Thesis Title: Philosophical and Theological Reflection on the Bible as a Significant Body of Non-sectarian Literature in Religious Education.

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Philosophical and Theological Reflection on the Bible as a Significant Body of Non-sectarian Literature in Religious Education.

Introduction

Can Religion be Taught Rather than Preached?

The essence of my Thesis is “Religious Education - Can Religion be Taught rather than Indoctrinated”? What aspects of religion can be taught and learned as opposed to inculcated and indoctrinated? As this implies, teaching religion may carry with it an intentional, or incidental, result of inculcating a particular set of values, beliefs or behaviour: My aim is firstly to illustrate the threats posed by exclusive teaching to an equitable educational policy and secondly to show how this can be avoided by presenting a wide and inclusive view of religion in all its variations and objectives and allowing unrestricted discussion of these alternatives. By teaching “about” religion, its morality, spirituality and denominations, in an open and general way the student can experience the notion of a long standing and world-wide sense of a ‘supreme being’, and from receiving teaching about religions he or she can experience the variety of ways of acknowledging or seeking that deity or power. Having learned about the nature of religion and the ways in which it is experienced, the student can be equipped for religious discussion, open mindedness and an understanding of other points of view with regard to religious matters, which is very important in a multi-cultural society like Australia. This approach is referred to as General Religious Education (GRE), Religious Studies or Comparative Religion (as eximinnable subjects). The difficulties to which I allude mainly arise when considering what is known as Special Religious Education (SRE) which concentrates on one Religious Denomination or Persuasion, often to the purposeful exclusion, and even denigration, of others. Difficulties also arise in this area when historical and scientific accuracy are attributed to texts which, according to reliable scholarly opinion, are clearly mythological, legendary or author generated.

The conceptual framework, within which the central questions about religious education to be addressed in this thesis arise, depends upon an epistemological comprehension of the distinction between education and indoctrination and on an in-depth discussion of the Doctrine of Inerrancy and literalist interpretation of the sacred texts. I intend to
show by evidential argument that the classification of the Biblical Texts in their entirety as ‘inerrant’ appears unsustainable in the light of modern science and Biblical Scholarship. I will trace the history and rise of Inerrancy and show that it has not always or universally been the view of the Christian Church. This thesis is not meant to deprecate the Christian Bible in any way: the Bible is a world best seller and its messages are timeless and valuable. However the Bible was written by human authors who were subject to human errors and to the limitations in knowledge of their times, both scientific and historical. As well as this they were susceptible to myth, magic, legend and cultural influences which surrounded them and for which no one can blame them. I am not questioning their inspiration but I am certainly questioning their alleged absolute inerrancy.

The problems in religious education, as I see it, revolve around the two main areas of Indoctrination and Inerrancy. In the first part of my thesis I shall argue that a significant body of literature exists which shows that there is a clear distinction between education and indoctrination and that the philosophical integrity of pedagogic praxis rests on respecting the boundaries between them. This being so, my initial goal will be to explore critically what is being said in the scholarly and philosophical literature about indoctrination and then to tease out its specific relevance for religious education. An insistence that the Biblical texts are without error of any kind, a doctrine known as Inerrancy, is, in the opinion of many renowned scholars, totally unsustainable in the light of modern science and scholarly study. For example James Orr held a high view of Scripture but nevertheless rejected Inerrancy as - the most suicidal position for any defender of revelation to take because unless we can demonstrate inerrancy of the biblical record down even to its minutest details, the whole edifice of belief in revealed religion falls to the ground (ORR, J. (1909) Revelation and Inspiration, London, Duckworth, p. 217).

