

Is it occult? Steiner education in Victorian state schools may be stretching the secular intent of Victoria's 1872 Education Act. There are now similar examples in Queensland and South Australian state schools.

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Transcript

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Stephen Crittenden: Welcome to the program.

We've had a huge response to last week's program on Rudolf Steiner's educational theories and anthroposophy. Talkback on ABC Local and Regional radio and lots of emails, some parents telling stories of illiterate children who spent their time colouring in, other parents very happy and supportive of the Steiner curriculum.

The focus of our program, however, was not on educational outcomes, or whether parents were happy or unhappy with choices they'd made. The question we asked were quite narrowly focused in fact: Is the Steiner method based on foundational presuppositions which are intrinsically religious or spiritualist, or even occult, in character? Is the Steiner method appropriate for a secular public school? And what steps has the Victorian Education Department taken to make a determination about these foundational questions.

Well those are questions that require an official response, and last week we approached the Victorian Education Minister, the Deputy Secretary of the Education Department, Darryl Fraser, and the Steiner Schools Movement, but none of them would agree to speak to us. But the Education Department has changed its mind this week, and in a moment I'll be speaking to John Allman, the Department's General Manager of Student Wellbeing and Support.

But first, we've received many emails from happy Steiner parents. We heard from unhappy parents last week. One of the most interesting came from Dr Charles Livingstone, a social scientist who has two children enrolled in the Steiner stream at Footscray City Primary School. Charles, welcome to the program. You've told us you're happy with the Steiner stream, but have you detected any sign of spiritualism or religion in the classroom?

Charles Livingstone: No, I haven't. My eldest daughter has been at the school since grade prep, she's in grade 6 now and she's been in the Steiner stream throughout; my son is in grade 2 and he also started in prep, grade prep in Steiner and he's been through it. I haven't seen any evidence of spiritualism or occultism of any sort in the classroom.

Stephen Crittenden: Do your kids say Blessings at the beginning of the day?

Charles Livingstone: Do they say Blessings at the beginning of the day?

Stephen Crittenden: Yes, in the classroom?

Charles Livingstone: Yes, they have. I mean they don't every day, to my knowledge, but they do -

Stephen Crittenden: They do sometimes.

Charles Livingstone: Yes, they do, and I don't regard that as a religious ritual.

Stephen Crittenden: What, saying a prayer is not a religious ritual?

Charles Livingstone: Well I don't regard it as a prayer. I mean it's simply asking for a sense of wellbeing, that's how I interpret it.

Stephen Crittenden: What about eurhythmy and all of Steiner's colour theories? He was quite open that there are occult reasons behind why he introduced those practices.

Charles Livingstone: Yes, well I'd interrogate the use of the term 'occult', I mean according to my dictionary -

Stephen Crittenden: That's the word he himself used.

Charles Livingstone: Well no, but I mean 'occult' simply means 'hidden'. It has other meanings which we've been layered on us over the last 100 years or more, but if you mean by 'occult' sort of black magic, spiritualism, or mysticism, that is certainly not a practice which -

Stephen Crittenden: I don't think anyone's suggesting it's black magic, but they are suggesting it's magic, they are suggesting it's spiritualism. He was a clairvoyant, he talks about clairvoyance, absolutely central to his theory of colour.

Charles Livingstone: Well, it may well be, but look, can I make this point? That Steiner was a man of the 19th century. He was a relatively minor philosopher but nonetheless a serious scholar. He was deeply engaged with the writings of Schiller, Goethe, and Nietzsche, all of whom he wrote on, all of whom were without doubt significant and central figures in the development of western philosophy, let alone German philosophy. And he lived in a time when a number of ideas which we would regard as rather odd, were central to the pursuit of thinking. So yes, some of his ideas are remarkably odd; some of Arthur Conan Doyle's ideas were remarkably odd too, but that doesn't mean we don't read the Sherlock Holmes stories and enjoy them any more.

Stephen Crittenden: I think some of his ideas were indeed very odd. He thought that blond-haired, blue-eyed children were more intelligent than dark-skinned children.

