

Secularism in Education

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1. Introduction “You must keep your religion out of your professional work”

1.1. Today’s secularist environment is most evident in the realm of professional training. People are trained to work in the professions *as if* there is no God. How this works is that, throughout their training, they will receive the explicit or implicit message, that, in order to be professional and objective, they must not bring their religion, or personal religious values, into their public, professional life and practice.

1.2. The inculcated mindset is revealed in some research into the training of school teachers. Education researchers, Lynn Revell and Rosemary Walters, investigated the attitudes of Christian and atheist students training to teach RE in secondary schools in England (Revell & Walters 2010).

1.3. Education 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)

1.4. The researchers themselves concluded:

“A secular, atheist or agnostic belief position in the classroom should be

recognised by all students as an identifiable belief position rather than as a neutral stance.” (Revell & Walters 2010: 4)

“Agnostic, atheist and radical/liberal faith positions have also to be acknowledged as potential hindrances to the educational process.” (*ibid*: 9)

1.5. Clearly we have another illustration of how secularist assumptions have been uncritically absorbed by a majority of people. But let us examine the situation in the teaching profession in more detail.

2. An Indefensible Religious/Non-Religious Divide

2.1. We have seen that the assumption that religious believers should not bring their religion, or personal religious values into their public, professional work has come to be seen as so obvious, so reasonable, that it is virtually unquestioned. But, on the contrary, it is, in fact, very problematic indeed. It should be obvious that, in a pluralist society, such religious discrimination – for that is what it is – is impossible to justify.

[The following discussion was stimulated by a question posed by the Norwegian, Christian educationalist, Signe Sandsmark, (2000: 87) which is adapted in **2.3** below. See also Clouser 2005, Cooling 2010, and Copley 2005]

2.2. Religious believers, training to be school or college teachers, will, explicitly or implicitly, receive something like the following message:

In order to be professional and neutral in your practice, you must not talk about God in a way that implies that God really exists. You must not pray with students. You must not talk as if moral norms and commandments are objective or universal. You must not base your curriculum on the assumption that human beings are created for a purpose. You must not teach science as if the world is intelligently designed. [and so on through the curriculum]

2.3. The problem with this is exposed if we ask a complementary question: “What, then, should secularists, agnostics and atheists try to do, and avoid doing, if they also are to be ‘neutral’, ‘objective’ and ‘professional’, and not be perceived as imposing their secularism, atheism, or agnosticism, on their students?”

2.4. The empirical answer is ‘Nothing’. In other words, the question reveals that our educational practice is already effectively atheistic. By this we mean that state education today operates across the curriculum:

- *as if* there is no God,
- *as if* a religious faith is irrelevant to everyday life,
- *as if* living without any reference to God, or to a religious faith is, or ought to be, normal and natural for everyone.

It should be very obvious that this is hardly neutral! Non-religious pupils and teachers will feel perfectly at home in the secular classroom, whereas religious believers will not. If the latter do feel at home in the secular classroom – and many clearly do – then it probably means that the secularist environment, in which they are immersed, through the media and in state education, has successfully *indoctrinated* them into the practice of living *as if* secularism is true.

2.5. Graham Haydon (senior lecturer in philosophy of education at London University's *Institute of Education*) put it succinctly:

"... it is simply 'not done' to bring one's religion, or views based on it, into any public sphere. But a society in which this kind of secularism reigns, even though not enforced by law, is surely not one in which it can be said that all persons are equally respected; it means, effectively, that some people are being silenced on matters of central importance to them." (Haydon 1994:70)

2.6. In effect, Haydon is questioning whether we are really serious about celebrating a pluralist society. If, in order to be professional, religious teachers are required to teach in a way that hides their real beliefs – to teach *as if their religious faith is not true, or, at least, not relevant to their public life*, to teach, in other words, *as if they are secularists, atheists or agnostics* – then shouldn't secularist, agnostic and atheist teachers do likewise? In order not to impose their secularism, agnosticism or atheism on pupils, maybe they should teach as if they were religious believers – as if they were, e.g., Buddhists, Christians, Jews, or Muslims!!

3. Today the Real Indoctrination Threat is from Secularism

3.1. What this clearly illustrates is that it is not possible for education to be neutral. Secularism has created an environment in which it is religious believers who are most at risk of facing disrespect and the rubbishing of their beliefs. Listen to education researchers William Kay and Leslie Francis:

"Today much of the world of adulthood is characterized by the secular rather than by the religious ... The socialization process is persistently and inevitably drawing young people into the ethos of that post-Christian world. In this sense, to be irreligious is to be normal." (Kay & Francis 1996: 144)

3.2. So what, then, should teachers do? Best practice is surely that all teachers should be honest about their religious or secularist commitments, explain them appropriately to their pupils, making it clear that all such teachers' commitments are options that should be considered, but not requirements that must be followed.

3.3. There is, of course, a very real problem here. Many people – including teachers – are not consciously aware of their religious and philosophical commitments! They have absorbed them unawares from their social and cultural environments. In their training, therefore, all teachers need to be made critically aware of those commitments. Of course, *that should be a foundational part of everyone's education* (see Sir Walter Moberly's statement in **3.7.** below).

