

Education, Indoctrination and God

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Summary

It is commonly asserted that the only danger of indoctrination in schools is from religion. On the contrary, there is hardly any danger of such indoctrination in schools, whereas indoctrination into the Western Religion (Western secularism) occurs on a massive scale in schools and demands urgent attention from religious believers.

Contents

1. Indoctrination
 2. Religious Education
 3. Modern Foreign Languages
 4. Maths
 5. Science
- Conclusions

Part 1: Indoctrination

Terence Copley

Terence Copley is Professor of Religious Education, University of Oxford (previously Professor of Education, University of Exeter) and author of the ground-breaking book *Indoctrination, Education and God* (Copley, 2005). From the title, a Western reader expects a discussion of religious education, but, no, this is a discussion of the real indoctrination threat – secularism:

“... a secular indoctrination process is at work in British and European society, programming people against religious belief ... People in Britain are frequently negative, even hostile, towards institutional Christianity, while at the same time being less critical of ‘other religions’ (except perhaps Islam), even more uncritical towards alternative spiritualities and, finally, completely uncritical of secular values.” (Copley, 2000: vii)

Writing in the *Church Times*, Margaret Holness summarises his argument as a warning that “the education system is under the disproportionate influence of vociferous secularists, whose claim that RE is indoctrinatory is a smokescreen masking their promotion of a secularist world-view” (*Church Times*, 18 March 2005).

Prime Time

Between the ages of 5 and 16 our children spend, on average, 15,000 hours in school and 12,000 hours with the electronic media. That represents an enormous chunk of their prime time. The dominant worldview influences at work in media and school can be expected to exert a major influence on their developing minds.

Aspects of Curriculum

To understand what is going on we need to understand the different aspects of the curriculum (of media as well as school). Educationists usefully distinguish *explicit*, *implicit*, *null* and *received* curriculum:

The **Explicit** curriculum is what is actually written down in the syllabus and the textbooks, taught by the teacher in the classroom (including any teacher handouts), and assessed in examinations.

The **Implicit** curriculum is what is intended by the school and the teacher, even though it is not written down. For example, the teacher ought to expect children to be honest in recording their results, even if they think their results are wrong. Other attitudes and values will be expected, but again often implicitly. Most importantly of all, there will be an overall framework of meaning (worldview) implicit in the life of the school. Schools rarely declare their worldview and may not even be aware that they have one. It may be socialism, materialism, liberal Christianity etc., or an eclectic mix drawn from several worldviews. Yet it will be there, and it will shape and colour the whole curriculum in the school.

The **Null** curriculum is what is not present. In any subject, or any topic, there is far more material than can be included. A lot of material will not be covered. Therefore we must always ask, "By what criteria were items admitted or omitted?" Inevitably and invariably, the criteria will be shaped by the dominant worldview. In the school as a whole, some areas of life and study will be little or never addressed. This is a key way in which indoctrination is effected.

The implicit and null curriculum are often referred to as the **Hidden** curriculum.

The **Received** curriculum is what the children actually learn. Almost always it will bear more relation to the Implicit and Null curricula than to the Explicit curriculum. It may bear little resemblance to the curriculum of the textbooks.

Secularism Is Not Neutral

The problem that we face with regard to almost every issue is the failure to recognise faith commitments/worldviews at work, and specifically the failure to recognise that secularism is not a neutral position, but another (or a set of other) faith commitment(s).

With regard to education it is helpful to pose the following question (adapted from the Norwegian Christian educationalist, Signe Sandsmark, 2000:87; see also Clouser, 2005, Cooling, 2010, and Copley, 2005):

In order to be professional and neutral in their practice, Christians in schools are told not to talk about God in a way that implies that God exists. They should not pray with

students. They should not talk as if moral norms and commandments are objective or universal. They should not operate as if human beings are created for a purpose. They should not teach science as if the world is intelligently designed.

But what, then, should agnostics and atheists try to do, and avoid doing, if they also are to be neutral and not impose their own beliefs or unbelief on their students?

The straight answer is ‘Nothing’, in other words the question reveals that our educational practice is already effectively atheistic (operating *as if there is no God*) – so hardly neutral. Non-religious pupils and teachers will feel perfectly at home, whereas religious believers will not. But if we consider the question again, then its logic demands a different response. If, in order to be professional, religious teachers are to teach in a way that hides their real beliefs – to teach *as if their religious faith is not true* – then shouldn’t atheist teachers do likewise? Maybe they should teach as if they were religious believers! Clearly it is not possible for education to be neutral.