Charles Livingstone: Yes, well perhaps he did. The problem that we have is that if you try to interpolate Steiner's ideas or anyone else's ideas into the context of the 20th century classroom environment, then of course some of them are going to look remarkably odd and indeed objectionable, but the fact remains that what makes it into the classroom is not Steiner's racism, nor his occultism, or whatever else you want to call it, what makes it into the classroom is the core of his ideas, which is about nurturing the love of learning in children, at which regardless of all the other strange things he might have believed in, he was remarkably good at I believe.

Stephen Crittenden: The actual sort of foundations of what he thought he was up to don't matter, is that what you're saying?

Charles Livingstone: Well no I'm not saying that at all. What I'm saying is that if you interrogate the theory, the philosophy, the social theory of anyone from the 19th century, you're going to find stuff in it that you would find difficult and objectionable, but that doesn't mean that you ditch the lot, because it also will contain some insights and some ideas which are of significance. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. I regard myself as a fairly rational person, I'm certainly a non-religious person. I would object if I felt that my children were being exposed to religious, racist or other doctrinal teachings, and in my experience, they have not been. What is taught in the classrooms at Footscray City is the Victorian curriculum, and is modulated to a certain extent by what I regard as some of the interesting ideas which are appropriate to our time, which are being used by the teachers in that stream, to help develop the children's wellbeing, and to develop their love of learning. That's my experience of it.

Stephen Crittenden: So the point is they're getting modulated Steiner?

Charles Livingstone: Well whether they're getting pure Steiner or not, I don't know. I've always found the teachers to be open about what they're doing, and to provide explanation of what they're doing, and they've certainly talked to me about anthroposophy, to the extent that I wanted to know about it, but -

Stephen Crittenden: How much do you want to know about it?

Charles Livingstone: Well I want to know enough to know what's going on, and I think I've got that. I've always had the opportunity to have that. There's no shortage of sources on what Steiner said or wrote, as you would well know. If you look, you will find it; it's not a secret, it's quite easy to inform yourself about it.

Stephen Crittenden: Thank you very much for being on the program. Much appreciate it.

Charles Livingstone: OK, thank you. Goodbye.

Stephen Crittenden: Charles Livingstone. Well Dr David Millikan is one of Australia's leading experts on cults, and we thought it would be interesting to hear his views about Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy, especially as his daughter went to a Steiner school. David, welcome to the program. Before we come to Steiner, you're planning to attend the funeral of Ken Dyers in Sydney later today; Ken Dyers, the founder of the Kenja movement, a kind of home-grown offshoot of Scientology and listeners may have seen the full page ads taken out by his supporters in the weekend papers after he took his own life. Sounds like it will be an interesting funeral.

David Millikan: Oh yes, very, very, interesting. I think you know this is a group who is facing one of the great crisis moments in groups like this, when the guru and founder and prophet, dies. Because now, they've now got to defend themselves, and if they're going to be taken seriously in the world, they've got to develop some sort of apologetic, and I think that's going to be difficult.

Stephen Crittenden: Now what's your assessment of Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy?

David Millikan: Well Steiner I regard as a really remarkable man. He was the sort of polymath who turned his hand to all manner of things: architecture, agriculture, education, art, and religion. And in Australia we've got various manifestations of Steinerism and quite often they stand very separate from each other. So you'll have people who are engaged in the biodynamic movement who owe their roots to Steiner, and they wouldn't see themselves as being necessarily party to Steiner's religious views, or his philosophical views.

Stephen Crittenden: Well I guess David, the most famous single example would be the design of Canberra. The Burley-Griffin's were anthroposophists.

David Millikan: Indeed, indeed.

Stephen Crittenden: And designed the town on anthroposophical principles.

David Millikan: Yes. Yes, that's true. And certainly this is true in the world of education. You'll find some schools, which are Steiner Schools, will see themselves as exclusively Steiner educational schools and others will see themselves as Steiner educational schools who then also want to take that extra step in making a link to anthroposophy, which is his underlying sort of philosophical and religious system.

