

Letter to editor

Gary Bakker remains critical of humanist chaplains

I AM NOT SURPRISED that several 'humanist chaplains' have responded defensively (AH No.129) to my recent criticism of the very concept of such a person ('Recent craven concessions, compromises, and capitulations to spiritualism', AH No. 128), but I am disappointed at the quality of those defences. All five respondents defended against arguments I did not make.

They busily pointed out all the great work done by humanist chaplains. At no time have I criticized or dismissed this. But I argue strongly that doing it as a 'chaplain' and in a chaplaincy system alongside religious chaplains simply bolsters all those who have dismissed humanism as 'just another belief system'. I am *so* tired of pointing out that not collecting stamps is not just another hobby.

I want humanism to be more than Murray Love's 'serious alternative to religion in helping people'. It should, of course, be the norm, the mainstream, the authentic pure help, undiluted by dogma and proselytizing – not just another competing alternative.

Murray suggests that I should direct my complaint that amateurs are intruding on psychological work at *all* chaplains. That is *exactly* what I am doing – humanist chaplains included!

Murray assures us that no-one has the intention to proselytize 'atheism to vulnerable believers', and 'of course we'd weed [them] out...No-one is seeking here to be some kind of priest'. But why should we believe him any more than we believe the Christian chaplains on this? Especially when Lyndon Storey admits he is keen 'to build a humanist alternative and promote it'.

We are much better off keeping our beliefs completely out of our volunteer or paid helping roles.

Several respondents took the line: It's only words. What does it matter what we're called? Where to start with this?!

As names have power, words have power. Words can light fires in the minds of men. Words can wring tears from the hardest hearts.

(Patrick Rothfuss)

The word 'chaplain' has more than just a 'religious history' (Lyndon Storey). It has a current religious meaning. So the capitulation that 'sometimes we might have to use words we don't like, such as chaplain' is not good enough. This would be like arguing to use the word 'God' instead of 'Nature' when discussing evolution because more people will listen to us.

Charles Foley feels the title 'chaplain' suits him 'just fine'. But he also thinks we should 'tweak' the definition to

include people 'commissioned or endorsed by a recognized belief system'. This is pure 'concession, compromise, and capitulation'. It simply legitimizes the whole chaplaincy movement.

If you want to do that wonderful work, then train up as a volunteer counsellor, befriender, support worker, hospital visitor, celebrant, or whatever *secular* helper you like. I'm told Lifeline's telephone counselling and befriender courses are good. But don't do Spiritual Health Victoria's chaplaincy course. Don't accept and join the proselytizers' world. And keep your humanism out of it, as we expect them to keep their religion out of it.

The problem I, and the Australian Psychological Society, have with chaplains in schools is that the government funds spent on them could have been spent on better qualified counsellors, school psychologists, social workers, and guidance officers. Replacing religious proselytizers with humanist or secular chaplains instead of fully qualified counsellors does not satisfy or appease us.

While we are redefining terms to suit us, Murray Love wants to redefine 'spirituality' to include "things like purpose, anxiety, choices, trust...." so we can happily cater for those who are 'spiritual but not religious' (SBNR). But these are not spiritual terms at all. They are psychological concepts. They have nothing at all to do with immaterial spirits.

So when letter-writer Joe Sehee quotes his Spiritual Care Victoria workshop literature claiming, with no supportive evidence, that 'a focus on spirituality significantly improves patient health outcomes', he is conflating and confusing spiritual and psychological support just as much as they are. This is clear when he asserts that 'spiritual care is simply the provision of human comfort'.

Scientific psychology has taken over 2,000 years to supplant religious/spiritual/superstitious explanations for people's problems. To appease SBNR people by providing spiritual guidance through a (humanist) chaplain instead of supportive counselling by a trained volunteer takes us back those 2,000 years.

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