGOS III | DISCERN: What should be going on?

The third movement of *dialogos* required prophetic discernment. What should be going on? The challenge here was to resist proof-texting that automatically supported the Christian cause. It's one thing to say that shalom is the telos of education.⁷⁹ It's another thing for this concept to take on flesh, embedded within the overarching story of God's mission in the world.⁸⁰ How, then, might a particularly evangelical narrative theology of education offer resources for the flourishing of all?

In short, I argued that a biblical curriculum is concerned with the core teaching and learning under divine tutelage for humanity to come of age. Across a six-leg journey of Creation, the Fall, Israel, Jesus, Church, and the New Creation, we learn about work, knowledge, wisdom, reciprocity, holiness, and hope. And we are formed as active citizens under the liberating reign of God in the way we cultivate, repent, bless, love, reconcile, and worship.

What was most interesting to me was that this vision suggested a meaningful role for the study of diverse Sacred Texts in restoring humanity to right relationship with the Transcendent, people, planet,

78 See, for instance, Cathy Byrne, *Religion in Secular Education* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Cathy Byrne, "Jeezis Is Alive! He Is the King of Australia", *British Journal of Religious Education* 34, iss. 3 (2012), 317–331; Marion Maddox, *Taking God to School* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2014).

79 Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Educating for Shalom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004); Paul Spears and Steven Loomis, *Education for Human Flourishing* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2009).

80 Cf. John Bolt, *The Christian Story and the Christian School* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Schools International, 1993); Harry Fernhout, "Christian Schooling: Telling a World View Story", in *The Crumbling Walls of Certainty*, ed. Ian Lambert and Suzanne Mitchell (Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1997), 75, 85–89.

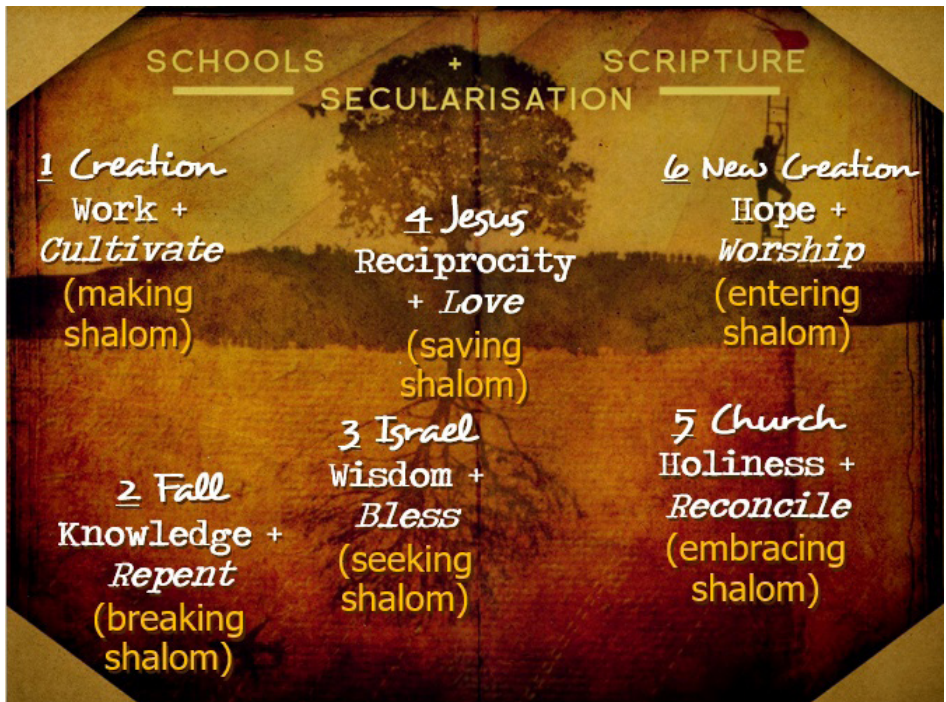
and self—which is the heart of *shalom*. Many faithful friends, even pastors and educators, assumed that my advocacy for non-Christian Scriptures was some kind of postmodern capitulation. How could I possibly argue for any incorporation of the Qur'an, for instance, into Australian public education for Year 7 to 10 students? It certainly wasn't what I expected to find. But, it seemed to me that this emerged naturally from the very warp and woof of redemptive history.

Creation highlights that all humans, irrespective of belief, are image bearers; so, we'd better understand each other's basic maps directing our visions for cultivating the world, that we might work together.

