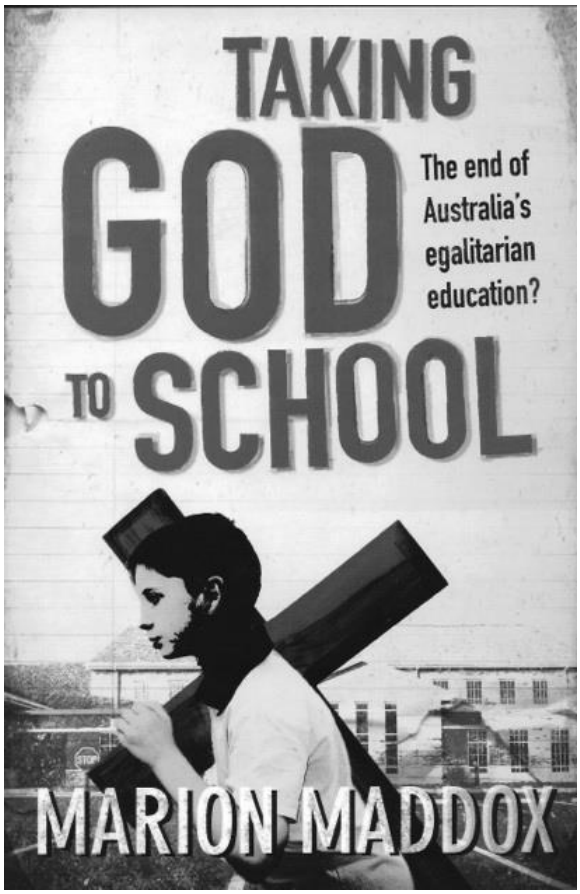
BOOK REVIEWS

Marion Maddox, *Taking God to School: The end of Australia's egalitarian education?* Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2014, paperback, pp xxv+248, ISBN 978 1 74331 571 2, RRP AUD $29.99.

TWO REVIEWS



CHRISTOPHER RIDINGS: All of us remember school and even, perhaps, receiving weekly Religious Instruction. This was the occasion where we found out what denomination our classmates were as we were re-distributed around the school according to our church affiliation. Before us stood a minister, or his representative, generally untrained in teaching, to 'teach us Religion'. Some of us had mixed feelings about it all and why this all happened the way it did and the same now with what is happening in our schools today.

Professor Marion Maddox of Macquarie University went through it all. In this book, Maddox takes us through the story of how we came to have Scripture in Australian schools in the first place and how the churches have struggled to maintain a vigorous presence within the education process of our forebears, of ourselves, and those who will come after us.

Long before Federation, the Australian colonies debated the place of religion in education. Different churches had set up their own schools partly to fill a wide gap in the availability of education and partly to ensure that children were sufficiently instructed in their particular version of the Christian faith. This led to constant struggles with the governments of the day for sufficient funds to carry this out. There was soon a move for governments to make education genuinely universal and take prime responsibility for it. The churches (mostly) gained the right of entry to public schools so that the children were not deprived of religious instruction.

Marion Maddox reviews the long and occasionally turbulent history of scripture in schools with the politics of funding its constant companion. She asks searching questions about the decisions that were being made then and are being made now. Each government, whatever its political allegiance or the religious affiliations (or none) of its leaders, has been relentlessly and (since 1963) successfully lobbied by varying religious and other pressure groups to continue to aid religious schools, now including other faiths.

One of the concerns expressed in this book is the alleged movement towards a religious élite at the expense of inclusive education. Maddox argues that more and more is expended on the schools that are ahead than on those schools in poorer areas. Are our schools separating like milk left in the sun, the rich floating to the top leaving the rest behind so that everything goes sour?

Moreover, is the Christian faith as presented in schools reflective of the discipleship required in a fast-changing multi-faith world, or is it

the case of the survival of the most pushy where the most aggressive programme wins?

If we are to understand and prepare for the education and spiritual welfare for the future, it would be wise to gain some appreciation of how we arrived where we are. Maddox, in her *Taking God to School*, reviews the strategies, past and present, of how churches and religious groups have been addressing the challenge.

Maddox asks whether we are seeing the end of Australia's egalitarian education. We need to ask what we have been doing which is proving counter-productive and what is the place of a workable faith within our schools.

PETER BENTLEY: Marion Maddox's latest book is an interesting and sometimes quaint examination of a range of educational issues centred on the ideals, ideologies and the funding of Australian schooling. It is intended to start a discussion of these issues for the future, but then it is also seemingly a hankering for the past or nostalgia for the ideals that she espouses with a certain interpretation of free and secular education. The title sums up the thesis of the book and the introduction 'When we were kids' is quite illuminating as it forms the basis for a reflection and view on the ideal nature of education in Australia, within the context of the history of school education and public funding of public and private schools, with a focus on what Maddox has highlighted as themelic schools (the religious private schools).

Other reviewers will no doubt concentrate on examining in detail her historical interpretation and ideas about what a secular education meant in the 19th century, but for myself, I do not believe it is reasonable to equate the undergirding philosophy of education in that period to that of the late 20th and 21st centuries in Australia.

While the introductory personal story is interesting, I believe there are limitations to the style that it employs, especially if readers are looking for a neutral academic text. This book is written in a way that

is reasonably transparent in terms of its orientation, and certainly there is nothing intrinsically wrong with polemic in writing; as long as the reader is clear about the nature of a book and understands its ideological basis and also the inherent limitations of such a basis.

A case in point is a continuation of Maddox's seemingly long-term focus on the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) within her overall critique of conservative Christianity. In one of her strategic comments about the views of ACL not being representative of Christians in Australia (p. 16), I found it disappointing that the footnote reference to this early and significant argument was actually not to evidence but to a 'forthcoming' article by Marion Maddox without any further confirmation of the point made. How can this be considered a helpful reference for an interested reader?

Maddox ranges far and wide on issues. These include the recent controversy over ACCESS ministries and related matters of the provision of Christian education in public schools, federal funding of school chaplaincy and especially funding arrangements, policy and religious beliefs of specific schools. The concentrated focus on the idiosyncratic practices and arrangements of a minority of Christian schools might unfortunately lead the reader into believing that all traditional and evangelical Christianity is weird.

As well as criticising various Christian schools, Maddox also comments on the 'Uniting Church'. There is mixed material with regard to the Uniting Church, and especially its schools, though Maddox is clearly supportive of a UC school if it has a liberal educational agenda, especially on anti-discrimination and matters related to the acceptance of homosexuality.

In relation to the Uniting Church, there needs to be clearer delineation as to which part of the UCA is 'speaking'. I realise this is always a difficult issue, but at times the footnotes and references needed to be sharper so that the reader understands it may only be a commission of the National Assembly putting forward their view, rather than the

'official' position of the Uniting Church in Australia, or seemingly the whole Uniting Church – whatever that may be.

Overall the book needs further editing to remove the repetition of both material and argument. The book is still very easy to read and raises many questions that are worthy of deeper discussion and debate. However, even if we were to take Maddox's thesis as gospel, what is a solution today that would actually work? It is difficult to contemplate what could happen today given the even larger numbers of children attending privately based schools, most of them low-fee, not élite.

The ideologically faithful will certainly find much confirmation and affirmation in Maddox's thesis, but rather than providing answers, she has added another contribution to a debate that has been going on for quite a while and will simply continue at this rate.

REVIEWERS

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