3.4. The risk of indoctrination in schools and society today is not from religion, but from secularism (Carey & Carey 2012, Copley 2005; *c.f.* Cooling 2010, Fraser 1999, Greenawalt 2005, Newbiggin 1998, Nord 1995, Norman 2002, Sandsmark 2000, Sommerville 2006, Trigg 2012). In today's environment it is hardly surprising that almost 100% of unbelieving parents successfully pass on their unbelief to their children, but barely 50% of religious parents succeed in passing on their religious faith (Crockett & Voas 2006, NatCen Social Research 2011, Voas 2005, Voas & Crockett 2005. The average figure drops to c. 25% if only one parent is a believer). Research also shows that many children give up on their faith in their teenage years, or as they enter adult life (*e.g.* Barna Group 2006, Kinnaman, 2011). The loss during college and university years (50-80%) is especially shocking, but almost certainly roots back to school years (*e.g.* Ham & Beemer 2009).

3.5. Lesslie Newbiggin put it bluntly:

“Even in homes where the parents are committed Christians, it is hard, to the point of impossibility, for children to sustain belief in the meta-narrative of the Bible over against that understanding of the meta-narrative – the picture of the origins and development of nature, of human society as a whole – which is being offered to them at school. It is possible to maintain the telling of the biblical story in the privacy of home and church, but in so far as this story contradicts the meta-narrative of the schools, young people are placed in an impossible situation. ... A belief which is permitted only to exist in a bunker may survive for a time, but it must finally be obliterated.” (Newbiggin 1998: 158-159)

3.6. Terence Copley was Professor of Educational Studies (Religious Education) at the University of Oxford when he died from cancer in January 2011. Previously, he was Professor of Education at the University of Exeter from 1997-2007. He was the author of the ground-breaking book *Indoctrination, Education and God* (Copley, 2005). From the title, a Western reader might expect a discussion of religious education, and of an assumed risk of the uncritical promotion of a teacher's particular religious commitments. But, no, this is actually a discussion of the real indoctrination threat in state education today – from **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 2005:vii)

3.7. Nor is this something that has been recognised only recently. Long ago, Sir Walter Moberly (1881-1974, Philosopher, Vice-Chancellor of Manchester University, Chairman of the University Grants Committee), put it even more trenchantly:

“If in your organization, your curriculum, and your communal customs and ways of life, you leave God out, you teach with tremendous force that, for most people and at most times, He does not count ... It is a fallacy to suppose that by omitting a subject you teach nothing about it. On the contrary you teach that it is to be omitted, and that it is therefore a matter of secondary importance. And you teach this not openly and explicitly, which would invite criticism; you simply take it for granted and thereby insinuate it silently, insidiously, and all but irresistibly. If indoctrination is bad, this sort of conditioning and preconscious habituation is surely worse ... if a planner of atheistic conviction and Machiavellian astuteness had been at work, he could hardly have wrought more cunningly.” (Moberly 1949: 56)

“Our predicament then is this. Most students go through our universities without ever having been forced to exercise their minds on the issues which 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.” (*ibid*: 70)

4. Secularism Harms Everyone

The threat from Secularism is not just to Christians, but to all religious believers, indeed it is a threat to everyone

4.1. Secularism is fundamentally a commitment to a belief in *naturalism* (aka *materialism*). Certainly, some scholars have attempted to develop a non-naturalist alternative to theism (e.g. Jerry Fodor (1935-2017), Bradley Monton (b 1972) and Thomas Nagel (b 1937)), but these attempts have been unconvincing, and have gained little support. Very few people become naturalists by intention; rather naturalism is usually absorbed unawares and unthinkingly, from the culture.

4.2. Naturalism entails the belief that there is no immaterial (or spiritual) realm beyond physical detection, *i.e.* that there is no spirit, soul, angels or God/gods. It is the belief that there is no intelligence, design, or purpose behind, or at work in the

universe. Hence it is the belief that all real knowledge comes from empirical science, with the aid only of mathematics and logic.

4.3. What many naturalists appear to ignore, is that humans are also part of the natural world, and that, therefore, they too must be understood from the naturalist perspective. The seemingly unavoidable conclusion from the acceptance of naturalism is that humans are just very complicated chemical machines, controlled entirely by material causes – by our genes, hormones, *etc.* – and thus without free will, and that, therefore, our human reason and science can have no necessary, or knowable connection with truth/reality. But no-one can live, intentionally and consistently, on the basis of such beliefs. Every human being lives within a framework of non-naturalist knowledge, a framework of meaning and purpose (for further discussion of naturalism, see, e.g., the author’s discussion in Jones 2019, sections 3.3. – 3.6., pages 7-9).

A recent nationwide poll of millennials (young people aged 16-29 years old) found that 89% believe that their lives have no meaning or purpose (Quixote & Anglin, 2019). Similarly, Anne Case (Economics & Public Affairs Professor at Princeton) and Angus Deaton (2015 Nobel Prize in Economics) write of ‘**deaths of despair**’ from suicide, drug and alcohol abuse *etc.* **There is an epidemic of young people giving up on life before it really even starts for them** (see Stonestreet & Rivera, 2019, Case & Deaton, 2020).

Q1 How might this be related to the dominance of naturalism in the media and in state education?

Q2 How can a real sense of meaning and purpose for today’s young people be established in state education? If not, what might we expect in the future?

4.4. So when talking to other believers (whether Hindu, Muslim, or whatever), and to those claiming to be secular, or non-religious (including those claiming to be (indefinably) ‘spiritual’), we should simply point out that secular materialism – which shapes most of the educational and media options available to most people – undermines *their* positions as well. *Everyone* should reject secular materialism, specifically in education, but generally in every realm of human life.

(Word Count: 2,361)

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