

DOES PUBLIC SCHOOL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION INDOCTRINATE LEARNERS?

Melvin Simuchimba*

UNIVERSITY OF ZAMBIA

Abstract

This article critically examines the concept of indoctrination and the accusation or charge of religious indoctrination which is often levelled against religious education (RE). It uses the philosophical understanding and meaning of the concept (indoctrination) to evaluate two current syllabuses of RE and uses this evaluation to argue that the subject does not necessarily indoctrinate the learner. However, the paper cautions against denominational, confessional or unprofessional tendencies and approaches which may be used by critics to justify accusations of indoctrination against the subject.

Introduction

The dawn of enlightenment in Europe triggered off great changes in all areas of life including education. All traditional forms of knowledge were no longer to be accepted without critical examination. Accordingly, since the 1960s, the teaching of religion as a school curriculum subject called Religious Education (RE) in the Commonwealth has changed from being denominational, confessional and biblical to being multi-faith, pluralistic and educational. In Zambia the subject has changed from being denominational and Church-controlled to being educational and State-controlled. However, RE has become a controversial curriculum subject because of fears, suspicions and accusations within educational circles generally and among some educational philosophers in particular, that it indoctrinates pupils. Some critics have even advocated for the subject's removal from the school curriculum on the same grounds. So what is meant by indoctrination itself? Why is it a matter of serious concern in education? Is indoctrination avoidable if RE is taught in state or public schools? Are the suspicions and accusations of indoctrination against the subject valid? These are some of the issues this article raises and discusses.

In the first part of the article, I will philosophically examine the concept of indoctrination. I will then use the understanding, meaning or criteria of the concept to evaluate the aims and approaches of two current RE syllabuses. Since the Zambian education system in general and RE in particular have largely been influenced by British traditions and philosophies of education, I will use one British syllabus and one Zambian syllabus in my evaluation. This examination

* Melvin Simuchimba is a lecturer in Religious Education in the Department of Languages and Social Sciences Education, University of Zambia.

and evaluation will help me to show that the aims and approaches of modern RE are such that if the syllabuses are professionally designed and handled, the subject cannot necessarily indoctrinate pupils.

The Concept of Indoctrination in Education

Indoctrination as a word and concept is etymologically connected to doctrines. Doctrine itself, according to Cox, is 'confined to theories, especially the beliefs of religious bodies and speculative opinions of political parties' (1982: 101). Accordingly, even the ordinary everyday understanding of indoctrination (from any dictionary) refers to training someone to accept a particular set of political or religious beliefs without considering others. It is partly this common linkage between religious beliefs and indoctrination even in educational circles that brings about accusations of indoctrination against RE.

In order to examine and define indoctrination further and respond to the accusations against RE, I will refer to the criteria on which philosophers of education and other critics base the accusations and fear of indoctrination. These are content of syllabus or lesson, method of teaching it, intention of the teacher and consequences of education (Sealey, 1985; Thiessen, 1993; Astley, 1994).

Beginning with the content criterion, it is often argued that indoctrination takes place in disciplines whose subject matter, as earlier mentioned, is doctrine, beliefs or opinions, with RE ranking first because of the seemingly ambiguous and controversial nature of the religious doctrines and beliefs it deals with. Thus 'the original and proper home of doctrines [and therefore indoctrination] is religion' (Kazepides, 1989: 393; Thiessen, 1993: 23).

Going hand in hand with the foregoing is the methods criterion, since what is taught (the content) should logically go together with how or the way that content is taught (the method). It has been argued, mainly by positivist philosophers of education, that since doctrinal beliefs are uncertain, debatable and either false or not known to be verifiably true, they can only be taught through non-rational and therefore educationally unacceptable methods. Furthermore, according to John Wilson (1992: 18), 'to indoctrinate only has meaning by contrast with other methods of dealing with people [learners], one of which we refer to by the term 'educate''.

