

Introduction to Christian Education 3

Life or Death?

Christianity and Secularism in School

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Summary

This is the last of three papers introducing Christian education. The second paper addressed the influence of secular materialism in society at large and presented the evidence that indoctrination into secular materialism occurs on a massive scale, is confirmably harmful, and demands urgent attention and action from everyone concerned for our future and that of our children. This paper addresses the influence of secular materialism on school curricula and presents alternative Christian approaches.

Definition

By 'secularism' I mean *living as if God does not exist and as if faith is not relevant to everyday life*. In a secular society, education operates without reference to God, religion, or faith. The underlying assumption is that it is possible to teach and learn without any particular religious or ideological commitments. It is assumed that universal human reason, or scientific reason in particular, can provide a sufficient basis for education and one that is free from cultural, religious, or philosophical commitments.

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1 Introduction

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

1.3 All three of these papers are responding to my experience that:

- many Christians appear unaware of the extent to which secular materialistic assumptions now shape people and society.
- many atheists find it very difficult to accept – to believe – what it would really mean to be in a godless world.

We will begin this look at education with the topic of indoctrination.

2 Indoctrination

2.1 It is commonly asserted that the only danger of indoctrination in schools is from religion. The reality is that today there is almost no danger from religion in schools. But, as we saw in the second paper, indoctrination into secular materialism occurs on a massive scale in the public realm of Western societies in general and in education in particular. This situation demands urgent attention from religious believers.

2.2 In that paper we mentioned some recent research into the mindsets of students training to be Religious Education (RE) teachers. You'll remember that Professor Trevor Cooling summarised the research as follows:

In the case of those who identified themselves as Christians, a consensus emerged that they had to be careful not to let their own private beliefs influence the pupils; that was not considered objective. Essentially, they saw their beliefs as a problem to be managed. However in the case of those that were atheist or agnostic there was a contrasting consensus; these students thought that their beliefs enhanced their professionalism. In other words, their atheist beliefs contributed to their being objective RE teachers because they didn't have a *religious* belief. In their case they viewed their atheistic beliefs as an asset to be tapped. This was only a small scale project and as such one cannot generalize from it. Further research is necessary. But it does indicate the existence of a mindset within contemporary education which is influencing students.

(Cooling 2011:4; also Cooling 2010:18)

2.3 Now if this is the mindset inculcated into RE teachers in the UK then how might that affect their teaching about Christianity and the Bible?

2.4 What are children Learning About the Meaning of Bible Stories in RE?

Surely there can be no more quintessentially Christian education than the teaching of Bible stories? Well, perhaps not ...

2.5 In the previous session we introduced professor Terence Copley. Here we can draw on the research of his *Biblos Project* at Exeter University (Copley, Freathy & Walshe, 2004). His team were 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.”

2.6 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 Bible story. Since this was never explained to them, it follows that they were receiving an indoctrination into secularism. Terence Copley explained 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).

2.7 How should a Christian teacher tell the Bible Stories? First of all every Bible story should be placed in the context of the overall Bible story – the story of God’s mission, encompassing Creation, the fall into sin, the promise and achievement of salvation through Jesus Christ, and ending with God’s new creation (Bartholomew & Goheen 2006, Goheen, 2011, Wright, CJH 2006, 2010, Wright NT (Tom) 1992, 2007, 2011, 2012)

2.8 Let’s take the David and Goliath story (1 Samuel 17) as an example. This story is not about some ‘timeless’ moral or spiritual truth, such as great faith confronting overwhelming odds. So read, the historical event becomes irrelevant. The take away lesson becomes: “identify the Goliaths that you face, and let your faith make you brave and courageous like David.”

Christian teachers should always seek to understand a passage they read or teach as part of the whole story of the Bible. The text of Samuel is actually concerned with a pivotal event in Israel’s history. Once again the Philistines are threatening to subjugate Israel. The future of the nation is at stake and is to be decided by individual combat. David volunteers to fight on behalf of the whole nation (1 Samuel 17: 4, 8-10). He believed God’s promise that his faithful people would be victorious against overwhelming odds (Leviticus 26:8, Deuteronomy 28:7, 32:30, Joshua 23:9-10,). He had proved that promise in his own experience as a shepherd (1 Samuel 17:34-37). By conquering Goliath he proved himself to be truer to the ideal of kingship than Saul. That is what the story is about. Of course the story can also then be applied to our own lives today, but *on its own* the latter is not a Biblical or Christian telling of the story.

