

When Christian schools bear false witness

By Guy Rundle

Private schools founded on Christian values are forgetting their mission statement.

Three times a week for however many years, we would file into the school chapel at nine in the morning. Looking like 14-year-old golf-club administrators - blazer with crest, grey slacks, tie - we would sing our way through the limited repertoire of hymns, and recite the incomprehensible Nicene Creed. Then one of the teachers - sorry, masters - in bat-wing coat would ascend to the pulpit. "Here beginneth the lesson. Educational funding is based on the equal provision of money to all students even though some may go to private schools . . ." Well not quite, but that's how it seemed at times.

The school in question, one of the 67 slated to lose part of its funding under a Latham government, was pretty keen on imparting the Christian message until one knew whole passages of the Bible by heart, but it was even better at imparting justification not only for its right to exist, but for access to taxpayers' funds.

The arguments spruiked by the independent schools' lobby seemed to appear in English, in maths, in politics: abolition of private school funding is class envy; everyone has an equal opportunity to excel, wherever they go to school; it's all about choice.

Round and round it went, and all of it against the spirit of the publicity the schools put out to parents in the burgeoning education market, in which the creation of an elite and the advantaging of students in the competition for university places was correctly advanced as the reason to spend the equivalent of a Mercedes a year on fees.

An allegedly meritocratic society based on some students having more money spent on them than others is, of course, a racket, and one likely to be spotted by as-yet unformed minds studying "clear thinking" and the like. So it has to be imparted implicitly and explicitly year in year out, until everyone understands that they are in it together. The arguments don't make sense, but hey, before you know it you'll be needing it for your kids. We call this process the production of ideology - a set of falsehoods that make a political reality look like the expression of unquestionable truth. The big private schools are at their best in this when dealing with the

Christian heritage they purport to be part of. After all, there were more than a few sayings of Jesus that contradicted the relentless cramming and the insistence that poverty and failure were one false step away. "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat . . . Consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not" (Luke 12:22-28) was tricky, but could be glossed as an instruction not to doubt providence, rather than advice against doing Arts-Commerce.

"For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in . . . Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:35-45) could have been taken as an argument for mutual obligation, but it was usually dealt with by putting on the occasional walkathon. It was certainly favoured over the real smoking gun, Mark 10:21, where Jesus meets a potential follower and says: "One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me. And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions." Sell it? All of it? Even the rifle range and the swimming pool? Christ. Er, I mean . . .

The truth is that Christianity is a religion of radical reciprocity. The elite schools are multimillion-dollar educational entrepreneurs, whose attachment to the religion is now simply a form of thematic branding, a bit of spiritual swoosh.

If they really believed their own mission statement they would be knocking back grants and sharing their facilities with state schools, but that would directly contradict their customer appeal, which is to provide what others do not get.

It is surprising and disappointing that more actual Christians have not broken ranks to condemn this state of affairs, when the arguments of the private school lobby more closely resemble the contribution to theology provided by the Borgias than that of the man of Galilee.

Possibly it is done behind closed doors, but if I remember the chapel lessons (which were held come rain or shine, except in mid-winter when they were skipped so that rowing practice could occur in daylight) correctly, it seems to come close to bearing false witness.

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