Demonic education

Rethinking education through a political theology lens

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Abstract

As we move towards an ever-increasing authoritarian, neoliberal and populist education, it is noticeable how elements of religious thought are embedded into our language and practices. This article uses the lens of political theology, drawing on Carl Schmitt's work which explores how the secular is often based on theological concepts such as sovereignty, obedience, good and evil. Political theology will be used to problematise the self-legitimising education system in England, the apparent necessity for populist behaviour in advocating for such a system, and finally the demonising of children. This essay is deliberately provocative in using political theology to question the state of education as it is now.

Keywords: neoliberal education; authoritarianism; political theology, Michaela Academy; populism

Introduction

There has been acceptance for some time that the English school system is neoliberal, with an emphasis on economic success, competition through high-stakes testing, and stringent accountability measures.[1] There is now a growing acknowledgement that the move towards authoritarian schooling is crucial to neoliberalism.[2] In this article I will use ideas drawn from what has been termed 'political theology' to explore the symbiotic relationship between neoliberalism and authoritarianism and how it manifests in education. I will also explore the populist tendencies within this system, which can also be analysed through the political theology lens. Drawing on the work of Carl Schmitt, Adam Kotsko and Georgio Agamben, I will use political theology to unpick different aspects of our education system: 1) how the system is self-legitimising; 2) how neoliberal education fosters particular kinds of enmity which encourages populist behaviour; and 3) how neoliberal education necessitates the demonisation of children.[3]

Political theology can be understood as theology that is political, for example liberation theology and feminist theology. However, in this article, I will be using Schmitt's concept of political theology; it provides a lens to examine how secular systems and institutions are legitimised and how such systems are based on theological concepts. I am not arguing that our school system is fundamentally religious in nature, but rather that we can see traces of religion and theology – particularly in this case

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Christian theology – especially within the justification of authoritarian education. The use of political theology is thus a deliberate provocation to question the current drift towards authoritarian and populist education. It should also be noted that Carl Schmitt, as a thinker, is problematic as he became inextricably linked with the Nazi regime. However, it is Schmitt's understanding of populism that is useful in my attempt to analyse what we are seeing in today's move towards a neoliberal, authoritarian and arguably populist education system.[4]

Increasingly, key figures such as Katharine Birbalsingh and Tom Bennett employ what Mouffe argues is a populist discursive strategy as they construct a political frontier dividing society and calling for the mobilisation of 'the underdog' against 'those in power'.[5] Arguably this is what we are seeing happen in education (especially on Twitter, now known as X) as Birbalsingh and others draw clear dividing lines between apparent traditionalists and progressives. In true populist style, they argue they are fighting for the underdogs whilst neglecting to mention that they themselves are part of the establishment. Birbalsingh may feel criticised and maligned, but does have support from Ofsted and the government; she was awarded a CBE and appointed chair of the Social Mobility Commission (a post which she later left as she felt she was too politically engaged).[6]

Although my article is about the wider neoliberal and authoritarian education culture in England, I draw on Michaela Community School and its headteacher, Birbalsingh, as an example.[7] This is because Birbalsingh is very vocal about Michaela's accomplishments and practices. As well as being the subject of numerous interviews and documentaries, Birbalsingh has edited two books by Michaela staff, presenting their work to educators and the general public.[8] With her continual denigration of other schools and approaches it is implicit, if not explicit, that the Michaela way is the one true way. For example, teacher Joe Kirby says that, unlike Michaela staff who prize knowledge, 'English schools and their English departments still neglect facts and knowledge, worried about spoon-feeding or regurgitation. Instead, the aim is to develop "transferable skills" such as analysis or evaluation' (note the scare quotes).[9] Another teacher, William Eastment, says: 'Senior leaders in most schools are too in thrall to what Ofsted deem "good teaching" that they dismiss our ideas as unworkable within the current education climate'.[10] Amongst the myriad of enthusiastic parental quotations, one claims, 'Michaela is the best school … not only in Brent … not only in London … not only in England … not only in the UK … not only in Europe … not only in the west … not only in the world but in the UNIVERSE'.[11]

To add to the sense of Michaela's significance, their first book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers,* is endorsed by Boris Johnson: 'Michaela is an inspiration – a revolution in education – giving kids the knowledge, the grammar and the confidence to achieve anything in their lives'.[12] (Johnson's time as prime minister, arguably, is 'an illustration

of a new populist rhetoric in its combination of hard Brexit, anti-immigration and anti-Parliament discourse'.)[13] Amplifying Johnson's endorsement, Michael Gove enthuses: 'Katharine Birbalsingh and her team are inspirational teachers from whom we all have much to learn. This book is their testament and my gospel'. For a politician, who has been so influential in English schooling over the last decade, to call the book his *gospel,* in other words a text detailing the route to salvation, demands further analysis.

