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Western Civilisation and Christianity in the Australian Curriculum: hubris or humility?

Introduction

Allow me to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we gather today and pay respects to their Elders who have been, are now, and will continue to be, true educators: passing on the knowledge and wisdom of the world's oldest living culture from generation to generation and offering that knowledge and wisdom to the wider Australian community.

In making that acknowledgement, I am conscious that certain media commentators would take that as confirmation that ACARA is somehow buying into a "black armband view of Australian history". But I am in 100 percent agreement with Noel Pearson, who said last year that "In fighting repudiation of recognition of our Indigenous heritage, no answer lies in the repudiation of our British heritage".

So let me also acknowledge that we are meeting today in the capital city of one of the world's most successful, prosperous and peaceful democracies, and that our nation owes much to its Christian heritage, with its respect for the inherent dignity of each individual, whether gentile or Jew, servant or free, woman or man, and that this respect for human dignity has in turn shaped Western civilization's democratic traditions that are so necessary for a just society.

GK Chesterton: "A piece of chalk"

In his short and brilliant essay, "A piece of chalk", G.K. Chesterton relates the story of his visit to the Dover countryside where he does chalk sketches on brown paper. After several sketches, however, he runs out of white chalk and is very annoyed, until the significance of the fact that he is Dover dawns on him: "Imagine a man in the Sahara regretting that he had no sand for his hour-glass. Imagine a gentleman in mid-ocean wishing that he had brought some salt water with him for his chemical experiments. I was sitting on an immense warehouse of white chalk." Once he realises this, he finds white chalk everywhere lying about him, and he continues his drawing in much happier mood.

Why do I relate this story?

Well, on 4 February this year, Education Ministers met to consider revisions to the Australian Curriculum. While Ministers requested ACARA to undertake further work on Mathematics and the Humanities and Social Sciences, when the meeting was over, the acting Australian Government Minister, Stuart Robert, held a press conference during which he made the following statement:

Western civilisation is something we should be proud of, ..., it is well and truly back in the curriculum...

Well Western Civilisation never really went away, and there was a fair bit of inaccurate reportage on this issue over the course of last year, but the final version of the approved Curriculum, which was publicly launched a week ago, **has** called attention **more explicitly** to the contribution of Christianity and our Western heritage to Australia's development.

In fact the whole structure of the curriculum, with its division into eight learning areas or disciplines, reflects the progressive growth in specialisation in the creation of new and powerful knowledge that Western society has accelerated. So in more purposefully calling students' attention to the significance of our Western and Christian heritage, the new curriculum is doing something akin to calling Chesterton's attention to fact that he is surrounded by chalk. The Western tradition and Christianity have definitively shaped the society in which our students are living and learning. It's been here all the time, informing us, influencing us, and empowering us in ways that we haven't recognised.

Controversy and Consultation

The contribution of our Western and Christian heritage to the development of Australia as a nation, was highlighted just over a year ago when ACARA released the consultation draft of the Australian curriculum.

The community feedback on the consultation draft strongly supported the new focus on First Nations peoples histories, cultures, perspectives and experiences, but it also indicated that this should not come at the expense of an appropriate appreciation of Australia's indebtedness to the Western tradition and Christianity.

So the new Australian Curriculum (version 9) not only has new material focusing on Indigenous histories, cultures and perspectives, but includes more references to Christianity

and the contributions of some of its famous adherents to liberal democracy and movements to promote equality and social justice. This was a necessary corrective to the possible perception of Christianity just one of a number of religions in a multicultural, multi-faith society.

A lot of feedback drew attention to the need for students to understand the strong connections between Christian values and West's traditions of liberal democracy, and while these connections are indeed strong, it would be inaccurate and misleading to suggest that it was ever thus.

Christianity and Western culture are related, but they are not the same thing, though going back 1000 years the relationship was much closer than it is today.

