

Let's stop brainwashing children

Johann Hari, 8 May 2009

Let us now put our hands together and pray. O God, we gather here today to ask you to free our schoolchildren from being forced to go through this charade every day. As you know, O Lord, because You see all, British law requires every schoolchild to participate in "an act of collective worship" every 24 hours. Irrespective of what the child thinks or believes, they are shepherded into a hall, silenced, and forced to pray - or pretend to.

If they refuse to bow their heads to You, they are punished. This happened to me, because I protested that there is no evidence whatsoever that You exist, and plenty of proof that shows the texts describing You are filled with falsehoods. When I pointed this out, I was told to stop being "blasphemous" and threatened with detention. "Shut up and pray," a teacher told me on one occasion. Are you proud, O Lord?

Forcing children to take part in religious worship every day is a law worthy of a theocracy, not a liberal democracy where 70 per cent of adults never attend a religious ceremony. That's why the Association of Teachers and Lecturers - one of the teachers' unions - has recently moved to ask the Government to stop forcing its members to take part in this practice.

Why does this anachronism persist in this blessedly irreligious country? For all their whining that they are "persecuted", the religious minority in Britain are in fact accorded remarkable privileges. They are given a bench-full of unelected positions in the legislature, protection from criticism in the law, and vast amounts of public money to indoctrinate children into their belief systems in every school in the land.

I can understand why the unelected, faltering religious institutions cling to this law so tightly. When it comes to "faith", if you don't get people young, you probably won't ever get them. Very few people are, as adults, persuaded of the idea that (say) a Messiah was born to a virgin and managed to bend the laws of physics, or that we should revere a man who at the age of 53 had sex with a nine-year-old girl. You can usually only persuade people of this when they are very young - a time when their critical and rational faculties have not yet been developed - and hope it becomes a rock in their psychological make-up they dare not pull out.

But why do the rest of us allow this fervent 5 per cent of the population to force the rest of our kids to follow their superstitions? Parents can withdraw their children if they choose - but that often means separating the child in an embarrassing way from her friends and exposing them to criticisms from the school, so only 1 per cent do it. Most don't even know it is an option.

More importantly still, why is worship forced on 99 per cent of children without their own consent or even asking what they think? As the author Richard Dawkins has pointed out many times, there are no "Christian children" or "Muslim children". I was classed as "Christian" because my mother is vaguely culturally Christian, although at every opportunity I protested that I didn't believe any of it. Children are not born with these beliefs, as they are born with a particular pigmentation or height or eye colour. Indeed, if you watch children being taught about religion, you will see most of them instinctively laugh and ask perfectly sensible sceptical questions that are swatted away - or punished - by religious instructors.

I am genuinely surprised that no moderate religious people have, to my knowledge, joined the campaign to stop this compelled prayer. What pleasure or pride can you

possibly feel in knowing that children are compelled to worship your God? Why are you silent?

The prayer-enforcers offer a few arguments in their defence. At first, they claim it instils "moral values" in children. The scientist Gregory S Paul produced a detailed study in 2005 to find out if rates of murder and rape went up as levels of religion went down. He found the exact opposite. On detailed international comparisons, the more religious a country is, the more likely you are to be stabbed or raped there. There isn't necessarily a causal relationship - but it blasts a bloody hole in this claim.

Of course, if you actually followed the morality explicitly commanded by the Bible, Torah and Koran, you would kill adulterers, gay people, apostates, and disobedient children and be sent to prison. Thankfully, the vast majority of religious believers long since decided to disregard much of "God's word", because it is manifestly appalling, and read it metaphorically. But you have to strip away an awful lot of the texts as metaphor before you get to a few bland lessons about being nice to each other. Can't we get the lessons about niceness from somewhere else, without the bogus metaphysics and endless injunctions to kill our friends?

Once the morality defence dissolves, the religious switch tack, and claim that children indoctrinated into religion perform better academically. As "proof", they point to the fact that faith schools perform somewhat better on league tables. It's true - but look a little deeper.

There have been two detailed studies of this, by the conservative think tank Civitas, and the Welsh Assembly. They found faith schools get better results for one simple reason: they use selection to cream off highly motivated children of the wealthy and weed out difficult, poor or unmotivated students who would require more work. Once you take into account their "better" intakes, faith schools actually underperform academically by 5 per cent (and that's before you factor in all the other problems they cause).

I am absolutely not saying that schools should teach children to be atheists. No. Schools should take no position on religion. They should be neutral, and equip children with the thinking skills - asking for evidence, and knowing how to analyse it rationally - that will enable them to make up their own minds, when they wish, beyond the school gates. How can a religious person object to that, without admitting that open-minded, evidence-seeking adults would see through their claims in a second?

And so, O Lord, I ask you - and the British Government - to set our children free, at last, from being forced to worship You. Amen - and hallelujah.

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