Michaela's second book, *The Power of Culture,* has no less glowing and hyperbolic endorsements.[14] Jeremy Paxman says that the book can 'rescue children from the idiocy which has seized so much of the educational Establishment'. American commentator Dave Rubin promises, 'if we have any chance at fixing our confused world, it will begin at schools like Michaela and with leaders like Katharine Birbalsingh'. Notably Rubin, once a progressive comedian, is now a populist conservative political commentator in the United States.

Michaela is not just a school in Brent that follows zero-tolerance policies. It is a school that is much admired, (and reviled), not just in the UK but also in the United States and Australia.[15] Indeed, Michaela is emblematic of the wider turn towards authoritarian, populist schooling which is being increasingly accepted as mainstream. There is no doubt that Michaela and its approaches are being positioned as the saviour not only of education, but of children.

The point of this article is not to assess whether the approach taken to education at Michaela is right or wrong, nor to assess its effectiveness, but rather to consider some of its espoused practices as exemplary of neoliberal, authoritarian and populist schooling. The school is 'outstanding', according to Ofsted, and has excellent exam results. Whilst we live in a world that over-valorises exam results, it must be acknowledged that something they do at Michaela is working. Of course, 'working' has a particular meaning in this context and may be disputed by many. However, as a school, Michaela is *the* exemplar of what is considered excellent, by the Establishment: Ofsted, the government and other influential figures, such as Tom Bennett. Whilst some may consider the school extreme – especially in its approach to behaviour, its commitment to teaching by script, and its student-presentation requirements – many of the issues perceived as problematic arise from the neoliberal education system rather than the individuals involved.

Neoliberal education as political theology

In 1922 Carl Schmitt argued:

> All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts, not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also because of their

systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts.[16]

During the Enlightenment period, the state became the lawgiver, arbiter, punisher, life-giver and ultimately saviour, replacing the role played by religion. A political theology lens provides us with a way to consider these changes, and the apparent legitimisation of the development and implementation of neoliberalism and its resultant schooling system.

Schmitt argued that one can see political theology at work when the state (or other such power) is given an 'exception' in terms of being able to make decisions and act without accountability or justification. There is effectively a declaration or assumption of sovereignty: the 'sovereign is he who decides on the exception'.[17] Such an exception allows what might be considered usual, or legal, to be put aside.

More recently, Agamben developed the idea of state of exception further, arguing that it is not temporary but becomes normalised – it becomes law without the-law.[18] Furthermore, sovereign power has been exercised through the use of biopolitics, such as embedded surveillance and controls. The sweating of the small stuff at Michaela, and other zero-tolerance schools, depends on biopolitics and surveillance. Drawing on Doug Lemov, Michaela embrace 'SLANT', which demands that pupils 'Sit up straight, Listen, Answer questions, Never interrupt and Track the teacher (or text of speaker) – tracking means eye contact'.[19] Children can only look where they are told to look. Importantly, for this argument, this form of biopolitics has become normalised, accepted and praised by political leaders as demonstrated above. For Agamben, it is necessary to abject a class of humans to justify particular behaviour. Whilst he applied this idea of 'bare life' and abjection to extreme states of exception, such as internment in Northern Ireland and Guantanamo Bay, the idea has been applied to data-harvesting by multinational companies (humans have become sites of data), and I am arguing that the abjection of particular children enables justification of particular models of zero-tolerance schooling. An example is how Outwood Academy Trust justified its high-use isolation by arguing it was because it had to turn around failing schools and was only a short-term necessity. However, nine years after taking on these schools, the frequency of use of isolation by the trust remained the same.[20]

As with Michaela, questionable behaviour management policies are justified by abjecting the children the schools serve. Walter Benjamin, a Jewish philosopher writing at the same time as Schmitt, argued that we must not accept the 'state of emergency' as the norm, but by continually questioning what is happening, work towards creating our own state of exception.[21] It is in this vein that I argue that exploring the political theology of Michaela and other such educators is important and timely, rather than gratuitously offensive.

Kotsko argues that neoliberalism is now the sovereign decider rather than the state, and in turn I argue that neoliberal education has become sovereign.[22] In an Agambian move, education has been reduced to such a parlous state that radical actions can, and must, be taken, no matter how distasteful they might be. This legitimisation can be seen in the run-up to the 1988 Education Reform Act as Sir Keith Joseph, then education secretary, lamented the low standards of school leavers' attainment and the delinquency in schools.[23] This he blamed on a politicised, ill-disciplined workforce, which he set to tame and discipline through the introduction of managerial practices.[24] The Act mobilised the neoliberalisation of the English school system; full competition via the mechanisms of high-stakes testing, league tables and parental choice was implemented. The fear of apparent disaster, and objectionable teachers, legitimises the declaration of a state of exception and all that follows from it.