What is implied by the foregoing is that it is not possible for the teacher of religious, moral or political doctrines and beliefs to use such educationally acceptable principles and methods as providing relevant evidence and convincing arguments for what he or she has to teach because at best it is non-rational and at worst meaningless. In RE especially, the implication is that the teacher can only evangelise or use his or her influence and authority to persuade pupils to uncritically accept the religious beliefs and values being taught to them. In other words, the teacher engages in the implanting of beliefs so that

they will stick by any non-rational means (Sealey, 1985: 64). However, it can be argued, in response to the content and methods criteria above, that indoctrination is not necessarily limited to disciplines dealing with doctrinal beliefs like RE, but also exists in others like science and mathematics which are often taken to be free of doctrines and beliefs and therefore to be consistent with liberal education. Science, for example, also begins with some central theories or principles (or beliefs) whose evidence is equally ambiguous. As Thiessen argues in defence of religion: 'The theorising in both science and religion must begin with central beliefs which are variously identified as "first order principles", "epistemic primitives" or "doctrines"... neither is entirely subjective. Both search for objective truth.' (1993: 84).

In other words, religion is a rational field and aspect of human life based more on reason than emotion or uncritical obedience. What this means is that religious doctrines and moral beliefs are not as non-rational and unverifiable as they are taken to be by philosophical commentators on education and proponents of a liberal education that excludes any such doctrines and beliefs. Many people are intelligently and deliberately committed to religious beliefs and lead successful lives based on them.

As will be shown later when I analyse the syllabuses, the use of rational teaching methods in the teaching of religious doctrines and beliefs is very possible. Suffice it to mention here that defining indoctrination in terms of rational methods of teaching or initiating children into forms of knowledge including public traditions, as many educational philosophers do, still means that indoctrination is unavoidable even in liberal education. This is because it is practically impossible to give reasons and evidence for all the content or knowledge that we teach or initiate children into. For either the demand for such reasons would go on indefinitely or the pupils would simply not understand nor appreciate all such reasons. So if any meaningful teaching and learning has to be achieved, 'there has to be an element of trust in the teacher's own knowledge' (Cox, 1982: 102).

Coming to the teacher's intention criterion, indoctrination is taking place if the teacher aims at making pupils believe what he or she is teaching and foresees and knows the outcome of his teaching regardless of evidence. The teacher is also guilty of indoctrination if he or she teaches something with the belief that it is in the interest of some religious or social organisation to which he/she belongs, or because it will help to create the kind of social and political order that the teacher would like to see established. This is because in modern liberal education, the teacher's duty is to facilitate the pupil's autonomous growth and rational development. Any other intentions, aims or objectives on his or her part amounts to nothing less than a violation of the pupil's educational rights.

Going by this definition of indoctrination, the teaching of moral and religious beliefs through RE seems to be dealt a severe blow because of the inherent nature of these beliefs to transform a person. As one commentator puts it: 'The difficulty with religious education...is that if the teacher denies having this intention [of indoctrination], it is hard to see what other intention he might have which is compatible with there being such a subject as religious education.' (Sealey, 1985: 65)

However, like the method criterion discussed above, the teacher's intention too is not a sufficient condition of indoctrination. For if indoctrination is both a 'task' and 'achievement' term as Sealey (1985:68) explains, it means that a teacher intending to produce certain outcomes such as religious faith and commitment in pupils may actually fail to achieve those outcomes, while the teacher with liberal education intentions such as critical and questioning abilities may succeed and thus end up indoctrinating his or her pupils into skepticism or agnosticism. As such the intention criterion is weak because it covers even non-intentional effects of teaching and allows the teacher guilty of indoctrination to escape the charge. Actually, apart from having the liberal aim of 'seeking to foster a more critical and autonomous individual' (Hull, 1982: xiii; Thiessen, 1993: 120), modern RE can also avoid the charge and accusation explained above on these same grounds.

Since the teacher's intention criterion is insufficient on its own, another criterion of indoctrination - the consequences of education - is implied in it. Most educational philosophers point to closed-mindedness and the holding of beliefs or views in an uncritical and unshakable manner as the main indication or outcome of an indoctrinatory form of education. Although he presents Christian education as non-indoctrinative, Jeff Astley (1994:49) admits that of the four criteria of indoctrination, the consequences one seems plausible because it is possible to relate the content, methods and intentions of teachers to the outcomes of their teaching. And in what I think is a good combination of the methods, intention and consequences criteria and therefore a similar view to Astley's, Cox (1982: 104 -5) states:

The teacher, by over-enthusiasm, by undue use of authority, or by angry disapproval of questioning, arouses emotions in those he teaches so that they identify with the teaching, feel defensive of it, and experience repulsion, insecurity and even anger when...conflicting ideas are presented.

