



# Catholic schools – some facts and fallacies

*Miro Martin*

I have worked in Catholic schools for over 30 years and have never felt the need to defend them however, ongoing media myths as well as ill-founded comments from Joe Public have inspired me to set the record straight.

In the early days of education in Australia, Catholic schools provided education only for Catholic children. Today Catholic schools provide a Catholic education for all children. Those first children were not only Catholic, but extremely poor. Without the sisters such as Mary MacKillop and other religious figures, these children would not have been educated. In my lifetime I have seen the number of sisters, brothers and nuns decline. They once made up the whole teaching staff in Catholic schools.

Today laypeople staff most Catholic schools. For example, I am a civilian. I'm married and have two sons. Also, all my teacher training and postgraduate study was completed in secular universities. I have done extra study to qualify for a teaching position in a Catholic school.

While Catholic schools are predominantly made up of Catholic children and Catholic staff, there is currently a significant shift to the enrolment of non-Catholic children. In our high schools the percentage of non-Catholics would be around 40 per cent, perhaps more. In our primary schools it would be around 20 to 25 per cent. There are some schools that are all Catholic. Where there are waiting lists for enrolment Catholics will always have preference.

Although we charge fees (we have no choice) we still cater for the poor. In my school, for example, we have several families on concessions. We go out of our way to accommodate families who may be struggling, however, I should point out that we are no longer charities. If we relied totally on donations from the public there would be no Catholic schools. On the whole, it is clear that Catholic schools are not elite or selective enclaves. There are exceptions and there are quite a few elite Catholic schools that cater for the well heeled, but the majority cater for the average family. In the Brisbane archdiocese where I work, the slogan is 'Quality and Inclusive Education.' I must qualify this by adding that, although we accept non-Catholics,

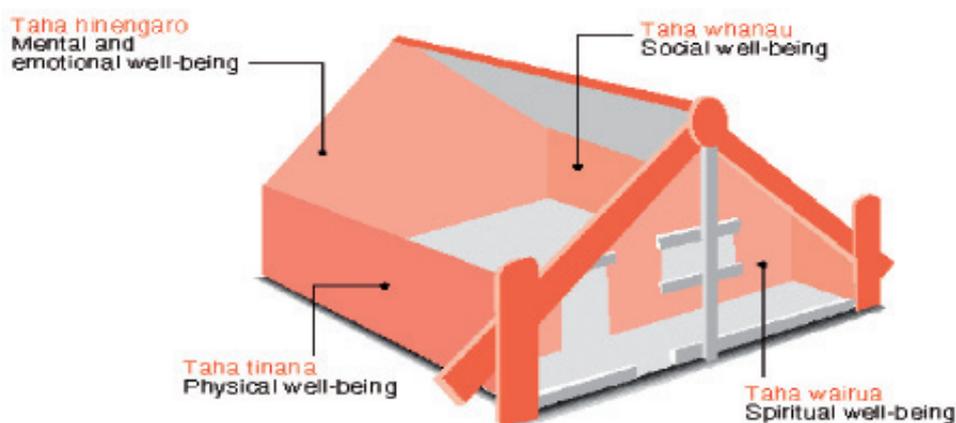
it is made clear upon enrolment that all families are expected to fully support the Catholic ethos of the school. Unlike state schools, children cannot opt out of religious education lessons or ceremonies.

The vast majority of Catholic schools are not private. Most belong to a system of schools. For example, the Brisbane archdiocese is made up of around 150 non-private schools. The private schools are usually those governed by religious orders. Government funding for Catholic schools is a contentious issue, due mainly to this misconception that we are all elite private schools. In the early days, Catholic schools received little or no funding from the government and catered for the poorest families in society, funded mainly by donations and good will. I'm pretty sure Catholic schools didn't get any government money until Menzies was Prime Minister. Currently, we get around 80 to 85 per cent of the funding that is given to state school students. School fees are charged to pay salaries, admin costs and to build and maintain schools. I'm sure the state schools would argue that we shouldn't get anything, but the fact is that we educate a huge number of students. Without Catholic schools, the government simply wouldn't be able to cope with the extra numbers. This was evident in the 1960s when the Bishop of Goulburn closed Catholic schools because the government wasn't contributing to maintenance costs. Catholic school parents pay as much tax as state school parents and are entitled to parity in education funding. Also, the Australian Catholic University trains more teachers than any other university in Australia. These teachers are employed in all schools, not just Catholic. The Catholic contribution to education in Australia is quite substantial.