The inculcatory and exclusive teaching of this doctrine of inerrancy therefore must itself amount to Indoctrination, as the evidence indicates that the doctrine is questionable. This problem has re-emerged more recently in a new guise in the context of the debate between Conservatives and Liberals over the nature of Scripture and a corollary, what should and should not be taught in our schools. It could have been thought that in the light of modern scientific knowledge and biblical scholarship the insistence on Inerrancy would have faded, but it hasn’t. Indeed it has re-emerged in a new tradition called Fundamentalism, re-packaged as if it was a new thing; new but allegedly founded upon
an invented historical orthodoxy. This new tradition seats these ideas in a political and ideological guise couched in vested interests and becomes an ideological position deeply entrenched in economic, political and theological interests. A huge publicity and publishing centre has been established in Grand Rapids, Michigan from which books pour out trumpeting the Evangelical message, especially from the evangelical publishing houses of Eerdmans and Zondervan. A large part of the Conservative Evangelical platform is evangelism and to aid the world-wide broadcasting of their message every medium, including early morning television and electronic recording methods, has been, and is being, used comprehensively.

Within the context of religious education there is considerable debate among teachers and the religious community about what ought and ought not to be taught in schools and therefore what ought and ought not to be included in religious education. It seems clear, from evidence to be produced in this thesis, that some of the material that is either produced by, or espoused by, certain exclusive Christian groups falls within the category that I will call Indoctrination and is thus unsuitable. I shall begin by defining and discussing Indoctrination, within the current context of the debate, arguing towards what I believe to be the most defensible position on the topic. I intend to show that certain of the fundamentalist teaching and evangelical interpretations should be classed as indoctrination and therefore should not be taught in that way. Despite a so-called Educational Policy, represented by the Rawlinson Report of 1981 and the Education Act of 1990, religious teachers who exclusively espouse Inerrancy and other debatable corollaries are still freely teaching their doctrines to our schoolchildren without, in some cases, any balancing discussion of alternatives.

In the light of this analysis I shall argue that, depending upon what is meant by a religious belief, the teaching of some religious beliefs amounts to indoctrination as opposed to education. I also argue that this realisation should be deeply disturbing for those who are concerned that schooling should open rather than close the minds of the children and young adults we teach. We shall see, however, that the determination of what counts as indoctrination is extremely complex and depends on many subtle factors of analysis and not just one. It is simply naïve, for example, to assume that all religious beliefs have the same logical status and thus represent a single, undifferentiated class of logically homogeneous religious claims. The religious belief that "Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem" for instance, stands as a very different sort of claim from "Jesus is the Son of God", and are the two claims similarly amenable
to the assignment of a truth value? These are the sort of issues that begin to emerge.

I want, amongst other things, to suggest that there is a tradition of Biblical Inerrancy in the Christian Church which could lead to an interpretation or exegesis of an exclusive kind and which could well count as indoctrination. I will attempt to show that Inerrancy, at least in its literalist and absolute forms, is unsustainable in the light of modern biblical scholarship and scientific advancement and further that it is damaging to attempts at unbiased biblical interpretation. I am not concerned so much with small inconsistencies, such as whether Jesus ‘sat’ (Matthew 5:1) or ‘stood’ (Luke 6:17) to deliver the sermon on the mount, or the conflicting numbers between Samuel/Kings and Chronicles when relating their versions of the same story. If I did so, some would seize on this and say that it was a copying error and that the original documents would have been consistent. However, even small inconsistencies are vital to the Absolute Inerrantists or Literalists such as E.J. Young, who points out - If the evangelists were guilty of trifling errors and evidences of carelessness in so-called minor matters, we cannot escape the conclusion that they might have been just as careless in more important things, (YOUNG, E. J. (1963) Thy Word is Truth, London, The Banner of Truth Trust., p.131).

Once the semantic issues concerning different kinds of beliefs are sorted out in regard to indoctrination, I shall then consider the extent to which the ways one might teach any belief, independently of its epistemic status as a putative truth capable in principle of being known, will make a difference as to whether the teaching done constitutes an act of indoctrination or not. If scholarly dispute exists on a topic, for example, and the entirety of reading material presented to the learner all says the same thing, because no reference is presented to any opposing views it is clear that the method of teaching has thereby corrupted the act of learning. In this and other such cases we shall see that certain methods of teaching may in themselves be indoctrinatory. Similarly, as White and others have argued, the act of teaching may also be reduced to a form of indoctrination depending upon the intention of the teacher. If the intended goal of teaching is to inculcate uncritically a particular set of beliefs, then not only will the method of the teaching be constructed in biased ways, but so will the authoritative imposition of the teacher’s will upon the validity and value of what is taught. This, I contend, is what is happening in the case of some overzealous religion presenters.