Stephen Crittenden: Can you have Steiner without the anthroposophy though?

David Millikan: That's a difficult question. If you're going to go all the way with Steiner, because he had such eccentric views about the way children should be educated, and they were views that require you to understand what underlies them, and so if you scratch the surface and go a couple of steps underneath, then you are always going to hit Steiner's presuppositions, and that will lead you to anthroposophy. So in that sense, Steinerism at a superficial level in education could be regarded as secular, but if you are an enthusiastic Steiner teacher who's concerned to get to the full depths of Steiner's perception, then you will know about anthroposophy, and that will influence both the way you speak to students, the way you think of them, the way you understand the very nature of the task that you've involved in.

Stephen Crittenden: So do you believe a Steiner curriculum can be operated free of its spiritual presuppositions?

David Millikan: Sometimes. And it depends largely on the enthusiasm of the teachers. If you get - I mean you could say the same would be true of Christian schools. I mean some schools that are Christian in the broader sense, but some of the more established private schools, they've been through periods of their life when they are indistinguishable from the world outside and religion is like a sort of a wash that brushes over the life of the school.

Stephen Crittenden: You had a daughter who went to a Steiner school, I gather?

David Millikan: I did. In fact I took my daughter to a Steiner school in Canberra because I was quite impressed by the quality of the students that were there, and the way they were operating. But before I sent her to the school, my wife and I went along and saw the headmaster, and I said to him, very directly, I said, 'Now to what extent do you see yourself as an advocate of anthroposophy?' And he said, 'Oh no, no, no, we are Steiner Education'. I said, 'Well if that's the case, I'm happy to send my daughter here, but I'll be watching you!' And in fact this school turned out to be quite a lovely school. But there are other Steiner schools that I would say are not of that order.

Stephen Crittenden: Now here's the \$64-million question: Is Steiner appropriate do you think, in the public school system?

David Millikan: My belief is No. I understand that this is going on in Victoria and Queensland and elsewhere. I think that the Victorian Educational system ought to look at their definition of what is religion, and in fact they may do well to look at the 1982 High Court judgment concerning Scientology, when religion was defined within the Australian legal system. We believe in Australia, that education should be universal and secular in the government system. And if they're opening the door to Steiner teachers, on the pretext that these Steiner teachers are saying, 'Well we are not a religion, we are simply introducing secular and interesting principles', then that opens the door in a sense, to any group. Groups like Landmark Forum, groups like even sort of Buddhist or Zen groups who could say 'Well we are not religious, we are providing secular or scientific views as to how we should educate children.' But that is not enough. We need our government departments to show more sophistication in their understanding of what belies the intentions and -

Stephen Crittenden: And what religion is, you're saying?

David Millikan: Yes, and what religion is itself, yes.

Stephen Crittenden: Thank you very much for being on the program.

David Millikan: It's my pleasure.

Stephen Crittenden: Dr David Millikan.

Well now to the Victorian Education Department. Public schools in Victoria are decentralised. Principals and school councils are free to run their own show, provided they stick within certain departmental guidelines. But do local schools have the right information to make an informed decision about Steiner and anthroposophy, and has the Department abrogated its responsibilities?

John Allman is the department's General Manager for Student Wellbeing and Support. John, welcome to The Religion Report. Is someone who believed that blond-haired, blue-eyed children were smarter than dark-skinned children because of a substance in their brains, an appropriate person to found a curriculum on for Victorian public schools in 2007?

John Allman: I prefer Stephen, if you don't mind, to talk about the policies that we have in place in terms of providing guidance to school councils who make decisions about curriculum that's provided in their schools. That's my expertise and I'm very happy to discuss that with you.

Stephen Crittenden: To what extent has the Education Department made an evaluation of Rudolf Steiner's theories, and made a determination about whether or not they have an occult or a religious, or a spiritualist basis to them?

