

## **Religious education versus the injustice of secular indoctrination?**

**Terence Copley**

### **Introduction**

In democratic societies there will be a natural and inevitable struggle for the mind between religious values and secular values. Both can be legitimated intellectually. Both can be associated with power and its extension or preservation, sometimes even with abuse (eg corruption) Both have the capacity to be establishment values or revolutionary anti-establishment values. Yet although religious values and secular values each carry - and on occasions attempt to conceal - their own intellectual, moral and ethical dimensions and difficulties, value-neutrality is not possible. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 to 1944, famously remarked that if you leave God out, you are communicating a value just as much as if you include God in. In this seesaw situation, is the balance within western education systems at present tilted too far towards the secular? Religious education (RE) in the west is sometimes viewed with suspicion as potentially indoctrinatory, yet the possibility of secular indoctrination is rarely canvassed.

In February 2005, SPCK published Terence Copley's *Indoctrination, Education and God: the Struggle for the Mind* (ISBN 0 281 05682 X). The book is a mainly theoretical study, using the UK, England in particular, as exemplars. It utilises the insights of sociology of religion, theology, church history and media studies, along with recent empirical research among children and undergraduates. Taking the book as its start point, this paper travels into new territory. It examines the concept of secular indoctrination, including how it could even happen within the context of teaching religion. Published research into England and previously unpublished research into New Zealand offer insights into two different but English speaking cultures, one with religious education in the public school curriculum as entitlement and one without. Could it be the case that without RE as entitlement for all within the curriculum, the tendency to secular indoctrination increases?

This paper emerges from issues within European education but it also raises questions for the North American situation. According to sociological research, people whose self-identity is consciously secular do not constitute anything like a majority in the populations of western democracies, so by what right should democratic education systems be governed or dominated by their values? Such domination could constitute a suppression of religious and spiritual values in the public square. If so, would this commit *injustice* against the human right to a religious or spiritual way of life?

### **Religious education and religious terrorism**

In different cultures, 'religious education' might be taken to mean

- 1) education about religion(s)
- 2) teaching religion(s) as a curriculum subject (like teaching politics)
- 3) 'learning from religion' (one of two attainment targets for UK public school RE)
- 4) education or induction into a specific religion (catechetics, faith nurture or development)
- 5) education rooted within a faith community (eg the whole of the education process in a Catholic school)

Because religious praxis is voluntary we might suppose that religious education should also be voluntary. The fourth and fifth senses of the term as identified above are clearly voluntary, on the part of the child and/or their parent. But the individual's right to believe or disbelieve in turn requires sufficient educational input to permit an informed choice to be made between competing religious and secular (non-theistic) values. This means that in the first three meanings of 'religious education' identified above, it should *not* theoretically be a voluntary activity, as it is a necessary precursor to informed choice at some point within the individual's story. For this reason the English and Welsh non-statutory *National Framework for RE* recommends that alongside the study of world religions, all students should study 'secular philosophies such as humanism' (QCA *Framework*, 2004:12). If religious education conceived in this way is a preparation for choice, we ought then to be asking whether the educational systems of the west enable, hinder or ignore this process.

Religious terrorism provides ammunition for anti-religious people as part of their attack on religions ('Look what religions are capable of ...'). But to what extent is 'religious terrorism', when it occurs throughout the world, fuelled by the perception that in the societies targeted for attack, religious or spiritual core values are not being taken seriously? Such societies are then perceived by their attackers as hypocritical or, in their language, Satan or Mammon inspired. It follows logically – although there would clearly be massive cultural and political problems in trying to implement this globally – that a compulsory program of religious education for all in the first sense listed above might assist in enabling informed personal choice. It could also help understand better those people whose choice has been quite different from our own. But all choices are not equally valid. Relativism does not 'rule OK'. Beliefs built the death factory at Auschwitz and as a result at least 1,100,000 people were killed there. It is therefore a defensible value judgement to argue that in contrast to the religiously educated person, the terrorist makes a *deformed* or *misinformed* choice based on intensive conditioning. Religious education of the sort supported in this paper is therefore de-indoctrinatory, because it increases personal choice.