Placing the definition and discussion of Indoctrination first in the thesis will equip us to
detect signs of it in the various presentations and expressed beliefs encountered in our investigation of the two main theologies in the church today, namely Evangelicalism and Liberalism. Detailed classification and definitions of Inerrancy follow in later chapters but for now it must be realized that the group referred to as Evangelicals embraces a range of beliefs from what might be called moderate to what is commonly referred to as fundamentalist. Moderate Evangelicals still adhere to a belief in Inerrancy but may limit it to matters of salvation, eternal life and the Christian lifestyle.

Some Evangelicals are wary of using the actual word “Inerrant”, as was James Orr quoted above: he did however view the Scriptures as *Infallible* as regards:

- The knowledge of the will of God for our salvation in Jesus Christ
- Instruction in the way of Holiness
- The hope of Eternal Life


Fundamentalists on the other hand believe Inerrancy to mean total freedom from error in all the biblical texts no matter to what they refer. The terms neo-evangelical and conservative evangelical may be used to describe those groups who are wary of adopting total inerrancy and those who are not, respectively.

In the second part of the thesis I shall argue that some of the pedagogies of fundamentalism are especially vulnerable to the charge of indoctrination. This is particularly so where fundamentalism is engaged in the literalist reading of any sacred text such that the words of the Bible are not only to be construed literally but are also to be construed as incorrigible claims to truth. In essence this dualist disposition to literal meaning and literal truth is what I shall refer to as ‘strong or absolute Inerrancy’ as opposed to Literality which is concerned only with Verbal Inerrancy. Since fundamentalists firmly believe the Bible to be the direct Word of God then God’s attributes of truth and omniscience are attributed to its texts and an exclusive defence of its rectitude follows.

A basic tenet of Fundamentalism is Total, Absolute or Strong Inerrancy, which is the Doctrine claiming that the Bible is free from error in all matters it presents, and this leads to misinterpretation, exclusivism and bitter and bellicose polemics. This simple view of Inerrancy will suffice for now but a more detailed break-down is provided later. It is the most important reason for Fundamentalist exclusivism and must therefore be
fully discussed. So important is Inerrancy in formulating Fundamentalist doctrine and
dogma that I have devoted much time to explaining, by historical, cultural and political
background investigation, what this exclusive adamancy is, how it is defined and how it
came about.

My concern within the thesis is to uphold the integrity of religious education! It is my
intention to show that Fundamentalist teaching, based upon the presumption of
absolute inerrancy, does not fit the criteria of an acceptable educational format and
indeed mostly amounts to Indoctrination. It is important to prevent religious writings
from being forced or seduced into one set of dogmas or another and thus being stifled
in their interpretation, and in the implementation of their precepts for those wanting to
base their lives religiously on them.

All persons who stand up to teach Religious Education to other people have
themselves been taught and the slants or areas of emphasis in the teaching they
received are embedded in them. Can those persons then teach an interpretation of
religion without allowing these germene influences to emerge in their presentations to
their students? If not, then there is a real danger of indoctrination. Craig Blessing, a
Fundamentalist Dispensationalist, put it this way - The problem is the failure to
recognize that all theological thought, including one’s own, is historically conditioned by
the tradition to which that theologian belongs, as well as personal and cultural factors
such as education and experience. These factors condition an interpreter to think in a
certain way (Dispensationalism: The Search for a Definition, 29-30). The stronger and
more dogmatic the teacher’s own formation, the more likely this is to emerge when he
or she teaches others. Is this prior instruction the foundation for indoctrination and is it
a peculiar feature of religion or is it to be found elsewhere? As Ulrich Zwingli said in
1522 - If we come to the Bible with our own opinions and interpretation and seek to
force it into that mould, we will not hear its message.