Christianity and Democracy

Anyone attempting to assert that Christianity as implemented in the real world was always and everywhere the champion of the rights of the people against the claims of autocrats would have to interpret a number of historical facts in particularly creative ways, for example

- How should one interpret Christ's own advocacy that we render unto Caesar what is Caesar's?
- Or Martin Luther's condemnation of the Peasants' Revolt 1525 as undermining the feudal authority of Princes,
- Think of all the Catholic theorists who proposed the Divine Right of Kings, a theory was supported by Charles 1 (until the forces of democratic reform cut off his head), and Louis 14, Elizabeth I
- The Protestant philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, believed in the absolute power of the monarch in order to protect us from a life that would otherwise be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short"
- the various inquisitions (Spanish, Portuguese, Roman) that admitted of no popular participation in civil authority by right,
- the large number of Cardinals and conservative theologians who tried desperately to prevent the American inspired democratic theories of Jesuit John Courtney Murray from infiltrating the Second Vatican Council,
- the Spanish Catholic Church under dictatorship of Franco.

Of course there are many counter-examples, including

- the witness of William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect and their opposition to the slave trade;
- the advocacy of Christian groups in support of Aboriginal rights in this country
- the influence of Catholic philosopher Jaques Maritain in the thinking that underpinned the UN Declaration of Human Rights
- the martyrdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero who was an outspoken critic of the oppression of El Salvadoran people by the right-wing military junta in El Salvador,
- the role of the Christian Women's Temperance Society in promoting the extension suffrage to women
- the work of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement,
- the key role of Cardinal Stefan Wyzinski in opposing the communist regime in Poland during the 1960s and 1970s,
- and the role of Martin Luther King Jnr in the US Civil Rights Movement

My point is simply that the history of the connections between Christianity, "Western civilisation", and liberal democracy can be described as ***a very tangled knot***. I don't propose to untie that knot in this short address, but rather, in pointing out some of its knotty features, I hope to encourage some reflections on the challenges and opportunities this tangled knotted history presents to Christian schools in teaching the new curriculum.

Christianity and Culture

Of course, the issue of how Christianity engages with culture, especially through educational institutions, is the key issue that you face every day. I faced these questions in my first job as a teacher in a Catholic school and in subsequent role as CEO of the National Catholic Education Commission. I am sure you all have cause to reflect regularly on which of Richard Neibhur's five models - of how Christianity engages with culture - is most relevant to the task of education. Is it Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, or Christ transforming culture? Hopefully my remarks today may help you in your reflections on this question, with respect to the issue of curriculum.

"Western Civilisation"

Let's start by asking the question, what is "Western Civilisation"? There has been much controversy in recent years over this question ever since the Paul Ramsay Foundation sought to endow the establishment of university courses for the study Western Civilisation. Many academics in universities were highly critical of this effort, arguing that Western Civilisation had left a legacy of colonial oppression and patriarchy that should not be celebrated.

In so doing, they were taking on the role of Reg from the Judean Peoples Front in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, who rhetorically asked "What have the Romans ever done for us?" In similar vein, this critique of the Ramsay Foundation's efforts is akin to such academics asking, "Well, apart from the highest levels of material prosperity in history, freedom of religion, liberal democracy and the establishment of universities and the freedom of speech that allows us to make these complaints, what has Western Civilisation ever done for us?"

It would be mistaken to argue that these critiques undermine the liberal tradition bequeathed to us by our Western heritage because, in fact, they exemplify it: robust but respectful disagreement and self-critique is a central aspect of that heritage.

Traditionalist defenders of Western Civilisation often make reference to need to teach the great canon of Western thought, as epitomised by Matthew Arnold's call to learn about "the best which has been thought and said in the world" through a study of the so-called "Great Books". This is indeed important, but such advocates might sometimes overlook the fact that this canon not only includes the works of Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Shakespeare, Austen, and Dostoyevsky, but also the works of Nietzsche who proclaimed the death of God and the need to cast off what he referred to as "the slave morality" of Christianity, as well as the works of Descartes, Rousseau, Bacon, and Hobbes, who all wrote great books calling on the overthrow of an approach to learning that focused on the teaching of previous great books.