It might also better enable societies or groups to understand their own heritage discourse, to clarify, adapt and implement their core beliefs and values and take an understanding empathetic account of minorities. We may argue, therefore, that religious education is *potentially* (but not at present *actually*) the antidote to religious terrorism. If so, the real problem becomes how to get the patient to take the course of treatment.

### **What is indoctrination?**

Doctrines are the defined tenets, usually of a sect or religion. In its basic and non-pejorative sense, therefore, indoctrination is simply the teaching of doctrine. The US Navy used the term in this way as late as the Second World War, to mean basic rules and discipline for naval personnel. But like its sister word propaganda, which also had innocent beginnings, indoctrination came to be associated with the questionable activity of instilling particular beliefs and values into the unwilling or unaware. Unlike conditioning or 'brainwashing', with indoctrination the will of the person is not over-ridden in the process. The FARE Report (1991, p19) says that 'indoctrination occurs when a person is given one view of the world in such a way that they cannot see any other'. We can therefore ask whether in some western democracies - outside the ghetto of institutionalised religion - secular indoctrination is occurring. Products

of this secular worldview cannot understand the claims of religions, which are presented as harmless minority private hobbies or dangerous fanaticism. Religious fundamentalism, which is on the whole non-violent, and the apparent pre-modern stance taken by particular religious groups, eg the Orthodox in some eastern European countries, or particular Islamic groups in some northern European countries, appear equally inexplicable to a secular mindset. Currently the Council of Europe is trying to decide what to recommend about religion in the curricula of Europe. It is aware that, in famous phrase of Edward VIII, 'something should be done' (1). In Britain and Europe a secular worldview dominates the media but there is no popular base for this, since religions and spiritualities continue to thrive.

Indoctrination occurs by planning and intention. Most commentators have failed to note that it can also occur by omission or exclusion (eg of the religious dimension). It can occur by 'positioning', a process whereby a philosophy or idea is relegated to the periphery and thereby marginalised. Another characteristic of indoctrination is to ask one question rather than another. It is not unreasonable to be wary of religious indoctrination within democratic societies, either in the society as a whole or in cells or pockets within it. But it is unjust if such wariness does not also extend to secular indoctrination: *all indoctrination constitutes a form of robbery, as it deprives people of choice.*

### **The secular**

Secularisation is the process whereby religious institutions and practices become peripheral or almost invisible in a society in which they were perceived to be central and pivotal (Copley, 2005:7). Religion gradually becomes identified with the arcane and irrelevant. Of course, by adopting intolerant attitudes against gayness or the ordination of women, by demanding compulsory celibacy, or denying other lifestyles which the 'secular' world takes for granted as part of being fully human, some religious communities not only co-operate in the secularisation process but speed it up. This is a form of spiritual suicide bombing, which in common with literal suicide bombing, does little to change the target society. There is a parallel with those Victorian churches which had such a rigid theory of substitutionary atonement that that some of their best members – such as novelist George Eliot – had to leave to find more loving options outside the church. In the UK it can be argued that the churches have too often taken an active part in demonstrating their irrelevance or securing their position as conservative guardians of a tradition rather than being pro-active spiritual adventurers. In this situation religions can too easily be stereotyped as fixed belief and value systems with immutable scriptures which have to be obeyed, whereas spirituality is seen as a rather more attractive do-it-yourself affair, a pick and mix of one's own choosing (Copley, 2005: Chapter 4 *passim*).

Despite secularisation of the UK media, in which religion frequently is presented as the province of paedophiles or terrorists and is the target of articulate campaigns by numerically tiny groups like the National Secular Society, the patterns of religions and spiritualities in UK society remain complex. In the 2001 national census a question about religious adherence revealed that 71.6% of the UK population claimed to be Christian. Only 15.5% stated that they had no religion. In a study of the rural town of Kendal (population approximately 28,000) Heelas and Woodhead (2005) found 25 active congregations representing a range of Christian perspectives and 53 alternative/holistic groups ranging from astrology, craniosacral therapy, Green Spirit,