At a time when, as Kotsko argues, the global populace is waking up to the problems of neoliberalism, for example the ever-widening inequality gap, there is a renewed need for legitimacy to ensure adherence to the law of neoliberalism.[25] As Agamben might say, neoliberalism is the law without the law. [26] Freedom, paradoxically, requires obedience to a sovereign authority. (This echoes Hobbes's argument in his 17th-century book *Leviathan*; when the new nation-state was replacing the church as sovereign, the citizen must obey the state for the good of all, and such obedience was necessary to be free.) Now nation-states can't rid themselves of neoliberalism without risking financial meltdown due to the likely response of investment fund-holders and the World Bank and other global institutions punishing them. Similarly, it is extremely hard for schools to opt out of the system.

Whilst different types of schools, such as academies and local authority schools, might have different freedoms, they still need to follow the essential neoliberal agenda; all are judged on results. There are some exceptions, such as Summerhill, but they are very rare, infamous and much derided. Notably the then secretary for education, David Blunkett, took on Summerhill and questioned its ability to function as a school, resulting in a tribunal and several Ofsted inspections, despite it being a private school.[27] Furthermore, as we will see, framing such schools as the enemy is necessary to the project of legitimation. Schools and teachers are subject to the obedience imperative as much as the pupils, for fear of being sanctioned. It should be noted that at Michaela there are weekly seminars 'to assist teachers to adopt the Michaela Mindset once they arrive' at the school.[28] Michaela's teachers are also encouraged to share their old beliefs and how they have changed their mindset, a process which sounds a little like confession or the practice of 'testifying' within a church.

Freedom is the principal concern of neoliberalism, and from a theological point of view this freedom is economic rather than democratic or holistic. We have moved from being *Homo sapiens* (people of wisdom) to being economically oriented, *Homo*

economicus.[29] The neoliberal education project aims to create economically free human beings, which involves getting the best academic qualifications to enable one to get the best (paying) job. Yet to become economically free is to become an obedient subject. Free parental choice of school is central to the neoliberal education project, yet parents are *expected* to choose the best school for their child within neoliberal norms, not the local community school.[30] Neoliberal obedience is not simply about economic viability but, importantly, about being adaptive and resilient, continually changing in order to develop and survive.[31] Neoliberal education is an exercise in creating compliant and efficient commodities: adaptive, resilient children who become the workforce.

Chandler and Reid point to Foucault's *Courage of Truth,* which linked Christian (and Islamic) expectations of obedience to the foundations of liberal modernity in which 'only by renunciation of the self and the putting of this general principle of obedience into practice will he or she be able to secure salvation'.[32] Similarly, St Augustine proclaimed that the ultimate freedom is to obey and serve God.[33] Michaela teacher Jonathan Porter draws on these principles, writing that Michaela's concept of freedom is based on Ancient Greek and early Christian understandings; learning self-discipline through obedience to the school regime and teachers is key to overall freedom:

> A Michaela pupil is free because, although healthy emotional response is an intrinsic part of our being, we want our pupils to learn to control their emotions so they can adequately deploy their reason. But reason must get to work on knowledge and a Michaela pupil should know, understand and be able to evaluate the most valuable knowledge, and the most enduring questions, of our community. [34]

To be able to use knowledge and develop the character traits that allow one to fully engage with society is the first understanding of freedom at Michaela. Porter is very clear that it is specific knowledge that helps this freedom: 'A British man or woman who knows nothing of Shakespeare cannot be as free as they could otherwise be: they have been shut out from one of the most important conversations of their community and culture, as well as the most perceptive, and universal, insights into the human condition'. [35] There is a very singular understanding of knowledge that will allow one to achieve freedom or even salvation.

At Michaela, personal freedom is celebrated but it is framed within the neoliberal competitive project. Porter argues that 'some constraint and some direction frees our young people to be the best that they can be', yet the best that Michaela's pupils can be is *better* than all others.[36] The school uses a pyramid as a metaphor. At the bottom you may behave if you want to avoid punishment, but at the top, you are the best of the best – you are Michaela.[37] As Michaela's ex-deputy headteacher Barry Smith put it when writing about his self-described 'morning sermon' to pupils outside the school gates:

> Do you know what top of the Pyramid means? It means that when there are tough choices to be made we do the right thing. There are millions of people at the bottom of the pyramid. Millions. When things are tough they take the easy choice. When things need perseverance and effort, they take the easy way out … That's not us. That's not Michaela. We're Top of the Pyramid.[38]

Smith then elaborates, saying that top of the Pyramid people are rare and unlike those from other schools. Whilst there isn't room for a full rhetorical analysis, it should be noted that the nature of Smith's language is somewhat evangelistic in tone. It is clear that there are those who become Michaela and those who don't. Becoming Michaela feels like one is baptised into the faith, to turn one's back on sin and join the faith. Making it to the top of the pyramid is the 'highest actualization of human liberty' within a [school] market competition'.[39]