I'll return to these authors in shortly, but for now I simply wish to make the point that when we hear both defenders and critics speak of Western Civilisation, it is sometimes as if they conceive of it as a static phenomenon, a statue on an altar, fixed in time and place, which one can either venerate or desecrate. But this conception of Western Civilisation is utterly mistaken. It is an ever-evolving, dynamic social and cultural process that is open to both progress and decline and has experienced both over the course of its evolution. (The same could be said about the way many people today speak of Indigenous culture, as if it some kind of archaeological artefact rather than a living, dynamic, diversity).

Not only that, but Western Civilisation isn't even exclusively or monolithically Western. Part of its essential character is that it adopts and adapts features from other cultures in order to evolve.

This was highlighted by Professor Greg Craven, former vice-chancellor at ACU in 2018 when he gave an address to the Sydney Institute, which can be found on the ABC website, in which he stated that

“supporters of Western culture would be well advised to rely more often in their contests upon one of Western civilisation's own defining and supremely effective characteristics – cultural synthesis. At least in some contexts, the basic question might not be how to throttle some seemingly divergent cultural thought, but rather how any potentially valid threads might be woven into the vast, diverse tapestry that is Western civilisation.”

Craven went on to demonstrate, through analysis of some of the masterpieces of Western art and architecture, how one of the defining features of the Western tradition is precisely an ever-evolving synthesis of conflicting but complementary ideas underpinned by institutions that facilitate the holding together of incommensurate values.

He gives the example of *The Virgin Annunciate*, a typical example of Western culture painted by the Sieneese master Taddeo di Bartolo in around 1422. “Her face,” he says,

ultimately comes not from Italy, but from the icons of Constantinople... Her book is in Hebrew, not Latin, something that would have been unthinkable before the stirring of the humanist revolution of the fifteenth century. Even her beautiful blue mantle is made from lapis lazuli imported from Muslim Afghanistan. The history of Western culture is as much one of synthetic acceptance, as of ideological rejection.

For Western civilisation is the supreme act of synthesis. It is fair to describe Western culture, argues Craven, as "synthetic," not in the pejorative sense of a cheap nylon shirt, but in the sense of the original Greek word – an imaginative and cohesive putting together of different but complementary concepts to provide an integrated whole.

Because of this, Western civilisation has never been truly static. It has constantly been changing as it incorporates the lessons of history and other cultures.

This perspective provides an important opportunity for Australia, and especially for Christian schools as you prepare to teach the new Australian Curriculum, if you can think creatively and critically about a synthesis that draws together First Nations peoples, Western and migrant

cultures. Can Christian schools be the crucible within which that synthesis is forged, a synthesis which would inform the way your students engage with the world?

“Great Books”

At this point I want to return to some of those cultural disrupters to whom I referred earlier when discussing the notion of “The Great Books” of the Western canon. I happen to have here one of those beautifully bound Britannica volumes from their Great Books series, from which I will quote shortly. A quick check of the full list of authors on the inside cover will soon have us realising that the Western heritage is far from static or monolithic and always pushing in the same inevitably progressive direction towards ever greater heights of sophistication and wisdom.

The list includes representatives of vastly different and opposing schools of thought, not only Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas and Shakespeare, but also Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Bacon, Nietzsche, Freud, Darwin, Marx and Engels. The history of the west is not one of inexorable progress but of tangled, knotty paradox in which the same phenomena, and each new syntheses, entail both new goods and new evils.

And so, paradoxically, the broader assault on the study of Western civilisation derives much of its intellectual fuel from a number of the great books of the Western canon themselves.

As Patrick Deneen, author of “Why Liberalism Failed” (2016), has argued, typically the defence of Western civilisation as an object of study in a curriculum is based on a claim that an education in the Western canon is necessary for a preparation for democratic citizenship, that it has the aim of teaching about the nature of liberty.

