

Developing a Strategic Response to Secular Hostility

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1 Introduction

1.1 Some working definitions:

By ‘secularism’ we mean a whole way of life that ignores God – people living *as if* there is no God. Thus secularists may *claim* to be atheists, agnostics or adherents of a religion. The issue is not what they claim to believe, but how they actually live their lives – what are they *really* committed to? There are many varieties of secularism and more than one may be followed by each person. Consumerism is a very secular way of life; so too are Fascism and Communism. And so too are some dualistic versions of religion (see **3** below).

Atheism is not the same kind of thing as commitment to a religious worldview. Atheism is rather like vegetarianism: it tells us what people *don't* believe, but not what they *do* believe. Many atheists are actually materialists, believing that ultimately only matter and energy are real. A few are non-materialists who believe, *e.g.*, that teleological principles are an inbuilt feature of the universe. If someone says they are an atheist, we need to interrogate them to discover what they actually believe is ultimate reality. What *kind* of secularist are they?

In this paper the assertion that a belief or proposition is ‘controversial’ is not a judgment on its truth or falsity, but simply a statement that *as a matter of fact*, this is “an issue about which there is no fixed or universally held point of view.” (*Crick Report*, 1998). Some will hold it to be true, while others will hold it to be false. Significantly all sides will believe in the reasonableness of their position. Each side may be quite passionate about the truth of their own views and the falsity of opposing views.

1.2 In a cultural climate in which secularism is overwhelmingly dominant, where there is great suspicion of Christian work, and some atheists have become disrespectfully aggressive, it is vital that we have a clear, thought-out strategy, which we can promote and defend, without embarrassment, in the public realm.

1.3 Three key factors should guide our thinking:

Firstly, the dominance of secularism in society. Whereas religious believers are used to having their positions scrutinised, secularists rarely, if ever, have their beliefs placed under the critical spotlight.

Secondly, the prevalence of dualism amongst religious believers. In this context, dualism is the tendency to restrict religion to the individual, to private life, and to moral and evangelistic concerns. Religious belief then has little cultural impact and societal leadership is corralled by the secularists.

Thirdly, these matters are clearly very controversial. There are important professional guidelines available regarding the handling of 'controversial issues' in schools. These guidelines are clear and sensible, and can be followed by religious believers without compromising their faith.

We will consider these in reverse order.

2 Teaching Controversial Issues in a Pluralist World

2.1 This has been an important topic in education, particularly since the 1998 *Crick Report* on Citizenship (http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_4851.aspx), which led to compulsory Citizenship in the school curriculum. This in turn has focused attention on the matter of how schools should handle controversial issues. In response there have been a number of key publications:

2.2 An excellent article by Trevor Cooling, *Handling Controversial Issues in Schools Today* (2007), is available on the *Transforming Lives* website (<http://www.transforminglives.org.uk/world.php>). Ted Huddleston has written *Teaching about Controversial Issues: guidance for schools* (2003) for the *Citizenship Foundation* (http://www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/lib_res_pdf/0118.pdf). Oxfam Education has a *Guide on Teaching Controversial Issues* which is available online at <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/teachersupport/cpd/controversial/>. Channel 4 have produced a video on the topic and the comprehensive programme notes are available online at: <http://www.channel4.com/learning/programmenotes/inset/teachcontrv01.htm>.

The wider issues raised by these guidelines are addressed by Trevor Cooling in his recent article, "The Challenge of Passionate Religious Commitment for School Education in a World of Religious Diversity: Reflections on Evangelical Christianity and Humanism" (*Journal of Education & Christian Belief*, **11** (1), Spring 2007, pages 23-34).

2.3 These guidelines all rightly emphasise that teachers are not allowed to promote partisan views, but are expected to give a balanced presentation of opposing views. This does NOT mean that teachers have to promote relativism. Committed teachers are free to use their commitments as important teaching resources. They may use their commitments to model explicitly for students the shaping role that beliefs play in life. They can do this by openly talking about their beliefs, and by explaining and engaging with contrary beliefs in an open and respectful manner. Teachers should always be permitted to answer student questions, giving their own views if appropriate. Disagreements among teachers are an excellent opportunity for students to learn how adults can respectfully disagree. What teachers must

not do is to set out to persuade pupils that their views on a controversial issue *are the only ones worthy of consideration*. The key **professional** guideline is that schools should be inclusive – that pupils from all backgrounds should feel at home and have their views taken seriously. Teachers must create a classroom environment in which students are free to express sincerely-held beliefs without fear of being dismissed or belittled.