Like with the foregoing criteria and as already explained, it is held by many educational and philosophical commentators that religion and therefore RE is the best example of disciplines where closed-minded people will

be produced. However, it can be argued that although the consequences criterion is strong and plausible when considered together with the first three criteria, it is actually the weakest when considered on its own. For then it becomes neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition of indoctrination. What this means, for example, is that closed-mindedness cannot result from closed-mindedness! There has to be a cause, in this case some educational content and indoctrinative teaching first before closed-mindedness can occur. In addition, indoctrination does not necessarily result in closed-mindedness and uncritical ability. A person or learners undergoing indoctrination can use their innate critical ability as human beings to become rationally committed to what they have been taught (such as religious faith or a political party manifesto) and thus overcome indoctrination.

Modern or post-modern society is also so liberal, open and sophisticated that the teacher's indoctrinative efforts are likely to be counter-acted and even defeated by out-of school sources of knowledge, information and influence on the pupil. Indeed as Wilkins (1992: 67) argues in defence of RE: 'Even if we knew where young people were at religiously, it would be extremely difficult to tell how much of these outcomes were solely attributable to the religious education received at school.'

Thus the consequences criterion, like the other three criteria of indoctrination discussed above, is not as full proof as it seems to be. Consequently, it can be argued that the charge and accusation of indoctrination against RE and other disciplines dealing with doctrines and beliefs is not valid and justified. If it is still held that RE is indoctrinative, then other subject areas like science are too. For as argued above, it is not possible to avoid indoctrination completely in any kind of education or teaching and learning situation. In other words, if indoctrination is defined in terms of the content, methods, intention and consequences criteria explained above, then there is an element of indoctrination in all subject areas or disciplines and not only in RE. Whether singularly or collectively, these criteria do not constitute an adequate and sufficient condition of indoctrination in any particular discipline, especially RE and other related social science subjects that are regarded as being indoctrinative.

Having analysed and examined indoctrination as a concept and charge or accusation made in education against RE and other subjects dealing with doctrinal beliefs, I now turn to the analysis and evaluation of two current RE syllabuses: the North Yorkshire Agreed Syllabus in England and Syllabus 2046 in Zambia. In the analysis I will use the four criteria of indoctrination discussed above to examine and evaluate the aims and approaches of the syllabuses with the aim of establishing whether they are indoctrinative or not. The results of this evaluation will help me to show that rather than necessarily indoctrinating pupils, modern RE contributes to liberal, rational education like any other curriculum subject.

Evaluation of the North Yorkshire R.E. Syllabus

The North Yorkshire Agreed Syllabus for RE was produced by the North Yorkshire Agreed Syllabus Conference which was composed according to the requirements of the 1988 Education Reform Act for England and Wales. The syllabus was prepared in 1989/90 and introduced in public schools in 1991.

With regard to the content criterion, the syllabus is not indoctrinative because although it is dealing with religious doctrines and beliefs, these are not drawn from one religious tradition but from all the major world religions- Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism, which are represented in Britain. Rather than inculcating faith or commitment to any of these religions, the syllabus aims at helping pupils to 'develop an open, sensitive and reflective approach to understanding humankind's varied religious experience, practices, values and beliefs' (NYDE 1989/90: 15). This broad aim is achieved by properly and carefully combining the pupil's own experience, shared human concerns from life experience and the response of the six religious traditions above and other (non-religious) responses to these experiences. The aim above does not only recognise the fact that an exploration and understanding of religions is an important aspect of any full liberal education but also takes into account the cultural plurality and multi-faith nature of British society. Now these are some, if not the most important qualities of a good, well designed non-indoctrinative RE syllabus.