There is a more fundamental claim that one also finds in the defence of the reading of the great books: that the core texts of the West have made us what we are, that they are the sources from which we have derived such concepts as human dignity, equality, individual liberty, democracy, and social justice and human rights.

So conceived, the great books have shaped a world in their image and guided not only individuals, but a whole civilization, in fostering a way of life. So, according to this argument, reading the great texts of the Western canon is necessary for us to come to a comprehensive self-understanding.

This is a remarkably bold claim: that books can make a world – even when many have not read those books. But we know it to be true, because people who do read those books are influenced by them, persuaded by them, and choose to act in accordance to the ideas they put forward, shaping public policy and the cultural and intellectual milieu of their societies.

And so we find, in that period of European history that is known as the Enlightenment, which was the great disruptive turning point that shifted the West from the classical to the modern mindset, that there are influential writers who write books that repudiate book learning, and in so doing usher in a new notion of human freedom as liberation from the past, from authority and tradition.

Let me attempt to explain the nature of this shift and the role played by some the so-called great books of the Western canon with reference to the writings of Wendell Berry, the contemporary American novelist, poet, environmental activist and farmer, who describes himself as a “marginal Christian”.

In an essay written during the Global Financial Crisis, which exposed the myth of limitless borrowing and debt, Berry reflects on the enduring importance of Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to suggest that it is a part of the wisdom of the older books to teach us not only about what we ought to do, but also about what we ought not to do, about the necessity of self-imposed limits.

Commenting on *Doctor Faustus*, Berry writes

Faustus, a man of learning, longs to possess “all Nature’s treasury,” to “Ransack the ocean.../And search all corners of the new-found world...” To assuage his thirst for knowledge and power, he deeds his soul to Lucifer, receiving in compensation for twenty-four years the services of the sub-devil Mephistophilis, nominally Faustus’ slave but in fact his master. Having the subject of limitlessness in mind, I was astonished on this reading to come upon Mephistophilis’ description of hell...: “Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed /In one self place, but where we [the damned] are is hell, /And where hell is must we ever be.” For those who reject heaven, hell is everywhere, and thus is limitless.

This connection between limitlessness and damnedness provides a segue to Berry’s discussion of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Berry points to the response of the archangel Raphael to Adam’s questions about the story of creation.

Raphael agrees “to answer thy desire / Of knowledge **within bounds**” (Berry’s emphasis), and explains that

Knowledge is as food, and needs no less
Her temperance over appetite, to know
In measure what the mind may well contain;
Oppresses else with surfeit, and soon turns
Wisdom to folly, as nourishment to wind.

Berry continues: “Raphael is saying, with angelic circumlocution, that knowledge without wisdom, limitless knowledge, is not worth a fart; he is not a humorless archangel. But he also is saying that knowledge without measure, knowledge that the human mind cannot appropriately use, is mortally dangerous.”

Great books such as *Doctor Faustus* and *Paradise Lost* sought to inculcate a sense of limits of human power and knowledge, to cultivate a capacity to accept and endure rather than the impulse to transform and escape those limits. Such books endeavoured to foster an education in the accompanying **virtues** that are required in a world where such limits are recognized – virtues such as moderation and prudence – and in the avoidance of vices of excess, such as **hubris** being an excess of pride.

For writers such as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, Dante, and Aquinas, the appropriate disposition toward the world is not the effort to seek its **transformation to fit our desires**, but rather to **conform** human aspirations to the natural world, the created order. Hence, the primary purpose of education on this view is learning to live in a world in which self-limitation is the appropriate response to a world we can’t control. Education in virtue is a central goal – particularly the hard discipline of the human propensity toward excess and hubris.

Because the present and future were believed to be fundamentally identical to the past, the past was understood to be a source of wisdom about our condition as humans in a world that we do not command. An education in great books of the past, as sources of authority and tradition, was therefore a consequence of a philosophical worldview.