The main obstacle to achieving impartiality of interpretation in Christian religious
studies seems to me to be the usage of the Bible and its writings to persuade people to
various beliefs and attitudes regarding God and the practice of religion in general.
This difficulty is exacerbated by the severity of some denominational dogma, such as
transubstantiation or predestination, which may have been present also in the person’s
place of training. In addition to some extreme forms of interpretation there are some
restrictive man-made lifestyle demands which make the adherence to religion very
demanding and unpleasant; I refer to those sects which forbid amusements such as
dancing and cinema, insist on dress codes and some whose dietary requirements
exclude coffee and alcohol. These isolating and exclusive stances, to which the
adherents attach great and particular importance, stand in the way of any progress
towards church unity and, together with other exclusive beliefs, such as Inerrancy, lead
to much acrimonious and damaging argument featuring some very un-Christian
statements and behaviour. The polemical process is also advanced by various groups
taking verses of the Bible out of context and using them to support their views,
conveniently ignoring any verses to the contrary (Primitive Scriptural Proof). But much
worse still than inaccurate details is the unforgivable practice of many polemicists,
including Harold Lindsell, of quoting only those sources which agree with their own
viewpoint and conveniently omitting those which don’t. For example in Lindsell’s
passage about heretical groups on page 42 of his book The Battle for the Bible, I point
out that he conveniently leaves out the case of Marcion (c.140AD) who was so
incensed with the fallibility of the Old Testament and much of the New that he proposed
his own Canon of Scripture consisting of Luke’s Gospel, minus the first 3 chapters, and
10 of the Letters of Saint Paul. These practices prevent Religious Education from
enjoying the same even-handed impartiality which is the due of any responsible
education system or item.

We will look at some traditions of interpretation which have been applied to the Bible,
or at least two primary ones, which would give us sufficient contrast to enable us to
understand how some of our previous discussion would apply, in the educational
context. Some of these interpretations do not respect the expectations placed on
education in the way of impartiality, freedom and even-handedness and nor do they do
justice to the integrity of the biblical text itself from a scholarly point of view. In order to
determine whether certain presentations and interpretations of the Bible come under
the classification of indoctrination and are thus unsuitable, we must first examine the
current discussion about Indoctrination to see where the balance lies and then look
historically at the development of the two quite different Christian traditions and
eventually perceive which of these, or which parts of these, fits better into the mould of
what education should be. John Perry said of this dispute between Conservatives and
Liberals - *Given that one side in this debate doubts the other’s orthodoxy, and the
other side in the debate doub’s the first’s faithfulness to scholarship, the impasse
Philosophy Shaped the Evangelical View of Scripture. Quodlibet, Journal, 3
I would like to offer three quotations from notable religious writers which set the scene for some of the things I intend to say and point out. I will refer to all of these points in the thesis.

Bishop Spong of New Jersey says that the biblical scholarship of the last 200 years has simply not been made available to the man and woman in the pew. The absurd biblical claims made by television preachers and the like have manipulated audiences without being called to account in the name of truth (SPONG, J. S. (1991) Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism, San Francisco HarperCollins Publishers, : p.10).

The Theologian Charles Augustus Briggs in 1881 in his bitter dispute with B.B. Warfield over Inerrancy said - if anyone can find any comfort in verbal inspiration and the inerrancy of the Scriptures, we have no desire to disturb him, provided he holds these errors as private opinions and does not seek to impose them on others. (C.A. Briggs The Right, Duty and Limits of Biblical Criticism, Presbyterian Review (July 1881): p.551 from ROGERS, J. B. & MCKIM, D. K. (1979) The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible, San Francisco, Harper & Row, Publishers p.351).

Inerrancy must not be confused with Inspiration because, as Everett Harrison remarks - No view of scripture can indefinitely be sustained if it runs counter to the facts. That the Bible claims inspiration is patent. The problem is to define the nature of that inspiration in the light of the phenomena contained therein (HARRISON, Everett, (1958) Revelation and the Bible, ed. Carl F.H. Henry, Philadelphia; Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., p.239).