John Allman: Certainly there's no evidence that we have that that is the case in terms of the way it is operating in any government school in Victoria. But I am aware that there are some issues at one of our schools which respect the parent concerns and we're

following that up at the moment.

Stephen Crittenden: So what is the policy?

John Allman: Well the policy's very clear. It's been in place for about 18 months for Victorian government schools. It's really important that we look at it in the context of self-managing schools, whereby school councils, the majority membership are parents, decide at the local level if they would like to introduce an alternative curriculum stream in that school, which is then an option for students and their families to consider when they attend that school. We don't have a policy specific to Steiner education, but rather for any specialised curriculum, that a community may consider appropriate -

Stephen Crittenden: So it's up to a local school to decide whether Steiner is appropriate or not?

John Allman: It certainly is. They can determine that at the local level, but they must follow the policy that we have in place that gives them guidelines about how to consider Steiner for their local community.

Stephen Crittenden: The new guidelines contain a list of principles that must be taken into account by schools. I notice there's no mention of secularism.

John Allman: Well certainly look let me make it absolutely clear, that the policy that we have in place obliges the Education Act which is very clear about secularism. School councils are aware that any policy they implement must oblige the Education Act.

Stephen Crittenden: OK, and when those guidelines came out, did the Department obtain a view about the way Steiner stands in relation to the Act? You know, in other words, whether Steiner passes a threshold test of secularity, if you like.

John Allman: Well one way of putting it, Stephen, the reality is we've had Steiner streams - now let's be clear, it's not a Steiner school in the government education system.

Stephen Crittenden: No, we understand that.

John Allman: Steiner-influenced curriculum model at school level, and we've had those in place for many years. I think one of our metropolitan schools goes back to 1991, and it's been implemented without any problems or issues at all, and parents make a choice at the local level, and that program in that school has always obliged the Act around secularism, and the reality is when the policy was introduced 18 months ago, it was really about providing a framework and further guidance for those schools considering going down that path.

Stephen Crittenden: Except that parents are telling us it's not passing the test of secularism, and we've had one parent tell us that his child was told basically they weren't in favour of him progressing on to the next grade because his soul wasn't fully incarnated into his body.

John Allman: Look, I am aware that there are some very concerned parents in one of our schools, and the Department has in place very rigorous processes around reviewing curriculum models across the board in our schools. The school that I'm sure you're referring to is undergoing a major review this year which is very convenient in terms of looking at the Steiner program, and because of the issue you've just raised, and issues the Department is aware of, we've gone one step further than normal, and engaged a body from Melbourne University to look at the program in the school, examine all the issues, in particular the one you just mentioned, and others, and determine whether it does fit in the guidelines, and oblige the Act. And we're able to dig deeper in certain school communities where we know there are significant issues.

Stephen Crittenden: But I've just recently read a report into how the Steiner stream was bedding down at the Castlemaine school. Clearly, the person who did that report for the Department had just these sorts of issues raised with him and his response in the report is 'These aren't matters to be dealt with in this report, or at a local level; a determination is being made to allow Steiner at the level of the Department, it's not an issue for me to look into here.' How do we know that the report on Footscray will be any different?

John Allman: Oh well look, I can't really comment on the one in Castlemaine, to be honest, because I'm not directly involved in it at the moment. I'd be happy to look into it for you, but I am aware of what's happening at Footscray City Primary School, and I know that there's a very in-depth review going on around the Steiner program and the issues that you've mentioned will be looked into, there will be discussions with parents, with teachers, they'll be examining the curriculum materials that are delivered to the students, and a determination will be made for both the school and the Department.

Stephen Crittenden: On the weekend, The Australian newspaper reported that your own department, the Education Department, had indeed had a report done in 2000, by curriculum officers for the Department, that recommended that Steiner education was the antithesis of what public schools in Victoria were all about, and it said, 'Steiner education is based on a philosophy of cocooning children from the world'. Now if that's what your curriculum people are telling you, on what basis are you ignoring them?