Enlightenment hubris

Arguments against this form of education became common among elite thinkers in the Enlightenment period, who sought to justify a new kind of science that had as its aim the expansion of human control over nature. Arguing strenuously against the content of books by

authors such as Aristotle, Francis Bacon castigated previous thinkers for their “despair” and tendency to “think things impossible.”

Asserting that “knowledge is power,” he rejected the idea that knowledge consists first in acknowledging human limits and claimed that it was necessary to wipe clear “waxen tablets” inscribed with older writing in order to inscribe new lessons upon them. Books were more often than not one manifestation of the “idols of the cave,” or illusions that obscured true enlightenment. His own book Novum Organum is devoted to arguing against the flawed inheritance of the past, including the arguments found in the great books of his age.

As Patrick Deneen has pointed out, Bacon’s work is the first in a long line of great books that argued against an education in great books. Another in this genre is René Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*, which begins with a similar condemnation of book learning as an obstacle to true understanding. “As soon as my age permitted me to pass from under the control of my instructors,” he wrote, “I entirely abandoned the study of letters, and resolved no longer to seek any other science than the knowledge of myself, or of the great book of the world.”

Famously, he concludes that he exists because he knows that he thinks—a conclusion that requires no consultation of books or culture, but only what his own mind, stripped bare of all external influences, can grasp.

In *Leviathan*, Francis Bacon’s secretary Thomas Hobbes also rejects the counsel of those who follow “the authority of books,” and instead tells the learner to trust entirely his own experience and experimentation with the natural realm and thereby make it possible for man to exercise control over the natural world and attain a condition of “commodious living.”

And as the great defender of the authority of the sovereign, Hobbes was very concerned about the democratic ideals to be found by young men who read the ancient classics, and was determined that the sovereign should decide what gets read and what doesn’t.

The power of knowledge and the redundancy of virtue

These early exemplars of the modern mindset largely reversed the ancient and medieval conceptions of *eudaimonia* or happiness. The knowledge prized by the moderns is based on empirical science. For them, natural science proved its utility through the tangible fruits and works it helped to produce. From their explicitly and exclusively pragmatic perspective, the

key to human happiness is not acquired virtue, the right ordering of fear, desire, belief, and judgment, but continually increasing human power and control over material reality. Only when the power we command exceeds our actual desires are we effectively positioned for happiness, both individually and collectively. From this modern ethical perspective, it was because the ancients lacked technical power over nature that they focussed their ethics on the moral and religious disciplining of human fear and desire. The new science and technology, by radically augmenting human power, made the traditional education of the passions no longer necessary.

However, the foolishness of our hubristic belief that limitless knowledge and power will deliver us power over nature is now becoming clearer as the reality of climate change dawns on us. In addition to diminishing our natural resources, we have also diminished the cultural resources of our Christian heritage which may have helped us (and could still) recognise our limits and exercise the necessary self-restraint to ensure our future survival and flourishing.

The counter-Enlightenment

The Enlightenment hubris displayed by Bacon and others, who envisioned the inevitable spread of cultural and scientific progress across the globe once humanity was freed from the bonds of tradition, was not shared by everyone. Indeed counter-Enlightenment figures such as Johann Gottfried Herder, the 18th century German philosopher, theologian and poet, were critical of the idea that the history of mankind was one of inexorable progress from savagery to 18th century Europe as the pinnacle of development. In his unfinished “Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity”, Herder addressed the following paragraph to peoples from all ages and places:

Men of all quarters of the globe, who have perished over the ages, you have not lived solely to manure the earth with your ashes, so that at the end of time your posterity should be made happy by European culture. The very thought of a superior European culture is a blatant insult to the majesty of Nature.

Herder himself is both a product and producer of that culture. Such is the tangled nature of our Western heritage. But there are more tangles still.

Dewey and “progressive” education

Centuries later, John Dewey, the patron saint of progressive education, in books that continue to exert great influence in schools of education, argued that learning should be accomplished “experientially” rather than through an encounter with books.