Many proponents of Inerrancy have retreated to naming the Autographa (the original documents) only as inerrant, but of course this is a difficulty since none of them are still extant. In any case the processes of passing on an oral tradition, converting it to a written medium, sometimes translating it into another language, producing a final text, copying and preserving that text, adding exegetical comments at any of these stages along the way, and running into one another and forming one total complex of tradition makes the identification of what or where the original document was, from which inerrancy can be said to have begun, difficult.

Is there a way of presenting religion in such a way as to escape the label of indoctrination? Michael Hand maintains - Given that religious beliefs are not known to be true and therefore cannot be rationally demonstrated, how can they be imparted
without by-passing reason? There appear to be only two ways of imparting a belief -
by proving it to the person or by indoctrinating them. Since no religious belief is known
categorically to be true then the only option is indoctrination – (HAND, M. (2002)
Religious Upbringing Reconsidered. Journal of Philosophy of Education Society of
Great Britain, 36, 545-557). A good example is the deep-seated Roman Catholic belief
in Transubstantiation, that is that at the words of consecration the bread and wine on
the altar actually become the flesh and blood of Christ; there is no proof whatsoever
that this does or does not occur but all deep-rooted Catholics apparently believe in it.

Seemingly then, the adamant and exclusive teaching of religious beliefs is not the way
to go. At present some groups are interpreting the Bible in an exclusive way and
presenting their viewpoint as the only one and, in some cases, ignoring, denying or
denigrating other possible expositions. How exactly could one utilise the Bible in a
way which reflects its capacity to say something to people who are not fundamentalists
or fanatical followers of some other tradition or religion and does not prevent them from
seeing its value as literature. I will investigate what conditions should be placed on the
teaching of anything in the educational context such that what is taught is not regarded
as indoctrination in the negative sense. It should not be authoritarian, doctrinal or
simply illogical in a way which does not provide evidence or an opportunity for
argument and in fact does not encourage it. It should not represent a literature which is
essentially based on authority which states this is the truth, this is how it is, and even to
ask a question would, at least in some religious traditions, be regarded as a sin.

The Bible should be looked at in a more reflective and scholarly fashion rather than
treating it as a given scientific truth or textbook of some kind, often rendered with
emotional disregard for the facts; as Augustine said on this matter - *The Bible was not
a textbook of science or an academic tract – God desired us to become Christians, not
astronomers* (Proceedings with Felix the Manichee, 1, 10, cited in Polman, p.59)
(Rogers & McKim; p.26). The truth in the Bible however can be metaphorical, akin to
the apocryphal *Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan where we clearly know that it is not
meant to be an historical rendering of a state of affairs, but nevertheless the story can
provide moral education and give a deeper understanding of the human psyche and
human relationships. However it must be acknowledged that a story is just that, not to
be adamantly and polemically put forward as historical truth as the Inerrantists do. We
must penetrate the shield around the scriptures created by faith, sanctification and
religiosity if we are to take an honest look at the Biblical texts. What is important about
what I am doing is that educators and policy makers have a responsibility to be mindful that certain materials and teachings fall within the definition of indoctrination and are therefore misguided in educational terms and should not be included. Strong material which is peculiar to a specific religious group should only be offered by that denomination itself outside of a public educational system, and then only to those who knowingly and willingly submit themselves to such teaching, not to immature and impressionable young minds in schools.

To consolidate my position I am arguing in this thesis that:

- The unopposed and exclusive teaching of the Doctrine of Inerrancy should not be accepted, as modern biblical scholarship and scientific knowledge clearly show it to be misguided and unsustainable.
- Any form of indoctrinational teaching should not be included in the school curriculum as it is a betrayal of a good and equitable educational policy.
- Indoctrination thrives on exclusivity.
- In as much as the exclusive teaching of the doctrine of inerrancy is a form of indoctrination, it, and the exclusive modality of religious belief it sustains, should be disallowed, or, at the very least, only be presented in a debating situation.

My thesis will give evidential proofs of the unsustainability of strong inerrancy and suggest how religion can be taught in a less confrontational and exclusive way and how a new non-polemical curriculum might look. I think it is important that our school children should benefit from the morality, ethics and spirituality offered by religion without the dogma, ritual and man-made regulations which many denominations put forward as essential.