However, the prominence given to Christianity in both the 1988 Education Act and this syllabus on cultural and historical grounds is, to some extent, a weakness. For although allowance is made for the same systematic treatment and understanding of at least one other religious tradition, it can still be argued that for the sake of fairness, equality and openness in educational practice, religious traditions should be treated as equal belief systems and taught for what they are rather than for some cultural, historical or numerical reasons. The prominence of Christianity or any one religion in the syllabus is therefore unacceptable in a plural country like Britain. Critics of RE would in fact find it easy to base their charge of indoctrination against the subject on this very point.

With regard to the methods of teaching, the syllabus' basic 'developmental approach based on active learning which is open, sensitive, reflective and geared to understanding' (NYDE 1989/90: 18) speaks for itself as far as the promotion of liberal, critical, rational and non-indoctrinative education or teaching is concerned. If the teacher can ensure that the syllabus' other key elements: the key stages, programmes of study, and attainment targets are properly matched in their schemes of work and lessons, the charge of using non-rational, indoctrinatory teaching methods and violating pupils' autonomy and rational development can be completely avoided. Thus for a professionally committed teacher, the North Yorkshire Agreed Syllabus provides scope for a variety of educationally sound methods of teaching covering both the cognitive and affective domains of knowledge.

Coming to the intention of the teacher criterion of indoctrination, I think the aims, content, format and approach(es) of the syllabus do not leave much room for a teacher to pursue personal religious, social or political intentions in his or her teaching. Perhaps the only loop hole is the emphasis on Christianity which, as I explained earlier, can be used by any zealous educational philosopher or critic to accuse the teacher of the syllabus of intending to indoctrinate his or her pupils with Christian beliefs and values at the expense of other religious traditions. Allowance should also be given to the fact that unlike animals, human behaviour can never be fully predictable, so that it remains perfectly possible for a teacher to intend and aim at indoctrinating his or her pupils while appearing not to. This however, would not be easy with a syllabus such as this one.

As far as the consequences criterion is concerned, the syllabus' aims, content, scope of teaching methods and attainment targets all point to good liberal outcomes of such RE. An open, sensitive and reflective understanding of religion including such abilities or skills as consideration of different points of view, critical evaluation, continuous enquiry, open-mindedness and readiness to adapt or revise one's beliefs if necessary (NYDE 1989/90:18), which are far from the indoctrinatory outcomes of closed-mindedness and unshakable holding of beliefs – can be achieved as long as teachers use the syllabus professionally.

The North Yorkshire Agreed Syllabus is thus in line with the phenomenological approach to RE which involves teaching about religion in its plural, non-exclusive sense and as it exists in a given society. Therefore, the syllabus and its approach cannot be said to be a form of religious indoctrination.

Evaluation of the Zambian Syllabus 2046

The Zambian RE Syllabus 2046 was prepared by some members of the Zambia Association of Religious Education Teachers as an alternative to Syllabus 2044 for Senior Secondary School or Grades 10 to 12. It was later accepted by both the Ministry of Education's Curriculum Development Centre and the Examinations Council of Zambia in 1984.

With regard to the content criterion of indoctrination, the syllabus is indoctrinative because its subject matter is, according to Mujdrlica's evaluation, '82 per cent biblical ... it idealises ... Christianity and underates other religions' (1995: 45). From the aim and approach statement, the syllabus only allows for a brief comparison of Christian spiritual and moral values with those of Islam, Hinduism and Zambian traditional beliefs. As argued earlier, there is no philosophical justification for such unequal treatment of religious traditions in RE wherever more than one religion exists such as in Zambia and Britain.

There is also no proper balance between the three important dimensions of modern RE content, the pupils' own experience, the shared human concerns from life experience and the response of the religions to those concerns, as there

is in the previous syllabus. The content of syllabus 2046 is therefore clearly biased towards Christianity and its teaching cannot easily escape the charge of indoctrination or that of aiming at initiating pupils into the Christian faith.

Since content goes with method, the syllabus under discussion is still indoctrinative from the methods criterion point of view. With learning stages which emphasise the recall and description of bible content and the historical, religious and cultural situation behind the bible passages (ZARET, 1988: 1), the syllabus is almost entirely bible-centred and provides little scope for educationally sound methods that can promote pupils' rational exercise and intellectual skills.