In his short work Experience and Education, he argues strenuously that an education based in books transmitted “static” knowledge to a citizenry that needed to be better enabled to face a world of rapid change. Learning through books is “to a large extent the cultural product of societies that assumed the future would be much like the past, and yet it is used as educational food in a society where change is the rule, not the exception.”

According to Dewey, not only was such an education the necessary response to a society experiencing change, but it also would lead to desirable acceleration of change. A society based upon constant change had two aims: to actively displace cultural transmission as a norm of education and thus unseat “authority” and the past as guides to action, and to permit greater command of the natural and human world and the growth of human power.

Dewey makes this case in his book Democracy and Education, asking, “Why does a savage group perpetuate savagery, and a civilized group civilization?” He answers that “in a sense the mind of savage peoples is an effect, rather than a cause, of their backward institutions. Their social activities are such as to restrict their objects of attention and interest, and hence to limit the stimuli to mental development.”

As an aside, I note that this categorisation of societies into primitive and civilised is itself not uncontested, as illustrated by the quote from Gottfried Herder I cited above, and the distinction has been at the forefront of debates about Bruce Pascoe’s book “Dark Emu” and its recent rebuttal by Peter Sutton and Keryn Walshe. But to continue with Dewey:

Even as regards the objects that come within the scope of attention, primitive social customs tend to arrest observation and imagination upon qualities which do not fructify in the mind. Lack of control of natural forces means that a scant number of natural objects enter into associated behaviour. Only a small number of natural resources are utilized and they are not worked for what they are worth. The advance of civilization means that a larger number of natural forces and objects have been transformed into instrumentalities of action, into means for securing ends.

Dewey claimed that progress rests upon the *active control of nature* and hence requires the displacement of the “savage” regard for the past and, arguably, the inclination to make a

home in the world as created rather than seek its transformation through human mastery. The savage tribe does manage to live in the desert, he writes, by adapting itself, and “its adaptation involves a maximum of accepting, tolerating, putting up with things as they are, a maximum of passive acquiescence, and a minimum of active control, of subjection to use.” A “civilized people” in the same desert also adapts itself. But “it introduces irrigation; it searches the world for plants and animals that will flourish under such conditions; it improves, by careful selection, those which are growing there. As a consequence, the wilderness blossoms as a rose. The savage is merely habituated; the civilized man has habits which transform the environment.”

These words now, after almost a century of reflection on the uses to which human beings have put their technological know-how, sounds almost positively naïve and hubristic.

A far richer means of distinguishing higher and lower cultures is offered by the Jesuit philosopher, Bernard Lonergan, in his 1972 work, “Method in Theology” where he describes that difference as between cultures that are able to exercise more or less control not over *nature*, but over *meaning*, through the use of symbols in language, religion and art.

Viewed through this lens, our technologically sophisticated and economically developed society – in which so many people experience life as empty of meaning and purpose - has arguably a somewhat weaker claim to superiority over more ancient societies.

Dewey traces his own thought back to Francis Bacon, whom he considered the most important thinker in history. In Dewey, as in Bacon, a close connection is forged between the modern project of the mastery of nature and the rejection of an education focused upon the teachings of the great books. Only by overcoming the “static” teachings of those texts can progress be unleashed through the exercise of human ingenuity and freedom; only by extending human mastery over a tortured nature can humanity achieve the true measure of its potential greatness.

Two notions of liberty

So we see a picture emerging of how two distinct and contradictory conceptions of liberty have been advanced in a long succession of great books of the Western canon. As Deneen writes,

OFFICIAL

The first of these commends the study of great books for an education in virtue, in light of a recognition of human membership in a created order to which we must conform and that we do not ultimately govern. The other argues against the study of great books and asserts a form of human greatness that seeks the human mastery of nature, particularly by the emphasis of modern science.