Secular Materialism

There are many secular worldviews, but in the Western world today the dominant secular worldview is that of *Materialism*. We must grasp exactly what this means, because it is rarely made explicit in public life. It consists of a close linking of the two meanings of that key word, a linkage that can fairly be called *The Western Religion*:

Materialism1 – *physical nature is all there is.*

Materialism2 – *enjoying material possessions is all that matters.*

Materialism1 – *physical nature is all there is*

Materialism1 (also known as *scientism, positivism, physicalism* and (*scientific*) *naturalism*, though, strictly, these all have their own specific meanings) is the belief that physical nature is all there is, that ultimately only matter and energy are real. The Big Story is that of Nothing to Nothing! In the beginning was nothing, which gave rise, spontaneously, to energy and matter. After billions of years, from energy and matter life arose. After more millions of years, intelligent life arose. But it is all to no purpose and it will all eventually return to nothingness. Given that Big Story, there can be no immaterial (or *spiritual*) realm beyond physical detection. There is no spirit, soul, angels or gods. There is no independent human mind or consciousness, only the mindless chemistry of the brain. There is no intelligence, design or purpose behind, or at work in, the universe. There is no objective or universal moral order. There is no ultimate meaning to life. There is no human freewill; freewill is merely an illusion created by the deterministic processes of evolution and brain chemistry. None of these things have any ultimate reality; they will not be part of any final explanation of the universe. Hence materialism is the belief that all real knowledge comes only from mathematics, logic and empirical science. Everything else is seen as merely a matter of individual opinion. In particular, philosophy and religion are reduced to the status of mere opinion. Thus for many secular scientists, debates with believers are debates between objective scientific proof and religious blind faith. They do not doubt for one moment that there is no god and that all religions are false.

Incidentally this analysis points to the real significance of Darwinism in the modern world. Darwinism is not simply the idea of natural selection applied to the origin of living organisms. For both Charles Darwin and its leading modern proponents, Darwinism is *the* materialistic theory of the origin of living organisms. It is the Western Religion's origins myth.

We live in a culture in which the only kind of knowledge recognised to be knowledge comes from empirical science. This is the default setting in education and in the media. Consequently we nearly all absorb materialism unawares. Since our life-choices will either reflect the Truth or an idolatry that has already captured our hearts, this is where the battle really lies. In order to live a life of obedience to God we have to overcome a *materialism-by-default* that both surrounds us and is lodged in our own hearts. It is the greatest threat to Christian faith today. It is like having elephants in your house. You may like elephants, tolerate them, or ignore them, but if you leave them there they will crush everything anyway.

Whereas a Christian or Muslim is assumed to be (religiously) biased, with all the opprobrium that that carries in our society today, the secular materialist will often claim the objectivity of modern science and portray an image of religious neutrality and sweet liberalism. In its hiddenness, the religion becomes all the more persuasive, seductive – and dangerous.

Materialism1 is False

Given its dominance, it is shocking to realise that materialism is unquestionably false – it is not a tenable position. Materialism is deficient as a philosophy – and as a basis for any and every science – because it cannot accommodate many things that matter and has to explain them out of existence. Materialists have to hold that such things as consciousness, mind, intelligence, meaning, logic, design, value, and purpose are either illusory, or just by-products of material processes. Either way they can play no causal role in the universe. That view may be widespread among secular scholars and scientists, but it flatly contradicts common sense experience and is self-refuting. If, for example, we are not free and able to weigh arguments and choose what is in accordance with evidence and logic, then there is neither science nor philosophy, nor any possibility of meaningful discussion about anything.

On the failure of materialism see, from an enormous literature, Martin, 2005, 2008; Moreland, 2009; Plantinga, 2000 (especially pages 227-240), Rea, 2002, Robinson, 2010, and Ward, 1996, 2008.

Materialism2 – enjoying material possessions is all that matters.

To Materialism1, the Western Religion adds Materialism2 and (despite postmodernism) tells the myth of progress, the modernist story of Science, Technology, Economics and Consumerism.

