

# Opportunity lost for lesson in tolerance

## Religious values have a place in NZ schools, writes Deborah Coddington.

IF EVER there were a case for teaching philosophy to children when they start school, it was writ large in the fiasco over religious studies at Auckland's St Heliers School.

Philosophy means the love of wisdom or knowledge, but includes values, how to solve problems - in basic language, a star to steer you by.

How many of us have the tools to be happy, to keep our sights on Venus even when we're lost in the dark?

What's so bad about teaching children they shouldn't steal, kill, and must try to care for others? These, I know, are values taken from the Ten Commandments - Christian values, objected to so

**Deborah Coddington**  
Viewpoint



ee What's wrong with telling kids to care for others?

vehemently by three parents of children at St Heliers that they complained to the Human Rights Commission.  
After a week of bad headlines the

school buckled and, despite 68 per cent of families supporting the religious classes and 19 per cent in the school survey saying they were opposed to them, the board of trustees last week moved the lessons to a time outside school hours. Now it's opt-in, as opposed to opt-out.

So what kind of message does this send the children? If you complain and make a fuss, go to the media and have a tantrum, you get what you want.

But as one angry parent wrote to the principal: 'What else will the board relent on? Stop teaching Maori and Maori customs in the general classroom because not all children are Maori, or that Maori concepts touch on religious beliefs (eg, Papatuanuku gives birth to all things, including human kind, and provides the physical and spiritual basis for life). Or have parents complain because their child is being taught Mandarin and they are not Asian. These all enrich our

children's learning.'  
Despite having the right, the offended parents didn't take their children out of religious class because they feared they'd be "ostracized" by their friends and made to feel different. Kids at school always want to run with the pack but guess what? Life's not like that. It's a good lesson for kids to walk in the shoes of those who are different - maybe they might feel empathy for others left out of the mainstream in future situations.

I'm not Christian - I blaspheme too much and I'm not nearly a good enough person - but in my village I've seen a hell of a lot of positive changes (there I go again) made by the church community for the elderly, the needy, the lonely, those in trouble. Who do you think runs the City Missions, food banks, Salvation Army homes? This country would grind to a halt without religion.

I know there are Christian fanatics, just as there are Islam,

Buddhist, Jewish and atheist Ayn Rand fanatics. But in this country last time I looked we still celebrated Christmas and Easter. Do these three parents at St Heliers School refuse to acknowledge these public holidays? Our Parliament at every sitting opens with a Christian prayer. Do they even know that?

The mother of one of these children protested that her child, aged 5, couldn't separate fact from the fantasy of religion. In that case I presume she eschews all fairy tales, magic, Santa, Tooth Fairy, D Seuss - all those wonderful bedtime stories my children loved like Maurice Sendak's *In The Night Kitchen* - because they're not true. I think schools should teach the history of all main religions, with field trips to cathedrals, mosques, temples.

There's a crossover between religion and culture and it would teach tolerance. Something these parents need to learn.

SST 16/2/14