This latter conception of liberty does not seek merely to coexist alongside an older conception, but requires the active dismantling of this idea of liberty. Hence education is to be transformed away from the study of great books and the cultivation of virtue and toward the study of "the great book of nature" in order to bend it to our will and our desires.

The older conception of liberty held that liberty was ultimately a form of self-government, as freedom within limits. In a constrained world, the human propensity to desire and consume without limit inclined people toward a condition of slavery, understood to be enslavement to the base desires. Freedom was thus conceived as liberation from enslavement to one's desires.

It is interesting to note that etymologically, the English word "free" is linked to friendship, the sense evolution from "to love" to "free" is perhaps from the terms "beloved" or "friend" being applied to the free members of one's clan (compare the Latin root of liberty, *liberi* refers to both citizens as opposed to slaves and to the children in one's family). Thus the context for and purpose of the exercise of freedom is friendship, family and community, rather than individual gratification.

This older conception of liberty was displaced by our regnant conception of liberty, the liberty to pursue our desires limitlessly with growing prospects of ongoing fulfillment through the conquest of nature, accompanied by the constant generation of new desires that demand ever greater expansion of the human project of mastery.

The notion of liberty as self-government is of course not unconnected to the notion of democracy, in which the people govern themselves collectively through virtue and self-restraint in recognition of the limits we face and in the interests of the common good of all. But today's rampant consumerism, in pursuit of the fulfillment of ever-expanding set of desires, is skewing the way we think about the democratic process, as simply another means of having our material desires fulfilled.

So we need to consider whether the justification for studying the significant, important and influential books of our Western heritage is sufficient: whether simply presenting these books as general representatives of “greatness” does not in fact contribute to the undermining of the study of our Western heritage. All these books were influential, but were they all “great”? Perhaps we need to commend instead *humble books*, or at least truly great (and influential) books that teach humility, such as *Doctor Faustus* and *Paradise Lost*.

Notwithstanding this, we ignore the so-called great books of our tangled, knotty, Western cultural heritage at our peril. As Deneen writes:

Only by understanding the competing teachings of the “great books” of our Western heritage can we reconsider the lessons that our age has embraced — lessons that have led us to think that we can dispense with reading the great books — and even ponder whether it would be wiser to commend the teachings of the humble books as we witness the accumulating wreckage amid our progress.

Conclusion: the needs for a new cultural synthesis

So in concluding I would like to suggest that education must keep consciousness open and flexible by way of expanding it through the realization of how others have experienced, understood, judged, and decided. In other words, education must foster critical respect for our past, for the culture we have inherited, always leaving open the possibility of amending cultural practices in response to new realities and new questions. Education therefore serves simultaneously the purposes of social and cultural continuity, and social and cultural change, of cultural transmission and transformation.

So one of the objectives that Christian schools may wish to adopt, as you consider the implications of the new Australian Curriculum, with its strengthened reference to Indigenous, Christian and Western heritage, as well as the cross-curriculum priority of sustainability, is how to fashion a new Australian cultural synthesis between Christianity, our Western heritage and the ancient wisdom of our First Nations peoples, who have perhaps learned to walk both more humbly and more proudly across our Mother Earth.

This synthesis must rise to meet the challenge of our time, which is multifaceted — environmental, economic, social, racial, cultural, psychological, spiritual, and moral. This

OFFICIAL

synthesis will need to address a loss of memory and ignorance about key aspects of the story of which we are a part: Christian aspects, Western heritage aspects, Indigenous aspects. It will need to serve the cultivation of civic virtues.

So the question I leave you with is this: Can Christian schools fashion for your students a particularly Australian synthesis between our tangled, knotty Western heritage of hubris and humility on the one hand and the 60,000 year-old culture into which it arrived a mere 234 years ago? How can the heritages bequeathed to us from Delphi, Golgotha and Uluru be synthesised to shape a culture in which true freedom and justice and fellowship are possible?

Can Christian schools teach us all to walk humbly once again?

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