- How do we gain true knowledge? Through science – by asking the elite scientific experts to share their wisdom.
- Why do we want that knowledge? So we can develop the technology to control the world (even including human behaviour).
- Why do we want to control the world? So we can have constant economic growth.
- Why do we want constant economic growth? So we can all live in a consumer paradise.

If the material world is all there is then the enjoyment of material things is the best that any one can hope for in this fleeting life. Consumerism is the social expression of scientific materialism. Consider the outrageous lifestyle of Imelda Marcos (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imelda_Marcos).

What are some of the slogans of the Western Religion? ‘Shop until you drop’, ‘TESCO ergo sum’, ‘Amusing ourselves to death’, ‘He who dies with the most toys wins’!

Many curricula in schools are implicitly answering (primarily or even solely) the question, “What is it about this thing (or this aspect of human life), that is relevant to (or can be exploited for) scientific and technological advance and/or economic gain?”

Part 2: Religious Education

Surely there can be no more quintessentially Christian education than the teaching of Bible stories? Perhaps so.

Here we draw on the research of Terence Copley’s *Biblos Project* at Exeter University (Copley, Freathy & Walshe, 2004). His team have been looking at what children learn about the meaning of Bible stories in schools in England. Here are some examples:

Year 9 pupil on David and ‘Guliefe’ (*sic*, Goliath): “No matter how small u are, belive in yourself.”

Year 12 pupil on the birth of Christ: “that the birth of a newborn baby is the best gift of all.”

Year 9 pupil on the betrayal of Christ: “You can’t trust anyone these days.”

Year 9 pupil on the feeding of the 5000: “Don’t take things for granted and share things.”

The investigators noted that God and faith were often consciously or unconsciously edited out by teachers, so that pupils learnt a secularised version of the biblical text. Since this was never explained to them it follows that they were receiving an indoctrination into secularism. Terence Copley wrote that, “Secularisation of biblical narratives, which excludes God as the ‘hero’, does *not* constitute a non-indoctrinatory approach to the Bible but merely a new form of secular indoctrination.” (Copley, Freathy & Walshe, 2004:19). Newspaper headlines took this up. “RE lessons leave out mention of God” (*Church of England Newspaper*, No 5761, 24 March 2005); “Schoolchildren indoctrinated says RE expert” (*Church Times*, 18 March 2005). The Church of England spokesman on religious education (RE), Revd Dr John Gay, commented that “This is a wake-up call to churches and the RE world, and calls for an overhaul in how RE is taught.” (*Church Times*, 18 March 2005). In contrast, though unsurprisingly, the Vice-President of the National Secular Society, Terry Sanderson, said, “This smacks of indoctrination. The fact is children have rejected the Bible and it should not be forced on them.” (*Times Educational Supplement*, 11 March 2005, page 5)

Part 3: Modern Foreign Languages

By contrast, the teaching of modern foreign languages (MFL) is – like mathematics – widely assumed to be unaffected by the teacher’s faith. Let’s take French. *La fenêtre* is the French for ‘window’ whether the teacher is a Hindu, Christian or atheist! Indeed so, but there is much more to teaching French than that. To start at the beginning, why do we want our pupils to learn French? The MFL literature suggests several reasons. They should learn French so that they can become:

- Profiteers** – how can our pupils exploit the opportunities of the European common market if they don’t speak the language? The commonest answer to the question, ‘Why do I have to learn French?’ is that businesses need people fluent in the European languages, so your ability to speak French will enhance your job prospects and earning power. Posters conveying this message will be found in most MFL classrooms.
- Persuaders** – how can we persuade other countries of the superiority of our policies and values if we can’t speak their language?
- Connoisseurs** – many teachers have explored the riches of French culture and literature and want to introduce their pupils to what they have come to deeply appreciate and love.
- Tourists** – many other teachers dismiss these goals as too idealistic or as simply unrealistic. All most children need – and will absorb – is enough of the language to get by on their overseas holidays and shopping trips.
- Escapologists** – Some children’s experience of life – in broken families and poverty – is poor. What better than to escape into another language and culture and forget – at least for a while – the realities at home.
- Revolutionaries** – Finally, some teachers would use MFL teaching to sharpen pupils’ understanding of their own culture and alert them to its social and political injustices.

