



Indoctrination

In the past it was generally accepted that religious instruction was an important part of the life of any school, whatever the religion might be. Children in Britain prayed and sang hymns every day in school assemblies. Whether we were Protestants or Catholics, we learnt that Christianity was right and other religions were wrong.

Believing in God was not enough. In addition to learning about Christ's teaching, we had to believe in the Ten Commandments, the Trinity and (unless we were non-conformists) the Church, with its doctrines about baptism, communion and ordination, its rituals and its respectability.

What we learnt from this instruction was a belief in our own superiority a belief similar to that of the adherents to any other religion:

- what we believe is true, and what people of other religions believe is not true, therefore we are wise, and they are ignorant.
- what we believe is true, and what people of other religions believe is not true, therefore we are civilised, and they are primitive.
- what we believe is true, and what people of other religions believe is not true, therefore we are entitled to dominate them.

This kind of indoctrination leads to anything from prejudice to open hostility and results in conflicts between denominations (Catholics and Protestants, Sunnis and Shias) and racist repression (Aryans against Jews, Israelis against Palestinians, Hindus against Muslims).

We can only avoid such conflicts if we either have no religion or else accept all religions. Those who choose the first option retain the right to question such things as the inquisition, the doctrine of hellfire, the superiority of the male sex, jihads and the wickedness of eating pork. Those who choose the second option find themselves obliged to accept a ban on contraception and the wickedness of eating beef, as well as genital mutilation and the stoning of adulteresses. Tolerance is not always appropriate.

Nowadays religious instruction is usually broad-minded, but there is often damage done even by broadminded religious instruction.

Children may be taught to pray to a superior power to help them to become co-operative, hard-working learners. This implies that they cannot be co-operative and hard-working without such supernatural aid. Teachers assume the role of intermediaries between God and the child, passing on divine instructions: they are therefore never to be disobeyed. Obedience to the word of God, as conveyed by teachers, becomes more important than the individual conscience. The child's natural altruism is drowned in a whirl of irrational imperatives.

In the eyes of religious people, religion is the origin of all morality. Though not all accept the idea of original sin, many adults sincerely believe that unless children are taught the difference between right and wrong they will never understand it. When asked how they themselves know this difference, they can only say that it was taught them by their parents and teachers, who had learnt it from their parents and teachers and so on back into history and pre-history when someone received a message from God. The fact that this history includes the religious massacres during the partition of India, the holocaust, the slave trade, the crusades and the burning of heretics is somehow overlooked.

Communism is derided for its decline into brutal authoritarianism; its original ideal of 'From each according to his ability: to each according to his need,' is forgotten. Religions also tend to forget uncomfortable precepts. Children in Christian schools are not taught to go and sell what they have and give to the poor, even though that is one of Christ's specific instructions.

Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, devoted an hour-long programme on the TV Channel More4 to criticism of faith schools in the UK. He deplored the way they created social divisiveness, and particularly objected to the way many of them deny the theory of evolution. Scientific evidence is not merely undervalued, he believes, it is rejected out of hand.

This is of course regrettable, but the way that religion is used eclectically to support the current state of society is even more damaging. Society is said to have been established according to the will of God, and the will of God is not to be questioned. Children are not allowed moral views of their own. They are taught to give conformity and irrational conscientiousness precedence over their natural concern for the welfare of others.

The status quo, armed with the authority of religion, presents itself as unquestionable. Even when children know exactly what is right they may be obliged to ignore their own consciences and submit to the authority of their elders. The well-documented physical and sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests shows how easily this authority can be misused.