pagans, rebirthing, Universal Peace Dancing and yoga. Even accepting that some people belong to more than one group, the sheer number and range of these groups is enough to challenge the secularisation hypothesis. The same can be argued from many other UK communities, eg Glastonbury (Copley, 2005: 94-96). For a society or its media to ignore or deny this complex of religious and spiritual outlooks is therefore fundamentally *unjust*. This could be happening despite the presence of religion in the UK public education system and sociological evidence to show that religion is not dead and that spiritualities including alternative/holistic groups are alive and well. Carrette and King (2005) go further, however, and argue that the rise of modern spiritualities is a reflection of consumer-oriented individualism, in which a sinister shift of meanings has led spirituality to conform to the needs of a corporate business culture to produce a pacified workforce. The god behind all this is the Market, which has turned spirituality into life-style packages we can buy. If they are right that spirituality has been hijacked, there is all the more need for religious education.

### **Research into young people**

The research team involved in the Biblos Project, led by Terence Copley, worked with UK young people for 8 years to research their understanding of and attitude towards biblical narrative as it featured in the UK public school curriculum. This was reported in summary (2005). But at the end of this time, Biblos moved on to work with young people in New Zealand, a different culture to the UK, but still English-speaking. Here religion does *not* appear as entitlement in the curriculum of public schools. So although there are clearly variables in the culture differences between NZ and the UK, it was hoped that some light would be thrown on the influence of public school religious education (UK) or its absence except as a minority voluntary activity in elementary schools (NZ).

The third phase of the Biblos UK Project worked with UK schools in the south west, the Midlands and the north east of England. Questionnaires were used with 1,066 students in years 6, 9 and 12 (ages 10+, 13+, 16+) to ascertain their knowledge of, and attitudes towards, the Bible as well as what factors they believe influenced these attitudes. For instance, are they affected by age, gender or religious affiliation? The questionnaire sample was an accurate reflection of the 2001 national census categories of religious adherence. As part of this phase 98 semi-structured interviews of about 30 minutes with year six, nine and twelve students from nine schools across England were conducted. The research allowed an assessment of the extent to which UK children see the Bible as a 'problem' and what the origins of any problems might be. The intention was, as far as possible, to replicate this research in the NZ context.

In New Zealand the 1964 Education Act allows for 'Religious Instruction' to be offered in public schools for up to 20 hours per year. The decision is made by the school's board of trustees, based on a survey administered to parents. In schools where this decision is made RI, or 'Bible in Schools' (BiS) as it is often known, takes place for half an hour per week, for up to 40 weeks a year. At this time the school is legally deemed closed. Parents may withdraw their children. BiS lessons are taken by volunteers trained and accredited by the Churches Education Commission. Roughly 61% of primary schools offer BiS and about 5-6% of children are withdrawn in those schools. There is no formal BiS in high schools although elements of religious belief might be touched on in Social Studies, Liberal Studies, History and the occasional

school assembly. Scripture Union organises extra-curricular ‘Scripture Union in Schools’ (SUIS) groups in intermediate and high schools, providing prayer support and access to resources. The NZ Biblos sample consisted of 419 students derived from 13 schools. In terms of ethnicity the breakdown is shown in Figure 1. The total sample were not representative of the 2001 NZ Census.

Figure 1

Ethnic group	Cited by (%)
Pakeha (European)	60.9
Maori	20.8
Other	8.8
Asian	9.8
Pacific Islander	3.1

In NZ the same questionnaires were used with students in years 6, 9 and 12 as in the UK, with some cultural and language adaptations to the different context. Distance meant that no interviews were conducted with the NZ sample. Students’ responses to the questionnaires were coded using categories devised during Phase 3 of the Biblos Project. Every attempt was made to code responses in the same way to facilitate cross-cultural comparisons. However categories were altered when the existing categories did not accurately represent the New Zealand data and new categories were created when a sufficient number of students wrote a response not mentioned in the UK coding criteria.