2.4 As Christians we should have no problem with these guidelines. They are consistent with our Biblical aspirations for justice. In following them we are not implying that all positions are either equally true, or equally acceptable. Rather, as Christians, we are bearing witness that the God whom we worship as true calls upon those in authority to ensure that people are free to search for God without coercion or discrimination (*cf.* 1 Timothy 2:1-6). The guidelines are also to our advantage, because we now work in situations in which it is *religious* believers who are the ones at risk of facing significant discrimination.

2.5 In Britain today religion is seen as something of a curiosity, and it is marginalised by many popular writers and by vociferous media ‘experts.’ It does not figure much in people’s consciousness. Many regard religious beliefs as irrelevant, or even as the cause of a lot of evil in the world. Terms such as, for example, ‘fundamentalist’, ‘radical’, ‘evangelical’, ‘creationist’ – and even ‘Muslim’, ‘Jew’ and ‘Christian’ – may now convey very negative images. Religion is perceived as something that would hinder or deny our freedom. And today ‘freedom’ is understood in the light of the secular, science → technology → economic growth worldview, as freedom to live securely in a consumerist paradise. Religion, it is asserted, should be kept out of the public square. For example, Tony Blair has noted that although religion is “hugely important” to him, it was difficult to be open about it as prime minister, because “You talk about it in our system and, frankly, people do think you’re a nutter.” (*The Blair Years*, BBC1, Sunday 02 December 2007, see: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=496389&in_page_id=1770)

2.6 Behind these attitudes lies the *myth of religious neutrality*, the (usually implicit) assumption that secularism is neutral and that in schools the secular subjects are – or can – be taught in a way that favours neither religion nor unbelief. On the contrary, the reality is that secularism has created an environment in which it is religious believers – and Christians and Muslims in particular – who are most at risk of facing disrespect and the rubbishing of their beliefs. In other words, the risk of indoctrination in schools and society today is not from religion, but from secularism. A cultural environment has come into being in which almost 100% of unbelieving parents successfully pass on their unbelief to their children, but barely 50% of Christian parents succeed in passing on their Christian faith (see http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/about/CI/CP/the_edge/issue19/churches.aspx)

2.7 One of the central challenges facing secularists today is to treat people of religious faith justly and respectfully. That involves the even greater challenge of admitting the controversiality of their secularist positions, and that they, too, are faith positions. The cultural divide is not, as they would have it, between religion and reason, but between two *controversial faith positions*.

2.8 On this matter we can refer people to professor Terence Copley’s book, *Indoctrination, Education and God: the struggle for the mind* (London: SPCK, 2005). For those who want to explore these important matters in greater depth, Dr Arthur Jones leads the Stapleford

Centre's postgraduate distance-learning course *Faith in Schools*, which can be pursued to Certificate, Diploma or Masters (MA) level (see <http://www.e-stapleford.co.uk/cpd/> for more details). We believe that all Christians working in education should be encouraged to do courses like this and be supported by Christian schools, organisations and churches to do so. Leaders in other religions should regard the establishment of equivalent courses as a high priority. We would be more than willing to assist them in the task.

2.9 Many schools seem unaware of the guidelines on controversial issues and so do not bring them to the attention of visiting speakers, especially, it would seem, when those speakers are secularists. Schools must be much more pro-active in this area and take seriously their obligation to be just and respectful to all their students when handling controversial issues.

3 Religious Dualism: reversing the loss of cultural influence

3.1 The main way in which secularism seduces Christians is through *dualism*. Dualism is at work when Christians and churches withdraw from engagement in public life into a privatised religiosity that focuses almost exclusively on personal morality and personal evangelism. Christians are then seen to be living *as if* Christianity is only a private hobby that is irrelevant to life in the workplace, education, the arts and sciences, politics, and to the development and transmission of culture in general.