Language-teaching expert David Smith concludes, “Perhaps what we most commonly have at present are connoisseurs claiming to train profiteers, and in fact producing tourists.” (*Language in God’s World*, 18, 1998:11; see also Smith, 1994)

Can any of these visions of MFL teaching be Christian? How do they lie with a Biblical worldview? What about the suggestion of David Smith that the goal of MFL teaching should be to nurture *good neighbours* (Smith & Carvill, 2000)? For example, we might want our children to learn French so that they can be good neighbours when they visit France and also good neighbours to the French who visit Britain, or who come to live here. The point as regards the curriculum is that each goal suggests different methods, approaches and vocabulary. Teaching and learning a foreign language is not a worldview-neutral activity.

One other point worth noting is the amazing absence of beliefs and values from MFL materials. It would seem that all foreigners live without reference to faith. In fact the only reference to anything remotely religious in many MFL syllabi is to horoscopes! Since all people live by faith in God or some idol(s), this is hardly good MFL practice.

Part 4: Mathematics

Of course mathematics is completely worldview-neutral and value-free...

Let's take a simple example. Arithmetic is taught by setting problems for the pupils to solve. The creation and selection of these problems is certainly not neutral. Like the prophet Amos (Amos 1:3ff), let us start far away. We will look at textbooks that have been used in Afghanistan.

In the communist era,

“Their arithmetic problems deal with land distribution and egalitarian ideals. Red banners and happy collective farmers would guide children towards communism.” (Seierstad, 2002:62-63)

In the Mujahedeen and Taliban era everything changed:

“This is how first year schoolchildren learn the alphabet: ‘J is for Jihad, our aim in life, I is for Israel, our enemy, K is for Kalashnikov, we will overcome, M is for Mujahedeen, our heroes, T is for Taliban, ...’” (*ibid*, 62)

“War was the central theme in maths books too. Schoolboys – because the Taliban printed books solely for boys – did not calculate in apples and cakes, but in bullets and Kalashnikovs. Something like this: ‘Little Omar has a Kalashnikov with three magazines. There are twenty bullets in each magazine. He uses two thirds of the bullets and kills sixty infidels. How many infidels does he kill with each bullet?’” (*ibid*, 62)

Of course Western secular maths textbooks will be neutral – worldview-free. Or will they? What are our arithmetic problems about?

Remember the worldview story of the Western religion: science – technology – economics – consumerism? Sure enough, our arithmetic problems reflect our religion: the problems are predominantly about individual buying and selling, profits made and interest earned!

How might arithmetic problems reflect a Christian worldview?

Part 5: Science

Dr Brenda Watson on the school curriculum:

Despite an appearance of educationally impeccable aims and objectives, the *real* beliefs advocated in that document may be expressed in quite different terms, harsh as it may seem:

- that economics is the key to life;
- that technology can control the future;
- that people matter chiefly in so far as they work;
- that the arts, humanities and religion are to be seen largely as pleasant extras, to be accommodated if there is time;

- that there is either no spiritual side to life or if there is it is unimportant and secondary;
- that in the end there is only matter, money and the industrial machine.

Such an approach is not education. (Watson, 1987:11; see also Watson & Ashton, 1995:29-30)

Chemistry teaching under the Western Religion

Given the Western Religion worldview, items for learning will be selected according to economic consumerist importance; the emphasis will be on economically relevant characteristics and properties and on industrial uses. Thus when studying aluminium, pupils learn about wire and cables, aircraft bodies and kitchen utensils; when studying silicon, about transistors and computer chips; when studying sodium they will hear about its uses as nuclear coolant, in sodium lighting and as a chemical reagent. Chlorine will be known for its use as a bleach and disinfectant, in water purification, as a reagent, and in the manufacture of the plastic, PVC. Limestone will be taught in relation to its use as a building material and in roads; its role in the making of glass and cement; as a chemical feedstock and in the extraction of iron. The atmosphere (air) and oceans will be understood as sources of raw materials for industry. Different kinds of rock will be evaluated in relation to their industrial utility.

How might Christian teachers bring their faith to bear on the teaching of science?

Chemistry Teaching under a Christian Worldview

If we re-conceptualise the practise of science as life-enhancing Christian service, then we will bring a different perspective on the chemicals we considered previously.

Aluminium was created as the key element for soil. It is the near universal presence of aluminium in hard rocks that enables them to weather (break down) into soils. It is then the presence of aluminium that allows soils to hold nutrients strongly enough that every rainfall doesn't wash them away, but not so strongly that plant roots cannot absorb them.