### Selected findings

#### *1 Declared religion*

Students were asked which religion (if any) they belong to, or identify with. They were asked to choose from the categories listed in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Religion	Cited by (%)	
	NZ	UK
None	50.8	15.1
Christianity	34.1	70.5
Other	3.1	1.5
Buddhism	2.4	0.8
Hinduism	1.2	3.4
Islam	0.7	2.4
Sikhism	0.2	6.2
Judaism	0	0.2

## 2 Sources of Bible knowledge

**Figure 3**

Sources of Bible knowledge	Cited by (%)	
	NZ	UK
RE lessons/Bible in Schools	61.6	93.2
Place of worship	31.7	61.8
Family	30.8	31.2
Books/magazines	26.5	24.0
Media (TV/film/radio)	23.9	36.1
Friends	18.4	15.4
Other	7.2	4.8
Collective worship/assemblies	N/A	77.9

## 3 Frequency affirming specific characters who appear in the Bible

Students were asked to name five characters in the Bible. Some students cited more or less than five characters. All those cited were included in the coding categories in Figure 4. For categories which include a range of characters, e.g. 'Other NT character', the percentages refer to the number of students who named one or more character.

**Figure 4**

Biblical character	Cited by (%)	
	NZ	UK
Jesus	79.7	91.5
Mary	44.4	44.9
God	44.4	25.7
Other Hebrew Bible/ OT character	41.5	32.3
Joseph	38.4	37.6
Evangelists	32.5	41.1
Other NT character	30.1	49.3
Moses	27.4	38.3
Adam	16.2	10.5
Eve	14.8	9.3
Inaccurate/Irrelevant	5.0	4.7
Abraham	4.5	10.8

There was a high tendency for New Zealand students to refer to God instead of Jesus when describing Bible passages, which may explain some of this difference. Another finding was the strong tendency to misspell the names of biblical characters. For example, 54 out of 334 NZ students who cited Jesus gave an incorrect spelling. In total, 39 different spellings of Jesus were noted.

The proportion of students able to name differing numbers of characters/people correctly is included in Figure 5 below.

**Figure 5**

Numbers of characters named correctly	Cited by (%)	
	NZ	UK
Named five	69.2	87.8
None	9.3	0.8
Named four	8.6	4.8
Name three	5.7	2.1
Named two	2.9	1.4
Named more than five	2.4	2.1
Named one	1.9	1.0

The proportion of students able to name five biblical characters was lower in New Zealand than in the UK. Also, using Spearman's correlation coefficient, there was no significant relationship between the frequency with which students attend a place of worship and the number of biblical characters they are able to name.

#### 4 Attitudes towards the Bible

**Figure 6**

Semantic Differential Statement	SA/A (%)		SD/D (%)	
	NZ	UK	NZ	UK
The Bible is important to me	29.6	33.7	42.8	35.5
The Bible is relevant to today	40.6	53.7	24.4	18.1
The Bible is interesting	29.6	35.9	34.6	35.5
The Bible contains truth	40.1	47.9	16.0	17.1
The Bible can show people how to live	35.4	63.1	25.5	18.8
I look to the Bible for personal guidance	17.0	18.7	61.6	58.8
I believe in the Bible	37.7	39.6	35.2	28.2
The Bible should be respected	55.6	74.1	21.3	12.9
Science has not proved the Bible wrong	20.5	23.4	25.5	27.3
The Bible has important things to say to people today	37.5	47.8	26.3	24.7

In general these results seem to suggest more negative attitudes in the New Zealand sample, with students less likely to agree or strongly agree with all statements than students in the UK. However the results of a Mann Whitney U test, revealed that this difference was only statistically significant for the statements 'The Bible is relevant to today', 'The Bible can show people how to live' and 'The Bible should be respected'.

#### 5 What shapes student attitudes?

Year 6 students were asked what they thought had influenced their view(s) of the Bible. Year 9 and Year 12 students were asked what they thought had helped to shape

their attitude towards the Bible. Their answers were coded according to categories presented in Figure 7.

**Figure 7**

Influence cited	Cited by (%)
Invalid response	55.4
Family	8.4
RE lessons/Bible in Schools	5.5
Own beliefs	5.3
Reading/Hearing it	4.1
Nothing/not much	4.1
Other	3.6
Place of worship	3.1
Bible teacher	3.1
Education/school	2.1
Other named person	1.4
Life experience	1.4
Friends	1.4
Not Reading/Hearing it	1.2

Several of these categories are different to those used in Phase 3 of the Biblos Project.