3 Stories (Worldview Stories)

3.1 In the first session, we saw that we all live in a story; indeed that all human life is shaped by stories. We live our lives in terms of the story. We think and speak in the language of the story. We hear everything as coming from within the story. If we can't fit something into the story, we will ignore it, shelve it, or simply never see it at all.

3.2 It is very, very difficult to see anything in the light of another story. (Remember the difficulty most of us have with lateral thinking puzzles!). This is one reason why discipleship is a life-long, never-ending process.

3.3 For Christians there is the Biblical story and worldview. But the dominant worldview today is that of secular materialism. Secular materialism can appear attractive – neutral and liberating – but it is harmful, and potentially very harmful.

3.4 The problem we face with almost every controversial issue in society today is the failure to recognise the faith commitments / worldviews at work. Specifically, it is the failure to recognise that secularism is not a neutral position, but another (or a set of other) faith commitment(s).

3.5 We examined secular materialism in the first paper. Briefly, in the Western world today it consists of a close linking of the two meanings of the key word, *materialism*:

- Materialism1 – physical nature is all there is;
- Materialism2 – enjoying material possessions is all that matters.

Please look back at the first paper for more information.

3.6 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?”

So lets flesh this out by taking a quick tour of some key parts of the curriculum.

4 Christian Perspectives on Education

4.1 There are, of course, many ways of forming a Christian perspective on education. We will explore these in more detail in other papers. For now we can simplify this to three key approaches:

- 1. The Creation → Fall → Redemption → New Creation worldview storyline.**
- 2. Affirming the richness of creation, resisting the temptations:**
 - a) To find a single cause of an effect, or a single explanation for everything that happens.

- b) To locate that cause or explanation at the lowest level possible, preferably an impersonal or inanimate level, *e.g.* the germ that causes a particular disease, the gene that determines a bodily feature.
- c) To avoid any personal responsibility, *e.g.*, given a particular problem in human life, we tend to look for an invading germ, a defective gene, or a malfunctioning organ. We will do all we can to avoid any scrutiny of, *e.g.*, lifestyles, for that would raise ‘messy’ social, cultural, moral, philosophical and religious issues (*etc.*) of a personal and communal nature.

3. Exploring our relationships to God, ourselves, to other people, to animals, to plants, and to the rest of creation.

The first three of these are given especial significance by Jesus Himself:

One of them, an expert in the Law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “Love the lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:35-40; Mark 12:28-31 :”There is no commandment greater than these.”)

4.2 We are here embarking on a potentially endless task, so we will restrict this survey to a few aspects of the three subjects which are generally regarded as those that are most objective and neutral – uninfluenced by a teacher’s philosophical and/or religious commitments: foreign languages, mathematics and science. If the teaching of these turns out to be shaped by the dominant secular materialism of our age, then few will doubt that the rest of the curriculum falls under the same charge.

5 Modern Foreign Languages

5.1 Unlike RE, the teaching of modern foreign languages (MFL) is – like mathematics (see section 6 below) – widely assumed to be unaffected by the teacher’s faith. The author lives in England, so let’s consider the teaching of another European language, German. ‘Fenster’ is the German for ‘window’ whether the teacher is a Hindu, Christian or atheist! Indeed so, but there is much more to teaching and learning German than that.

To start at the beginning, why do we want our pupils to learn German? The MFL literature suggests several reasons. They should learn German so that they can become:

Profiteers – German is an important European language. How can our pupils take advantage of the opportunities of the European common market if they don’t speak one of the most important European languages? The commonest answer to the question, ‘Why do I have to learn German?’ is that British businesses that seek to export goods and services to Europe need people fluent in German, so your ability to speak English 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 German culture and literature and want to introduce their pupils to what they have come to deeply appreciate and love.

Exploiters – 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 exploit German-speaking tourists and visitors!

Tourists – All other students need is enough German to get by on holidays and shopping trips in Germany.

Escapologists – Some children's experience of life – in oppressive communities and poverty – is bad. 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.

5.2 In regard to teachers in the UK, 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)

5.3 Can any of these visions of MFL teaching be regarded as Christian? How do they connect with a Biblical worldview?

Consider the third approach described in section 4.1 above. How should we teach a foreign language so that our teaching nurtures our students' love for God and for their neighbours? 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 German so that they can be good neighbours when they visit German-speaking countries and also good neighbours to German speakers 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.

5.4 One other point worth noting in relation to that third approach (in 4.1) is the amazing absence of beliefs and values from MFL materials. It would seem that all foreigners live without reference to God or 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.

6 Mathematics

6.1 Of course mathematics is completely worldview-neutral and value-free. Or maybe not

Since maths is commonly regarded as the paradigm example of a value-free subject, we must look at it carefully. We'll start at a deep level.