Silicon is the key element of rocks (silicon oxides and silicates make up the majority of rock). No silicon, no rocky planets; no rocky planets, no life.

Sodium is a very reactive metal; chlorine a very reactive non-metal. They therefore form exceptionally stable (unreactive) compounds. These compounds fulfil the essential role of providing the background concentrations that are essential for the proper functioning of our blood and body fluids. The same is true for plant and animal body fluids and also for planetary fluids (rivers, lakes, seas and oceans). Imagine what would happen if the digested food passing into our blood stream reacted with the blood salts!

Limestone (white mineral, calcium carbonate, which may be hard or soft) has many valuable functions left where it is (water resources, recreational landscapes; contains fossils, caves and archaeological artefacts; mined for important minerals; forms good agricultural soil; supports diverse array of animals and plants). In any location we must mine only a certain proportion of the mineral, so that enough is left for its other important functions.

One of the many unique things about planet Earth is its atmosphere, the air. This is very obvious if we compare three of the four inner or rocky planets – the very similar planets, Venus, Earth and Mars. Both Venus and Mars have atmospheres dominated by carbon dioxide gas. There is almost no oxygen and the atmospheres are completely unsuitable for living things. Chemists would expect Earth to be very similar to Venus. We would expect a planet of Earth's composition, at its distance from the Sun, to reach chemical equilibrium with an atmosphere like that of Venus. Oxygen and nitrogen are very reactive elements, so a chemist would not expect them to exist on a planet as the free elements. Rather a chemist would expect most of the nitrogen to be dissolved in the oceans as nitrate salts and almost all of the oxygen to be in the rocks as oxides. It is living animals and plants that – by photosynthesis, respiration, and other biological processes – maintain the Earth's atmosphere in a state very far removed from chemical equilibrium. One of the important things children should learn in science is that our atmosphere is chemically improbable – far away from chemical equilibrium. Animals and plants make the difference.

The oceans are likewise very different from what they would be if only chemistry was at work.

In starting with this information about chemicals (before, of course, going on to their industrial and economic uses etc.) we are establishing the amazing design of our world as well as laying the foundations for considering our calling to stewardly and responsible use of the resources entrusted to us by God.

For much more on teaching science, see Jones, 1989.

Conclusions

As Christians, we must deal with the influence of the Western Religion's myth of progress. We must challenge the little stories that support it whenever and wherever we find them. In teaching our children, we must work to replace those stories with stories that reflect and promote the Christian story. We must work to establish the vision of education as life-enhancing Christian service.

Robert Young, an educationist from the University of Sydney, has famously said, "...in order to be critical you must first be indoctrinated" (in Smith & Wexler, 1995:13). The full quote explains: "...learners cannot understand reasons until they have already acquired a view... criticism always presupposes a schema, background, worldview, *vorhabe*, or tradition. Put crudely, in order to be critical you must first be indoctrinated." (*ibid*) Similarly, Brenda Watson and Elizabeth Ashton comment that, "One of the most important duties of education is to seek to lay bare, clarify and evaluate precisely these numerous convictions which affect how we live, but which may be obscure to us unless critically examined." (1995:72)

We need to learn and teach a Christian Thinkers' toolkit. We must take every opportunity to show our neighbours:

- that they have worldviews that colour and shape everything they see and do; and
- that it is critically important for their children's future that they discern and weigh (assess) those worldviews.

In Westernised and secularised cultures today none of this is either obvious or easy, but it has to be done. Christian teachers are called upon to do much hard study as they seek to discern and subvert the pagan worldviews that saturate almost all the curriculum materials that are available to them in schools.

“Teaching Christianly may well be the hardest job in the universe.” (Van Dyk, 1997:9)

It is our educational duty to lay bare to our students the framework of meaning that is shaping and colouring the education they are receiving. We should not be defensive about a Christian approach. On the contrary we should expose and critique the ruling secularism. Secular approaches are not neutral. If subjects are taught without ever declaring or discussing the secular frameworks, then children are being indoctrinated. Today religious indoctrination is almost impossible in state schools, but secular indoctrination occurs all the time. For Christians it should be a major concern.

***Acknowledgement**

Much of the content of this essay has been sparked and honed down through the years in conversations with my long-time colleagues and friends Richard Russell and Mark Roques. For very relevant examples of their educational wisdom see Roques, 1989 and Russell, 1976.

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Who are we?

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