**Figure 8: UK Results**

Influence cited	Cited by (%)
Family	27.4
No response	16.8
Own beliefs	14.5
Other	9.4
Life experience	8.8
School (e.g. collective worship)	6.2
Friends	6.5
RE lessons	5.9
Place of worship	3.5
Other named person	0.9

The percentage of students who provided an invalid response for this question was very high (55.4%). Of those students 80 (19.1%) wrote 'don't know', 35 (8.4%) gave an irrelevant or inappropriate answer, 7 (1.7%) students explicitly stated that they did not understand the question and 110 (26.3%) provided no response. Although the difference in coding categories prohibits easy comparison, it is worth noting that family is mentioned most frequently in both the New Zealand and UK samples (excluding invalid responses).



## Figure 9 Selected Questionnaire Quotations

### What do you think has helped to shape your attitude towards the Bible?

Year 6. Pupil 79	I think my bible teacher and one of my friends has influenced my views of the bible.
Year 9. Pupil 262	The fact that god is there helping me to follow the right path and be a better person.
Year 9. Pupil 305	My family my pastor and church my friends and my own experiences.
Year 9. Pupil 333	I think my friends did. I don't believe in it fully and I don't really apply what is in there to my life but I respect it.
Year 12. Pupil 375	Growing up and living life to my own plan. Realising there's no such thing as 'sinning' only learning. Knowing you make your own fate.
Year 12. Pupil 404	I have formed my own opinions about the bible. I was a regular church-goer when I was younger but I choose not to go now.

### 6 Familial attitude

Students were asked to complete the sentence: 'My family thinks the Bible ...'. Their responses were coded according to the categories presented in Figure 10. It is possible to compare the New Zealand and UK responses, although one should note that for the New Zealand context an additional category of 'is good/positive comment' was created to reflect the number of students who gave a positive response.

## Figure 10

Attitude cited	Cited by (%)	
	NZ	UK
Is good/positive comment	18.4	N/A
I don't know/we don't talk about it	12.4	5.0
Is important/respect it	11.2	32.3
Invalid Response	10.5	10.3
Is OK	9.3	4.7
Is rubbish/negative comment	7.6	5.1
Other	6.7	9.1
Is true/believe in it	6.7	7.9
Is not true/do not believe in it	4.1	2.4
Is not important/irrelevant	3.6	8.8
Different family members think different things	3.1	4.4
Useful as a guide for living/moral teaching	2.6	4.5
They don't live by it	1.4	2.2
Is boring	1.4	1.2
Is interesting	1.0	1.9
Is out of date	0	0.2
Has historical significance	0	0.1

Although re-coding makes direct comparison difficult between New Zealand and the UK, the most frequent response in both samples was positive. In New Zealand this was 'is good/positive response', whereas in the UK the most frequent response was 'is important'.

### **Cross-cultural comparisons**

1 The number of NZ students who claim that they have never heard a Bible story (14.6%) may reflect the fact that students do not receive compulsory RE in New Zealand. It could be argued that this is a form of secular indoctrination or a loss of entitlement. It would have been useful to know how many of these students attend(ed) BiS, to know whether this finding reflects the teaching methods employed or that attendance is not compulsory. Even though the majority of students stated that they had heard a Bible passage, a much lower proportion could accurately name one. This finding may be due to the high proportion of Year 6 students (age 10+) in the NZ sample, who may have experienced difficulty remembering specific passages.

2 In terms of sources of Bible knowledge it is not surprising that the number of students citing RE /BiS is lower in New Zealand than in the UK, as many may not attend and BiS does not exist in high schools, unlike UK RE. The proportion of students citing the media was lower in New Zealand than in the UK. Does this reflect a more secular culture, where religion does not feature in schools? This finding could indicate a tendency to keep religion out of public life all together.

3 The proportion of students able to name five biblical characters was lower in New Zealand than in the UK. This can be explained according to the lower proportion of respondents with a religious affiliation in the New Zealand sample and the fact that RE is not compulsory in New Zealand schools. The frequency of misspelled characters' names may reflect the tendency of BiS teachers to focus on oral teaching. NZ students were more likely to cite Old Testament characters and less likely to cite New Testament characters than those in the UK. Students in the UK were more likely to cite a difficulty with the credibility of miracles specifically rather than credibility in general. These findings may reflect the content of the BiS lessons at the time when the questionnaires were administered. It was also noted during analysis that specific verses, such as John 3:16, appeared very frequently. This reflects the tendency of BiS teachers to ask students to memorise verses.