The Fall reveals our God-given “freedom” to choose a lie, and our shared tendency to deceive and be deceived; exposure to a competing take on life's *telos* may thus jolt us out of complacency, ignorance, pride, and self-interested readings that enshrine unjust privilege.

Israel's election to bless the nations requires an expansive wisdom that is open to multiple perspectives and truth wherever it may be found, especially in the cries of those easiest to ignore.

At the story's climax, *Jesus* confronts us with the Golden Rule: do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Reciprocity demands even-handedness for the inclusion of diverse Scriptures



in a pluralist educational space, based purely on educational merit rather than partisan preference. Like their Messiah, Christ-followers are to take the lead in sacrificially giving up our grasping for control and clinging to rights. Our vocation is to listen to and radically love our neighbour, irrespective of creed.

Out of our own biblical plot, we find in the *Church's* mission a call to become a community of character capable of working for reconciliation and hospitality. Sacred Texts reveal the myriad tongues and imaginaries shaping the nations, whose diversity the Spirit longs to refashion and fit together in unity.

And in the story of the *New Creation*, we look forward to the glory of the nations in the form of their richest cultural artefacts refined through judgement, and brought into the Garden-City to God's glory. We pre-empt this celebration by spotting truth, goodness, and beauty in our neighbour's tribe and Sacred Text.

Each act offers a rationale for dialogue and partnership with diverse neighbours. By understanding their sacred stories, we may learn how to journey toward *shalom*. Which, as I have argued, is our broadest mission. Sacred Texts crystallise visions of where we have come from, the path to follow, and different destinations as the end of our pilgrimage which call us forward and focus our energies.

DIALOGOS IV | CONVERSE: Where is the common ground?

In the fourth movement, then, *dialogos* challenged me to converse. Where was the common ground among these different perspectives of educational philosophy, secular sociology, and a biblical theology of education's purpose? In simplest form, the process sounds like criteria for a high school essay: compare, contrast, and create. Compare each view to find overlap where they affirm each other. Contrast each view to discern where they refuse each other at the heart of their narrative. Then, prayerfully create a synergy which moves beyond the status quo in faithful practice that serves agreed upon ends.⁸¹

How, then, do the Australian Curriculum and a biblical curriculum correlate? How might the incorporation of diverse Sacred Texts serve the telos of students making sense of the world, and working together for a common good?

Through this process, I discovered that these partisan perspectives converged on a vision of education for holistic flourishing. That is, education could be re-imagined as aiming at responsibility, critical thinking, understanding, care, inclusion, and integration. The particular aims of each subject could be served and enriched by openness to transcendent takes on our shared secular existence. Thus, there was a legitimate role for the

81 Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 196, 217; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 273, 337. Cf. Merton, *Conjectures*, 144.

STAGE	PLOT: EDUCATION FOR SHALOM	WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT	HOW WE JOURNEY WITH GOD	FUSION: EDUCATION FOR HOLISTIC FLOURISHING
CREATION making shalom	Designed for good ... Cultivate God's Garden	Work	Cultivate	Responsibility
FALL breaking shalom	Damaged by evil ... Repent over the Tower	Knowledge	Repent	Knowledge (Critical Thinking)
ISRAEL seeking shalom	Chosen to bless ... Bless from the Tent	Wisdom	Bless	Understanding
JESUS saving shalom	Restored for better ... Love on the Mountain	Reciprocity	Love	Care
CHURCH embracing shalom	Sent to heal ... Reconcile in the House	Holiness	Reconcile	Character and Inclusion
NEW CREATION entering shalom	God sets it right ... Worship in the City	Hope	Worship	Integration

selective incorporation of Sacred Texts—especially in the form of a face-to-face sharing of our deepest stories that are functionally sacred. These accounts are entry points to communal imaginings of humanity's greatest good, thereby impacting upon our life together. And this is a most valid educational concern.

DIALOGOS V | ACT: How might we respond?

In the fifth and final movement, then, *dialogos* directed me to act. How might we respond? I needn't bother you with how this vision was translated from curriculum to classroom pedagogy. Suffice it to say that I demonstrated how,

in each subject, the sharing of sacred stories could serve ACARA's educational goals. It transcended my initial partisan preference to see the Bible alone gain access into public schools.

