

What's Distinctive about the *Reality Bites* Approach to Schools Work?

Challenging Secular Perspectives

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Introduction

Secularists have grown accustomed to their position being regarded as the *neutral* one, so that it is only other ('religious') positions that must be placed under the critical spotlight. This is not true to the reality of the situation (see *Developing a Strategic Response to Secular Hostility*) and it certainly ought not to be acceptable in a pluralist society. Our approach is to treat secularism for what it is – as a set of *other* (or *alternative*) faith positions. We can then scrutinize secularist worldviews in the same way that we ought to scrutinize all worldviews – drawing out their implications and exposing any hidden tensions. This works far better than traditional religious approaches that cannot engage effectively with the secular worldviews that shape children's lives today.

Consider these reports of three occasions when we have challenged secular perspectives:

Case Study One: children as sexual commodities

When I (Mark Roques) worked at Prior Park College in Bath I delivered a lecture to the entire Sixth Form on the topic of sexual slavery. I began by explaining how consumerism answers five worldview questions – Where am I? Who am I? What's Wrong? What's the Solution? What happens to me when I die? I focused upon the 'commodification of life' and told the students about the remarkable work of Catholic priest Shay Cullen who rescues children from sexual slavery in the Philippines by pretending to be a 'John' and secretly filming conversations in underground brothels. At least two or three boys were very moved by this and were on the point of crying. They sensed the horror of a worldview that treats poor, vulnerable children with such callous disregard. My analysis was using searching questions to expose the clear connection between consumerism and the brutal commodification of vulnerable children. I was exploring some unpleasant implications of a secular worldview that dominates Western societies today.

At the end of the lecture I made a few brief comments about the differences between a consumerist and a Christian worldview. I explained that consumerism often disciplines us to love things and to use people whereas the Christian faith urges us to love people and to use things. Both the students and the (secular) teachers were very appreciative of the lecture. There was no embarrassment, no 'cringe factor'.

Case Study Two: the horrors of Nazism

I (Mark Roques) delivered a lecture on the topic of Nazism to the whole Sixth Form. I began by showing them a Nazi propaganda film, which presented a Social Darwinist perspective on euthanasia. The message was bold and uncompromising. We must eliminate the weak and the unfit. Weak people are *lebensunwertesleben* ('life unworthy of life'). Again I was engaging in a worldview critique to expose the clear link between the Nazi belief that we are all animals to the very unpleasant consequences of holding that belief (murder of innocent people). At the very end of the lecture I made a few brief comments about the profound difference between a Nazi and a Christian worldview. Again there was a great deal of appreciation for the lecture. One of the atheist teachers was visibly shaken and said to me afterwards that he had never really understood the connection between biological reductionism and the horrors of Nazism. There was nothing cringe-worthy about such a presentation.

Case Study Three: Dawkins Delusions

This year (2007) we led a session on the materialist philosophy of Richard Dawkins. Through examples drawn from his own writings we showed how Dawkins' philosophical materialism leads logically to the dissolution of morality, science and the existence of 'distinct selves' who own their own 'rational' thoughts. We noted that sensitive, thoughtful atheists, like Susan Blackmore, are already deconstructing their own position along these lines. A group of atheist students interacted with us in vigorous, but civil discussion. At the end one of them came up to us and said the evening had been 'fantastic'. The Christians present were excited and encouraged to see that a Christian perspective could be presented to atheists effectively and without embarrassment.

In our presentations we always make it clear that we are not suggesting that atheists cannot be highly moral, nor that secular worldviews must inevitably lead to unpalatable consequences. Atheists may have high moral standards, just as professing Christians may fall far short of them. If people - whether atheist or religious - have high moral aspirations, then we should hold them to those aspirations and explore with them the implications for the issues at hand. If they appear to have no moral framework then we should also help them explore the implications of that absence. In other words, if religious believers are expected to answer hard questions, then atheists must be ready to do so as well. The mantra of 'faith (religion) vs reason (atheism)' is hard to defend when we critique secularism in powerful and creative ways.

Conclusion

Traditional ways of doing School's Work rarely subject secular perspectives to radical challenge. This is a great shame. Too often Christians do not engage with the unseen and unspoken doctrines of secular worldviews. We believe that effective engagement with secularism must include such critiques.

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REALITYBITES is the national outreach programme of the West Yorkshire School of Christian Studies (WYSOCS) – see <http://www.wysocs.org.uk> and <http://www.markroques.com>