To my knowledge (based on where I have worked) Catholic schools do not brainwash, indoctrinate or proselytise. We don't sell or force religion onto anyone. Rather, the Catholic ethos is about teaching children to care for each other and those less fortunate. It's about responsible stewardship of the planet.

It's also about being civil to one another. Sure, we talk a lot about Jesus and refer to the Bible to get our point across. These are wonderful didactic tools that perpetuate a caring culture. Most cultures have their teaching stories. The Aborigines have their Dreamtime stories that clearly delineate between good and bad behaviour. Catholic schools have the Bible. What a wonderful resource this is e.g. the story of the good Samaritan, where several people walk past a beaten man, ignoring him until one kind passer-by stops and helps and takes him to get care. What a great story to use when talking to children about the child who eats lunch on his own or who is never asked to join in games. A good Samaritan would go out of his way to make sure the lonely child was included.

Another example is the story of Jesus turning



*The Maori house of wellbeing.*

the other cheek when slapped by a soldier. This isn't about lying down and letting someone bully you, turning the other cheek is about taking a breath and thinking for a few seconds before reacting. If you retaliate the fight will escalate and someone will get hurt. If you use your brain and walk away or ignore, your pride may get a bruising but your teeth will remain intact. These stories are not mindless religious claptrap. They relate directly to the lives and values of the children. Not teaching these stories to our children creates a values void.

There is nothing wrong with secularism. In fact, I could argue a case against religion in favour of secularism in light of the terrible

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conflicts religion has caused throughout history and is still causing. I believe that most people want to worship their God in their own temple and in their own way or have the freedom not to worship any God at all. Unfortunately, you get extremists who believe it is their right to exert their beliefs above all others. We have them in Catholicism. In its true sense religion should not be about coercion or indoctrination. It certainly was when I was in primary school, but that was over 40 years ago. Religion comes from Latin – re ligare. It means to re-tie or bind back. Religion binds a person back to their true self by forming values. This is certainly what happens in my Catholic school and I'm sure it happens in most others.

Perhaps the best feature of a Catholic school, or indeed other religious schools, is the development of spirituality. The Maori have a beautiful metaphor for holistic wellbeing. They describe a typical whare (house) where the walls are physical, spiritual, mental and emotional wellbeing. The roof is social wellbeing (see diagram above). This diagram was in an old PE syllabus I used when I taught in New Zealand 15 years ago. A weakness in any of the walls or roof will lead to a total collapse of the whare. Spirituality is important in most cultures. It's what governs our values. Religion is a way of

experiencing and expressing this spirituality. A major component of our values, spirituality or religion – that which binds us back to our true self – is conscience.

In the old days Catholics were good at telling children that, if they sinned, they would burn in hell. This was reinforced from the pulpit on Sundays. The didactic purpose of religion was to scare the crap out of us so we would do the right thing. It was Old Testament stuff. God was like a policeman who would punish you if you did something wrong. Thankfully those days are gone. These days we use Jesus as a role model. He cared for the poor, campaigned against injustice and ridiculous practices, e.g. stoning a woman suspected of adultery. He forgave his enemies. In Catholic schools we want our children to act like Jesus. We focus on developing a conscience that intrinsically tells them to do the right thing.

For the most part, Catholic schools are the same as state schools. We follow the same curricula and are bound by the same legislations and compliances. Our teachers are trained in the same institutions as our state counterparts. The big difference is that Catholic schools have a definite value system which unashamedly uses the teachings of Jesus Christ to form the basis of a child's values. Catholic schools nurture an important component of a child's holistic development which is not catered for in state schools, i.e. their spiritual development. Secularists could argue that this is not essential, but there are significant numbers of families in Australia who obviously think it is. I am not saying that Catholic schools are better than state schools but, for a significant proportion of the population, we offer a more comprehensive package of holistic education.



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