What is relevant, however, is the importance of finding commonality among key actors in facts, norms, and feelings. Constructing this uncommon good requires decision-makers and stakeholders to largely agree on the fact of religious diversity and its continued relevance. They must recognise the norm of democratic education that serves active citizenship in a pluralist society. And, shared action is facilitated when they feel that reciprocity is crucial to safeguard education; equity ensures that a diversity

of voices are fairly represented without any one perspective dominating.⁸²

In short, then, my thesis demonstrated that while Sacred Texts are largely silenced in secular education, they have a meaningful role to play. By engaging students in explaining, understanding, and changing the world through diverse subjects, the selective incorporation of Scriptures may sensitise adolescents to the many sacred stories at play. In so doing, supposedly transcendent revelation may illuminate and enrich our immanent frame as the one thing we must all share.

WHY LISTEN TO US? | A PEACEABLE COMMUNITY FOR THE WORLD

Well, it's been a long night, on this the 100th anniversary of Morling College. You've very politely listened as I've lectured about the importance of genuine dialogue. The irony is not lost on me!

What, then, might we take away from it all? Three things spring to mind.

First, take away our mission to love. We must recover at the core of our biblical narrative the call to

sacrificially embrace all people, even those who consider us the enemy.⁸³

And we must be prepared to publicly repent when our cultural engagement falls short of Jesus' own example, even at the risk of losing face, privilege, and power. As Thomas Merton says, "The last thing in the world that should concern a Christian or the Church is survival in a temporal and worldly sense: to be concerned with this is an implicit denial of the Victory of Christ and of the Resurrection".⁸⁴

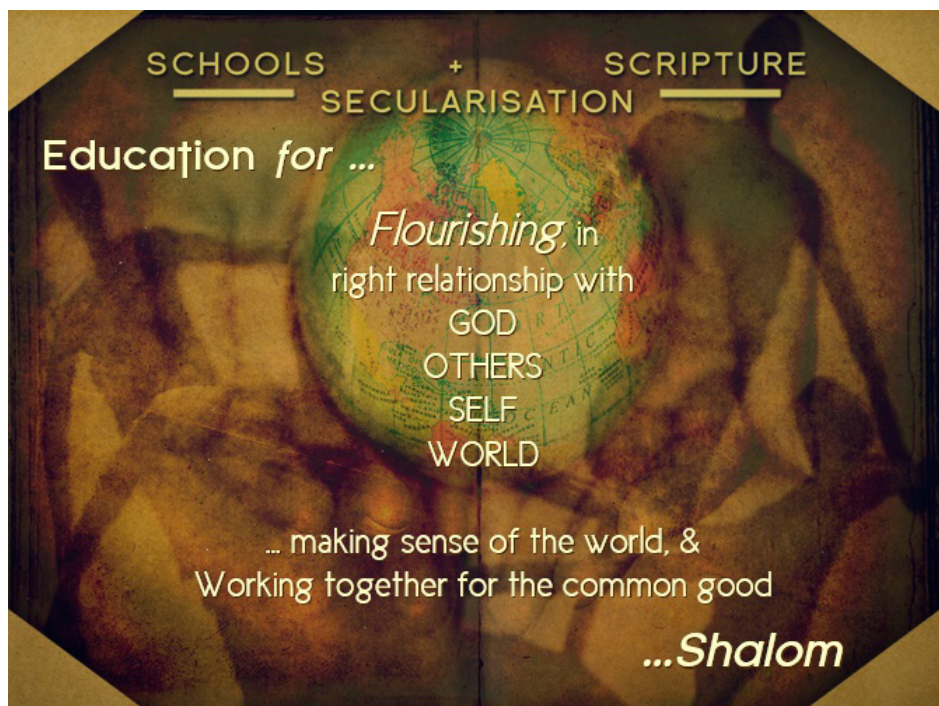
May we be identified as a community that stands for love of all, not simply for "just us" and against all who oppose our particular cause. Let us seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and trust that God will take care of everything else, however foolish and dark the times may seem.

Second, take away our mission to listen. I am convinced that those we readily frame as enemies in our present cultural wars, may actually be friends in disguise. Not always, but at times, they are less opposed to our redemptive story and goals, and more repulsed by the cocksure way we demand to be heard; the way we try to control and direct a pluralist democracy despite increasingly being a voice expelled to society's dialogical desert. But in this simultaneously post-Christendom and post-secular time, we

82 Heitink, *Practical*, 126, 132–40. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols., (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984–1987).

83 As Thomas Merton (*Conjectures*, 69) eloquently exhorts, "In the long run, no one can show another the error that is within him, unless the other is convinced that his critic first sees and loves the good that is within him. So while we are perfectly willing to tell our adversary he is wrong, we will never be able to do so effectively until we can ourselves appreciate where he is right. And we can never accept his judgment on our errors until he gives evidence that he really appreciates our own peculiar truth. Love, love only, love of our deluded fellow man as he actually is, in his delusion and in his sin: this alone can open the door to truth."