5 Several examples of confusion over religious and cultural identity emerged during data analysis, including one student who wrote that her religious affiliation was 'South Africa.' 14 NZ students stated that they did not know their religious affiliation. 13/14 attended the same school (18.1% of the total number of respondents from that school). Perhaps this school is in some way eliciting confusion over students' religious identity. One teacher explained that a child could not understand the question because New Zealand RE is Christian. This suggests that students are not required to learn the terminology which separates one religion from another. One head teacher of an NZ elementary school added that many students did not understand the word 'worship'.

6 An unexpected difficulty associated with NZ data was the dual meaning of the term 'Bible'. When coding the responses it was sometimes difficult to tell whether the

pupil was referring to Bible - the book, or Bible - the lesson. For example, Pupil 83 wrote: 'My family thinks the Bible...is not good at all and thinks I shouldn't do it!'

### **Conclusions**

1 How a society handles religion in the public square and how far a democratic society is willing to recognise the sort of religious education referred to in this paper as universal entitlement will impact both on its education system and the values it transmits to its young. These values will not only include beliefs (secular and/or religious), but also a level of 'religious literacy'. The empirical research in this paper examined one example of religious literacy, biblical literacy. How 'religiously literate' are our democracies?

The principle of justice implies fairness. Is religion treated fairly in the public square of western democracies?

2 Cross-cultural comparison is fraught with difficulty but that does not invalidate the attempt. Reference must be made to the full report on this empirical research (Baker, H. *et al*, 2005) and its comparative implications. As we seek to understand other cultures, we may understand our own more acutely.

3 In the UK and New Zealand, Year 6 (age 10+) produces the most positive attitudes towards biblical narrative. It is difficult to be sure whether NZ children have more negative attitudes to the Bible than UK ones because the elementary schools represented in our NZ sample all offered BiS. A range of schools not providing BiS might have produced more negative data, but none of those approached would participate in the research.

4 The NZ school survey shows that more students question the relevance of the Bible than in the UK. This may reflect a more secular society than the UK.

5 The question is raised how far these findings and the whole question of secular indoctrination might apply in North America, both as an issue of concern for faith communities and for those seeking to achieve a just philosophy of education. That the question can be raised constitutes a call for further research.

Terence Copley is Professor of RE at the University of Exeter, south western UK.  
Correspondence address: School of Education & Lifelong Learning, St Luke's Campus, Heavitree Road, Exeter. EX1 2LU  
t.d.copley@exeter.ac.uk

### **Reference**

1 Edward VIII's words at the derelict Dowlais Iron and Steel Works, reported in the *Western Mail* newspaper, 11/18/1936

### **Bibliography**

Baker, H., Copley T., Freathy, R. and Walshe, K. 2005. *Biblos in New Zealand: the fourth report of the Biblos project* Exeter: University of Exeter School of Education  
Carrette, J., and King, R., 2005. *Selling Spirituality: the silent takeover of religion* London: Routledge

- Copley, C., Copley, T., Freathy, R., Lane, S. and Walshe, K. 2004. *On the Side of the Angels, the third report of the Biblos project* Exeter: University of Exeter School of Education
- Copley, T., Priestley, J., Coddington, V., Wadman, D., 1991. *Forms of Assessment in Religious Education: the main report of the FARE project*, Exeter: University of Exeter School of Education
- Copley, T., 2005. *Indoctrination, Education and God: the Struggle for the Mind* London: SPCK
- Copley, T., Freathy, R., Savini H., Walshe, K. 2005. *The Speech of Angels? 98 young people talk about the Bible. An extension to the 3<sup>rd</sup> report of the Biblos project* Exeter: University of Exeter School of Education
- Heelas, P. (ed), 1998. *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* Oxford: Blackwell
- Heelas P. and Woodhead, L., 2005. *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality* Oxford: Blackwell
- Qualification & Curriculum Authority, 2004. *The non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education* London: QCA