6.2 People have clearly had an important role in the development of mathematics, but how we understand the nature of that role is very worldview-dependent. There is an almost universal secularist tendency to regard humans as either totally autonomous – having unlimited control and completely self-determining – or totally determined, having little or no control over their lives. As regards the former, some mathematicians hold that humans do not discover mathematical truth; they create it. That philosophy is apparent in the title of an American college textbook first published in 1963, but still in print (Stein, 3rd ed, Dover, 2010): *Mathematics: the Man-Made Universe*. If one starts with the assumption that there is no God, then it is a quiet reasonable conclusion that man is the creator of mathematics. Mathematics in this vein glorifies humans and human reason. Human reason alone is needed to make sense of the world and control the future.

6.3 In contrast the Christian recognizes God as the source of all knowledge and our mind as a gift from God. The mathematical is one aspect of a multi-faceted universe; mathematics one God-given tool for understanding, that we might develop the Earth to God's glory (Genesis 1:28, 2:15 with Isaiah 11:9; Habakkuk 2:14; Romans 8:19-21). Christian teachers must constantly guard against secular ways of presenting the nature and role of mathematics.

6.4 How do we know that the principles of mathematics we use today will still hold true tomorrow? The secularist has no answer, but can only hope that they do. Christian teachers can affirm that the same God who created the universe sustains it:

“Laws of mathematics are dependable not because man with his logical reasoning created a fool proof system, but because God in His constant faithfulness embedded these unchangeable laws in His creation.” (Harro Van Brummelen, in Steensma & Van Brummelen 1977: 139)

6.5 Let's turn to a very different example in Arithmetic. Arithmetic is commonly 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 in another country. We will look at textbooks that have been used in Afghanistan.

In the communist era (c 1978-1989),

“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 (c 1992-2001) 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)

6.6 Of course Western secular maths textbooks are neutral – worldview-free. Or are 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!

6.7 How might our arithmetic problems reflect a Christian worldview? (*c.f.* 4.1)

Teachers do not have to illustrate lessons with examples of “profit and loss”, or encourage children to save in order to buy bikes or toys. Instead, lessons might focus on the maths involved in giving donations to charity and the Gift Aid that might be claimed, or on saving for an overseas project to help the poor, and so on.

Even maths and the teaching of maths is not, and can not be neutral!

7 Science

7.1 Dr Brenda Watson wrote this on the UK national 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)

7.2 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.

7.3 Chemistry Teaching under a Christian Worldview

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

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. The elements have been designed for specific roles in God's creation.

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 an exceptionally stable (unreactive) compound, common salt (sodium chloride). This compound fulfils an 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!

7.4 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 important natural functions.

7.5 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 extremely improbable – far away from chemical equilibrium. Animals and plants make the difference.

7.6 The great British scientist, James Lovelock (b 1919) wrote about this as follows:

Imagine that some cosmic chef takes all the ingredients of the present earth as atoms, mixes them, and lets them stand. The probability that those atoms would combine into the molecules that make up our living Earth is zero ... the mixture would react chemically to form a dead planet like Mars or Venus. (Lovelock 1995:24)

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

7.7 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 a stewardly and responsible use of the resources entrusted to us by God.

For much more on teaching science, see Jones, 1999.

8 Concluding Comments

8.1 “Our predicament then is this. Most students go through our [schools and] universities [in the UK] without ever having been forced to exercise their minds on the issues that are really momentous. Under the guise of academic neutrality they are subtly conditioned to unthinking acquiescence in the social and political *status quo* and in a secularism on which they have never seriously reflected ... Fundamentally they are uneducated.” (Moberly 1949:70)

8.2 Prime Time. Between the ages of 5 and 16 our children [in the UK] 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. We live in an environment conducive for indoctrination that dictators past and present were never able to create.

8.3 Does it matter? It certainly does. We saw that in paper 2 (*Culture of Death*) and there also noted that the impact of the secularist environment is evident in the social statistics (*Culture of Death* **12.12**).

8.5 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.

8.6 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)

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

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

8.8 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.

8.9 The great Scottish Catholic philosopher Alasdair Chalmers MacIntyre (b. 1929) concluded that,

“Teachers are the forlorn hope of the culture of Western modernity. ... the mission with which contemporary teachers are entrusted is both essential and impossible.” (MacIntyre 1987: 16)

8.10 The Canadian educationist, John Van Dyk, was simply being realistic when he stated,

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

8.11 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 Government schools, but secular indoctrination occurs all the time. For Christians – and Christian leaders – it should be a (even ‘the’) major concern.

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Many important resources to help us in our educational task!

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