84 *Ibid.*, 126.



must be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. It sounds antiquated, even cliché, but it is biblical. As my agnostic friend Mitch has observed, there is an opportunity in this schismatic age for “the church to show leadership by listening to both sides and mediating between the opposing factions that have lost the ability to talk to one another”.⁸⁵

This, of course, requires that Christians listen to, and are at peace with, each other. Work remains to be done.

Third, and last, I’m hoping you take away from this talk our mission to serve. May we be a community of reconciliation

which bridges these fault lines at the heart of our divided existence. We are called to work for salvation and shalom, a peaceable community for the world. We are to seek the holistic flourishing of the secular city. This emerges from the story of God’s mission. And if we look closely, we may discover many a “person of peace” among our differently believing neighbours, with whom we may partner toward an uncommon good (Lk 10:6).⁸⁶

I commend to you *dialogos*, peaceable dialogue, as a missiological praxis for these partisan times: in education, in law, in media, health, prison reform,

85 Mitchell Gray, posted to <https://www.facebook.com/traversecentre/posts/892570784187560> (accessed May 7, 2016).

86 Cf. David Benson, “The Call To Go: Why Youth Ministry Must Leave the Building”, *St. Mark’s Review* 224 (2013), 61–69.

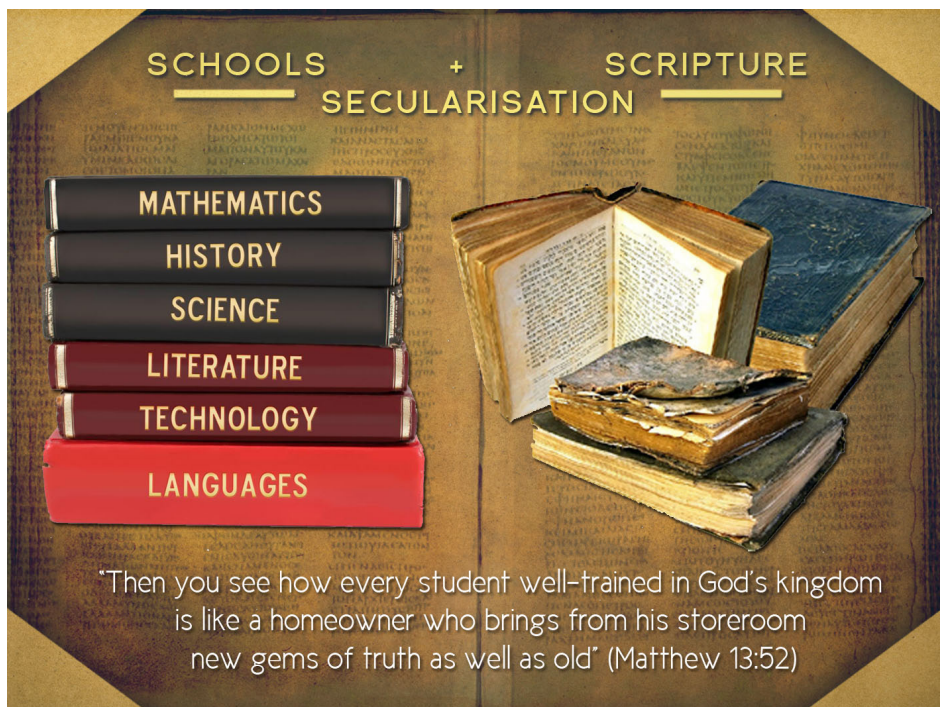
engineering, shift-work, the arts, and more. Whatever your frontline, I pray that by God's grace you may unite disparate factions, learning to live well together in the here and now. Listen, interpret, discern, converse, and act.

This is the best of times, and it's the worst of times; it's an age of wisdom, and an age of foolishness.

Returning to Fred's provocative question, "Why should I give a f*** what evangelicals think about anything?" Our actions must lead the response, with our words following in train. Nevertheless, if given another chance to reply, I wish I had said something like this:

"Fred, I'm not demanding that you should listen to us. But I have spent a long time listening to you: your heart, your story, your agendas and aims. I've learned a lot. Along the way, I've found key points where we seem to agree and disagree. Are you open to dialogue further? For I'm convinced that we each have gifts to bring, and together we can make something better of this world than we have thus far."

Idealistic, perhaps. But in the Spirit's power, I believe this mission moves us beyond the winter of despair. May we anticipate the spring of hope, and welcome the risen Son.



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