A very professionally committed teacher might try to use some rational methods at the value application and comparison stages, but such methods would still be undermined by the close-ended nature of the syllabus aims and objectives, which are: to appreciate, accept and judge by Christian values and principles in every life situation (ZARET, 1988).

With regard to the teacher's intention criterion, any teacher teaching this syllabus can justifiably be accused of intending to indoctrinate his or her pupils with biblical and Christian beliefs and values. The brief comparison of these Christian values with those of other religious traditions in Zambia can be dismissed as a mere smoke screen intended to hide the real intention to evangelise and implant faith and commitment to Christianity in the pupils. The fact that Christianity is the majority religion in the country does not give the teacher any educationally credible reason or excuse for teaching such a biased syllabus. Nor does the official declaration of Zambia as a 'Christian nation' in 1991 help the syllabus and the teacher out. This is because firstly, despite the declaration, the country is still constitutionally multi-faith and democratic. Secondly, both the 1977 (*Educational Reform*) and 1996 (*Educating Our Future*) national education policy documents set out liberal, democratic and pluralistic guidelines for RE in the country. Therefore, if the subject teachers and curriculum specialists who design and implement syllabuses are professional, they should be bound by the constitutional and policy provisions on RE in their work.

Coming to the consequences criterion which is the last and most important, it is abundantly clear that the content and approach of RE Syllabus 2046 which may be summarised as 'Bible text – Christian values – Christian practice – Comparison with other religions' (Mujdica, 1995: 38), can only lead to indoctrinatory outcomes. For at best the pupils will gain a systematic understanding of only the Christian religion and at worst they will come to hold Christian beliefs and values in an unshakable, closed-minded manner. This is unacceptable not only educationally but socially as well in a multi-faith and increasingly plural society like Zambia. It is for this reason, as alluded to above, that the main aim of Zambian RE has been stated (MOE, 1983: 3; ECZ, 1984: 4; Simuchimba, 2000/2001: 16) as follows:

To enable pupils to appreciate spiritual, moral and religious values and behaviour based on four main religious traditions in Zambia, namely: Christianity, Hinduism, Indigenous Zambian Beliefs and Islam.

Similarly, the Zambian state makes its commitment to pluralistic RE very clear by pointing out that one of the most important goals of the education system should be to produce a learner capable of 'being animated by a personally [and autonomously] held set of civic, moral and spiritual values' (MOE, 1996: 5).

This means that pupils need to be fully exposed to the various religious traditions, their beliefs, values or truth-claims and trained through critical openness to evaluate them so that they can autonomously come to hold any life stance of their choice. Confessionalism aimed at converting pupils to a particular religious faith is no longer expected nor accepted in secular public education and schools where most RE now has to be taught. Gibbs therefore puts the matter succinctly when he says: 'Secular education fails if it produces a bigot but not if it produces an atheist (1985: 76)'.

Unlike the previous syllabus, the Zambian Syllabus 2046 is more in line with the old confessional approach to RE which involves teaching religion in its exclusive and denominational sense, with a particular religious tradition (in this case Christianity) enjoying exclusive monopoly or overwhelming dominance over other traditions due to cultural, historical or numerical reasons or strength. The syllabus is thus not fully in line with the educational and pluralistic goals and aims that the Ministry of Education has set out for Zambian RE and can easily lead to indoctrination if not carefully and professionally handled. Syllabus 2046 therefore needs to be drastically revised, taking into account the various weaknesses highlighted above so that it can reflect and cover the subject's educational goals and aims as spelt out in the Ministry of Education's policy documents.

Conclusion

In conclusion, three important points have emerged from this discussion. Firstly, RE does not necessarily indoctrinate pupils as feared by many critics of the subject and philosophical commentators on education. While this may have been the case in the past when society was generally conservative and religion or the Church controlled education, modern RE is totally different. It is liberal, rational, critical, open and therefore educationally respectable like any other subject. This has been clearly shown by the assessment of the North Yorkshire Agreed Syllabus as well as the Zambian Ministry of Education's guidelines on RE. Modern RE's subject matter in form of religious beliefs, moral values and

human experience have the same epistemological and rational status as that of science and other related subjects. It therefore contributes to the intellectual and rational development of the child/pupil like any other subject.