3.2 The prophetic challenge of the late Bishop Lesslie Newbigin was for Christians to reclaim the gospel *as public truth*. Our response in work with young people is a strategy of telling inspiring stories that help students to recognise and understand the shaping influence of worldviews. In particular, we tell the stories of Christian who have had a transforming influence on their society and culture (see *What is Distinctive about The Reality Bites Approach to Schools Work? Telling the stories of culture-transforming Christians* for examples). These stories are life-affirming, celebrate the rich diversity of God's world, and the exciting breadth and depth of Christian ministry. Whereas some traditional approaches to schools ministry can be cringe-worthy, it is important to note that it is never embarrassing to tell these kinds of story.

4 Turning the critical spotlight onto secularism

4.1 It is our experience that a clear majority of secondary school children (maybe 75-80% of years 10-13) are default, unreflective atheists, and that a significant number (maybe as high as 50%) of the *confident* students (*i.e.*, those who regularly volunteer their opinions) are emotivists with no moral framework, *i.e.* their moral decisions are based on what they feel at the time, and they deny that it is possible to make objective moral judgments. They would say that Saddam Hussein, Pol Pot, Stalin, Hitler *et al*, all lived in another age and who are we – who don't know their circumstances – to condemn them, or judge their deeds as evil or good. Various surveys bear this out. For example, as regards religion, a Mori poll commissioned by the British Library in 2007 found that 43% of 16-19 year olds say that they

have no faith, 72% say religion is “not relevant to their life” and only 14% say that religion is relevant at all times in their lives (see <http://www.secularism.org.uk/halfofteenagersareatheists.html>)

4.2 The result is a cultural environment in many (probably most) secondary schools in which atheist and emotivist perspectives are presented openly and confidently, even aggressively, by students (and some teachers?) and in which students with a religious faith feel alien and intimidated if they seek to offer a religious perspective. It is not surprising that many of these students struggle to survive in such an environment.

4.3 We must have a strategy which enables us to support and encourage these students. We can do so by showing them how to respond effectively to the issues in a way that turns the challenge back to the secularists.

4.4 This leads us to highlight a weakness with many traditional models for Christian ministry in schools. The weakness is that while these approaches positively present Christianity, they usually fail to couple that with immanent critiques of secular worldviews.

4.5 In schools the non-Christian majority are used to being asked to be critical of religions (Christianity *etc.*) but are almost never (or ever) asked to critique the taken-for-granted secularism/naturalism/practical atheism. We must take every opportunity to challenge those secular students by also turning the critical spotlight on to secularism, both to expose hidden tensions and to draw out the possibility of unpalatable implications (See *What is Distinctive about The Reality Bites Approach to Schools Work? Challenging Secular Perspectives* for examples). In so doing we will also be supporting the theists present. And we can do so in ways that adhere strictly to the guidelines (see **2.3** above).

5 Summary: a strategic response to secular hostility

5.1 *Reality Bites* offers training for schools and youth workers that enables them to further Christian ministry in schools and youth organisations in ways that can be promoted and defended, without embarrassment, in the public realm. We can show how to use challenging critique and exciting stories in ways that respect all students, whether religious or non-religious, and that adhere strictly to the professional guidelines regarding controversial topics.

5.2 Christians leading schools and youth ministries, or in long-term involvement with such ministries, should be encouraged to undertake university-accredited courses, such as the Stapleford Centre’s *Faith in Schools* courses (see **2.8** above), which explore these issues in depth. Leaders in other religions should regard the establishment of equivalent courses as a high priority. *Reality Bites* would be more than willing to assist them in the task.

5.3 Challenging critiques of secularism and stories of culture-transforming Christian faith are not the only elements of effective work amongst young people today. It is also important, for example, to give young people a holistic and culturally rich understanding of the Biblical story. Here also *Reality Bites* can provide relevant materials and training. In this document we have simply focused on two elements that have been lacking in much of the work we have seen, but which we are persuaded have key roles to play in work with young people today.

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