John Allman: Look I have followed that matter up. The reality of it is that there is no formal government or department report, there may have been a view expressed by some people around the Steiner program in that report, but it was not a formal report that the department commissioned. So one view has been expressed; it had been referred to in The Australian article, and so be it.

Stephen Crittenden: One view has been expressed by whom?

John Allman: Well obviously you just mentioned by two curriculum -

Stephen Crittenden: Senior officers of the Department?

John Allman: Yes, but I mean they may have been Department employees, I'm not sure, I'm just aware that there hasn't been a report commissioned by the Department with respect to the Steiner program.

Stephen Crittenden: I just want to come back to this issue of parent choice. Isn't parent choice a pretty foolish basis for developing a curriculum?

John Allman: Well I mean you'd have to go into the local school and have that discussion. I mean parents -

Stephen Crittenden: What, ask the parents?

John Allman: Parents at government schools can determine, and they may be looking at Montessori, they may be looking at Reggio Emilio, we have the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, which provides a framework for curriculum delivery here in Victoria, and if the approach obliges the Act, then we allow communities to make those decisions, on the understanding that on an annual basis, or on a triennial basis, every three years, we will review what's going on in that school to make sure it is benefiting the students that participate.

Stephen Crittenden: Are there any limits to choice?

John Allman: Well it depends on what's happening at the local level. I mean I know of schools that are very much into promoting a range of programs in their schools that are -

Stephen Crittenden: Well what's to stop for example, there are Scientology schools, private Scientology schools, what's to stop the parents at a particular public school saying 'We want a Scientology strand'?

John Allman: Government schools, their decisions at the local level can't be made without reference to the policy that's clearly in place. So Scientology would not oblige the policy in any way whatsoever, nor the Act, so it wouldn't even be considered.

Stephen Crittenden: Does it matter in terms of the principles of the Steiner stream, does it matter what Rudolf Steiner himself thought he was up to? He's fairly open about his colour theories or his breathing exercises, he's quite comfortable with saying that they have an occult meaning, and that they're all about the evolution of the spirit, or the soul. Now does it matter?

John Allman: I've heard that comment before, so I know it's been made, but I don't know enough about the history of Steiner and his underpinning philosophies to be able to answer that question. But the reality of it is the Steiner-influenced streams that we're talking about in government schools, do not follow that path in any way whatsoever, and I'm very confident about saying that about the Steiner streams in the eight government schools in Victoria. I'm not talking about what's happening in other States, I'm not talking about private Steiner schools. They will be implementing the Steiner program possibly in a very different manner.

Stephen Crittenden: So in other words, in public schools in Victoria, we've got a Steiner stream that's not based on Steiner's foundational thinking at all.

John Allman: I'm saying that they're implemented at the local level. There are degrees, I suppose, to which they oblige, though you're saying there's an underpinning philosophy that you've described in a particular way. Now I wouldn't like to confirm that that is the case, but the reality is they will pick up aspects of Steiner for these Steiner streams in schools, that parents welcome, and they make a choice at the local level about their children being involved.

Stephen Crittenden: Can I ask you one more thing, and that is, Steiner is beginning to move into the State education systems in South Australia, in Queensland also. You've got this report that you've been talking about coming up at Footscray. Do you in fact owe it to everybody, the Department of Education in Victoria, to be extremely rigorous at this point, in your analysis, on the basis that a whole lot of other people now are going to be looking at what the outcomes of this report are, in order to determine where they're going to move?

John Allman: Our review processes are rigorous across the board, and they will be rigorous in the circumstance, but Stephen, it will be about Footscray City Primary school and they way they implement the program. It won't be about Steiner per se.

Stephen Crittenden: Are you ever going to make a public assessment available about Steiner's philosophy and approach and whether it is in fact spiritualist, even occult in its basis?

John Allman: No, I think the specialised curriculum approaches and the guidelines and the policy that we have in place is meeting our needs very, very well at the moment, and we're very comfortable with it.

Stephen Crittenden: Thank you very much for being on the program.

John Allman: Thank you.

Stephen Crittenden: John Allman, who's the General Manager for Student Wellbeing and Support with the Victorian Education Department.