Secondly, however, the concerns raised by some educational philosophers and critics of RE should always be taken into consideration when designing RE syllabuses and learning materials and when planning and executing actual lessons. A poorly prepared syllabus such as the *Zambian Syllabus 2046* will not only distort Modern RE's educational goals and objectives, but it will also provide the subject's critics with more ammunition for continued accusations of indoctrination. *Syllabus 2046* therefore needs to be improved upon so that it can reflect the educational rationale of modern RE in Zambia and the rest of the Commonwealth.

Thirdly, the distinction between liberal, rational education and dogmatic indoctrinative education remains 'one of the most important educational distinctions to make' (Thiessen 1993 18). However, while this distinction is important, there is need 'to make our pupils heirs to a religious or non-religious tradition in such a manner that in due course, they are free to appropriate it, modify it, develop it or reject it' (Mitchell, 1994 : 359). Rationalism and critical enquiry cannot be exercised in a vacuum. There is need for both rationalism and doctrine. Therefore true education should adopt some kind of middle path between the two extremes of conservatism and indoctrination on one hand and liberalism and rationalism on the other.

References

- Astley, J. (1994), *The Philosophy of Christian Religious Education*. Birmingham: Religious Education Press.
- Cox, E. (1982), *Problems and Possibilities for Religious Education*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Examinations Council of Zambia (1984), *Syllabi for Religious Education for School Certificate Grades 10, 11 and 12*. Lusaka: CDC.
- Gibbs, J. (1985), 'A Response to John H. Westerhoff III', in M.C. Felderhof (ed), *Religious Education in a Pluralistic Society*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 75 – 79.
- Hull, J. (1982) (ed), *New Directions in Religious Education*. Lewes, Sussex: The Falmer Press.
- Kazepides, T. (1989), 'Programmatic Definitions in Education: The Case of Indoctrination', *Canadian Journal of Education*. 14(3), 387-96.
- Ministry of Education (1977), *Educational Reform - Proposals and Recommendations*. Lusaka: Government Printer.
- Ministry of Education (1983), *Syllabus for Religious Education in Basic Education, Grades One to Nine*. Lusaka: CDC.
- Ministry of Education (1996), *Educating Our Future: National Policy on*

Education. Lusaka: ZEPH.

- Mitchell, B. (1994), 'Faith and Reason: A False Antithesis?', in J. Astley & L. Francis (eds), *Critical Perspectives on Christian Education*. Leominster: Gracewing, 245 – 359.
- Mujdrlica, J.J. (1995), 'An Evaluation of the Zambian Secondary School RE Syllabuses', Unpublished MEd Dissertation, The University of Birmingham.
- North Yorkshire County Council Department of Education (1989/91), 'North Yorkshire Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education Document', NYCDE.
- Sealey, J. (1985), *Religious Education: Philosophical Perspectives*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Simuchimba, M. (2000/2001), 'Religious Education in Zambia: Syllabuses, Approaches and Contentious Issues', *ZANGO, Journal of Contemporary Issues* 23(13), 13-21.
- Thiessen, E.J.(1993), *Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination and Christian Nature*. Leominster: Gracewing.
- Wilkins, R. (1992), 'Identify the Educators', in B. Watson (ed.), *Priorities in Religious Education: A Model for the 1990s and Beyond*, London: The FalmerPress, 65 – 80.
- Wilson, J. (1992), 'First Steps in Religious Education,' in B. Watson (ed), *Priorities in Religious Education: A Model for the 1990s and Beyond*. London: The Falmer Press, 10 – 25.
- Zambia Association of Religious Education Teachers (1988), *Brief Outline of Syllabus 2046: Grades 10, 11, & 12*. Ndola: Mission Press.

ZANGO

Zambian Journal of Contemporary Issues

Volume 24 Number 14 (2002/2003)



The University of Zambia

**UNZA Press
P.O. Box 32379
Lusaka 10101
Zambia**