

## Religious Education, brainwashing and faith

In the ABC Q&A program of 18th July on religion, a viewer sent in the following question:

*Whatever you believe, faith is, by definition, not fact. Yet religion is taught to young children, who can't possibly understand what it means, as fact. How can you justify brainwashing children?*

This question raises a number of interesting points:

What is brainwashing?

Is teaching religion brainwashing?

Is it true to say that “faith is, by definition, not fact”?

### What is brainwashing?

Let's explore some definitions of brainwashing to see how this term might apply.

*(1) a forcible indoctrination to induce someone to give up basic political, social, or religious beliefs and attitudes and to accept contrasting regimented ideas (Websters)*

In this definition, the emphasis is on changing from one set of beliefs or attitudes to another through indoctrination (to permeate with a usually partisan or sectarian opinion, point of view, or principle). Teaching religious or secular views could equally fit this definition if the effect is to forcibly indoctrinate or change an existing disposition.

In relation to Special Religious Education (SRE) in public schools, all religions, and Christian denominations in particular, need to be sure that their teachers are faithfully presenting their religion without coercion. Christians believe that God's word has its own power to change and, together with the Holy Spirit, can lead people to God. There is no need, or authority, to *forcibly indoctrinate*. Such efforts can lead to false conversions followed rejection which make communication of the Gospel even more difficult. It is always very hard to talk about religion to a person who says “I tried it and it didn't work.”

*(2) to make someone believe something by repeatedly telling them that it is true and preventing any other information from reaching them (Cambridge)*

*Here the emphasis is both on repeated telling and the denial of access to alternatives. Closed religious communities are often accused of this form of brainwashing. But there are other closed communities who expose a philosophy or ideology that separates them from the world and denies access to other perspectives. Religion has no monopoly on such arrangements.*

*In fact the denial of access to alternatives is becoming an issue within the Australian curriculum where the marginalisation of religion is evident. In relation to both SRE and GRE (General Religious Education), it has been argued (see recent TCFNews articles on Does God make a difference) that the curriculum is approaching secular indoctrination and there is a greater need than ever before for religious education. The denial of access to religious knowledge and understanding through the curriculum may well lead to the claim of indoctrination and brainwashing with secular perspectives.*

*Similarly, religious education can be brainwashing if it is doctrinally narrow aiming to keep children from knowing about alternatives. This is always a worry when some religious sects set up schools and why the state requires them to teach the state curriculum to ensure a broader perspective. But when*

***do students in state schools get to hear alternatives to the secular dominated state curriculum?***

*(3) pressurise (someone) into adopting radically different beliefs by using systematic and often forcible means (Oxford)*

This definition emphasises process: pressurise - systematic - forcible. This set of actions can be interpreted as brainwashing and can apply to any form of teaching. They are reminders to teachers of religion to let God do his work through the Holy Spirit and that their task is to be faithful in presenting the Gospel and not to place repeated and forceful emotional pressure on students to commit to Christianity. It is often the latter that leads to cries of indoctrination and brainwashing and not the systematic teaching of religion.

**Is teaching religion brainwashing?**

Teaching ABOUT religion is not brainwashing. Teaching a religion without access to alternatives could be brainwashing. Refusing to acknowledge any alternative and using threats, coercion and emotional manipulation to change a person is most assuredly an attempt to brainwash. But these matters do not apply only to teaching religion. Newspaper opinion writers often are accused of manipulative writing aimed at brainwashing the readers. Political parties do the same and what about advertising. Perhaps brainwashing is part of a greater social problem of bullying.

Teaching about religion is not brainwashing but instruction of a child in a religion could be depending on how it is taught and what alternatives are acknowledged. SRE teachers have a huge responsibility to get this right. Threats, coercion and emotional manipulation have no place as they fail to reflect the loving character of God.

**Is it true to say that “faith is, by definition, not fact”?**

Some dictionaries have up to five definitions of faith. In relation to religion two seem relevant. Faith involves trust in someone or some thing and that trust may not entirely involve (scientific) proof. For Christians faith is trusting God to fulfil his promises. But it is not a blind faith. It involves evidence both scientific and historical, reason and recognition of previous promises fulfilled.

God is evident in creation and his exploits throughout history are recorded and available for study. They reveal a God who honours his promises even at great cost to himself. Our faith is not blind and we trust God to continue to fulfil his promises in the future even if we can not scientifically prove that he will. So we are a people of faith.

Our religion is largely based on facts and those facts should be taught to students so that they can make up their own minds about whether they will put their trust in God. Without this religious knowledge students are secularly indoctrinated and taught that only non religious world views are relevant. Is this brainwashing?

The question from the Q&A viewer is a good example of the pervading confusion in our community about religion and teaching about religion. He would no doubt support the continuing secular indoctrination of students in schools and feel no sense of hypocrisy in calling religious teaching brainwashing. Brainwashing can exist in many forms and come from people of many different perspectives. It is the job of Christians to oppose it, especially when seen in their religion.

John Gore