Well finally today, a tribute to Tammy-Faye Messner, better known as Tammy Faye Baker, the famous American televangelist. In the

mid-1980s she and her former husband, Jim Bakker, were making \$1-million a week in donations, until he was sentenced to 45 years for fraud, tax evasion and racketeering.

Known for her heavy eye make-up, she was famously described once as 'Not so much made up, as iced'. She took it all cheerfully in her stride, in fact it was very hard not to like her. Unlike many American televangelists, she was friendly towards gay people, and they responded warmly. A couple of days before she died of cancer, she made an amazing appearance on Larry King Live, just skin and bone and eyeshadow, but gallant and gracious to the end.

Reporter: This is the house that the Bakker ministry built for its founders, a lakeside retreat worth millions of dollars. Since their ousting from the PTL broadcasting empire, the Bakkers have continued to claim it as their own. Jim Bakker last weekend was out on the lake in a ministry speedboat. His wife, Tammy Faye, was shopping for rhinestones in a nearby Kmart.

Today several removal vans pulled up at the house. Tammy Faye emerged to say it was all part of a Jerry Forewell plot to force them out.

Tammy Faye: I wake up every morning wishing that they had killed me. And Jim does, too. If it had been much kinder for them just to have put a bullet in us. But they didn't.

Reporter: The Bakkers, who are alleged to have skimmed tens of millions of dollars from their ministry to live in style, have seen their assets sold at auction. But Tammy-Faye says the biggest insult was what they did to her unsold record albums.

Tammy Faye: They just took them out back with a bulldozer.

CRASH/CRUSH

Tammy Faye: Put them in a hole and buried them.

Man: Three hundred more people to call on their credit card right now and say 'I'll give that \$1,000'.

Reporter: Jim Bakker emerged apparently unshaken by a verdict of Guilty on 24 counts of fraud and conspiracy.

Jim Bakker: I went into the court house several weeks ago telling you that my faith was in God, and I want to tell you again that this moment my faith is still in God.

Reporter: Wife Tammy was also in good heart.

SINGING 'All other ground is sinking sand'.

Tammy Faye: It's not over till it's over.

Reporter: Despite the brave face the Bakker empire is facing ruin. The jury decided the 49-year-old evangelist had used the nation's TV airwaves to cheat his followers out of more than \$5-million. The court was told the money had been used by Bakker and his wife to live the high life. They had everything they wanted right down to an air-condition doghouse.

NEWS THEME

Larry King Newsreader: Good evening, it's been 16 months since our good friend and frequent guest, Tammy-Faye Messner appeared here on camera. She recently reached out to us saying that talking to her public makes her feel stronger, and wanting to do the interview that you're about to see which we taped yesterday. How're you doin' dear?

Tammy-Faye: I'm doing pretty good, considering the circumstances, Larry.

Newsreader: We have a lot of emails for you Tammy, as you might imagine. One comes from Debbie and Frederick from Canada.

Tammy-Faye: Hi, Debbie and Frederick.

Newsreader: The question is, my prayers are with you Tammy-Faye, what have the doctors said to you about how much time you may have left?

Tammy-Faye: I asked them not to tell me; I don't want my faith level to do down. And so I don't fear. I'm concerned Larry, but I don't fear.

Newsreader: Now you've always been so upbeat. The feeling of God being with you. Does that remain?

Tammy-Faye: That remains consistent. I talk to God every single day and I say God, my life is in your hands, and I trust you with me.

Stephen Crittenden: The late Tammy-Faye Bakker. John Diamond put that tribute together.

Well that's all this week.

Guests

Dr Charles Livingstone

Parent at Footscray City Primary School, Social Scientist

Dr David Millikan

Australia's Leading expert on cults, and Uniting Church Minister

John Allman

General Manager for Student wellbeing and support, Victorian State Education Department

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Presenter

Stephen Crittenden

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Wednesday 8.30am
repeated **8pm**
Presented by
Stephen Crittenden