Not only are those individuals top of the Pyramid; Michaela as a school is also. The school and its students are above all others, and able to declare rules without real accountability. They are right because everyone else is wrong at a time of fear and concern regarding education. As Saul Newman points out, when there is chaos and danger, there is a 'renewed desire for a strong state and a unified, homogeneous identity' and nation-states have been usurped by a range of entities, often transnational (such as Google and Facebook).[40] The transnational movement for authoritarian neoliberal schooling, including Michaela, is also acting as sovereign, bringing a clear identity (for example, all the qualities exemplified at the top of the pyramid) which entails strict adherence to the rules if one is not to be bottom of the pyramid. These schools are behaving as omnipotent lawgivers, justifying themselves with populist rhetoric, warning of doom if their way is not followed.

Political enmity, battle lines and populist rhetoric

In his book *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt explores how we decide who is our friend and who is our enemy. As discussed earlier, much of populism, and populist education, is based on who is *in* and who is *out,* through the construction of political frontiers. Schmitt framed it in terms of enmity, arguing that the political required an enemy, which might lead to war, but the fear of such war might lead to vanquishing the enemy in different ways: 'war as the most extreme political means discloses the possibility which underlies every political idea, namely, the distinction of friend and enemy'.[41] In other words, particular actions can be justified, as they avoid actual war with the enemy. In education, war-like language is used, as can be seen in Gove's infamous 'Blob' speech: 'I refuse to surrender to The Blob – marxist teachers hell bent on destroying our schools'.[42] Battle lines have been drawn, the political frontier of education divides clearly between progressives and traditionalists. The title *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers* draws on

militaristic metaphor, and throughout the Michaela books there is a mantra – 'we are Michaela' – where it is clear who is not Michaela. Smith's aforementioned 'morning sermon' clearly demarcates the battle lines. Both books contain chapters by staff once persuaded by progressive education but who now recognise the error of their ways.[43] One says, 'through reading the blogs of the new and founding teachers of Michaela my eyes were opened to a whole new world of pedagogy ... I felt like Plato's prisoner in the Allegory of the Cave, my eyes hazily opening to a new world'.[44]

As Watson and Barnes argue, education can be seen as a 'micropopulism' in which we can see the new right using populist language to generate change.[45] They point to the English government adviser Tom Bennett who charts the rise of previously persecuted traditionalist educators against the mass of progressive education: 'We have witnessed a reformation of the church of education, and its revolutionaries are to be found online, saying what they wish about matters they were previously structurally prevented from commenting on'.[46]

One only needs to look at social media to see populist language being used to drive the neoliberal authoritarian agenda. Such populist language, Watson and Barnes argue, must have a moral urgency and a theological nature, pointing to the evil in the world. If there is no fear of evil winning there is no need for anyone to take action. As Schmitt argues, the pessimism of Christianity's original sin theology (that humanity errs towards evil and needs redemption) is necessary to maintain politics.[47]

Populism feeds off anxieties, which Sant argues were ramped up in 2001, with the events of 11 September seen as a challenge to the idea that Western liberalism was the accepted norm.[48] George Bush famously declared: 'Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists'.[49] 'We' were under threat, and discourse changed quickly to identify the demons within and without. The financial crisis of 2008, along with political suppression around the world such as the Arab Spring, and continual wars, have consolidated the anxieties and ruptured democratic faith. We have seen a rise in populist rhetoric and governments (I write this as Geert Wilders, the far-right politician has just won the election in the Netherlands). Valluvan points to how these increasingly prominent anxieties about life and society attract forthright answers to soothe politicians and their constituents.[50] When there are anxieties it is easy to blame those we view with suspicion as at fault, and to find the demon in our midst and seek: 'solutions that project a nationalist tenor [and which] increasingly obtain a panacean value in the popular imagination, suggesting that various significant challenges – be they economic, security, social or cultural – will be magicked away through the emasculation of the significant Others in the nation's midst'.[51]

In education, we see panacean answers being provided to a complex problem by way of zero-tolerance policies, technocratic and authoritarian practices that have de-

professionalised teachers, and a general undermining 'of the possibility of democratic educational policies and practices'.[52]

Demonisation

As discussed above, political theology considers how different authorities declare an exception, which can be seen clearly in the ongoing neoliberalisation of education. To ensure this exception it is necessary to create the scene for acceptance. Whilst there is the need to create the battle between good and evil, in the populist sense, there is a further case for demonisation. As Kotsko argues 'neoliberalism demonizes us', pointing to the historical legacy of witchcraft in which many women were literally demonised as they were deemed to threaten the status quo.[53] This process can be seen during the period of the Cameron government and its justification of austerity and drastic cutting of disability benefits: 'Disabled people – once a source of compassion and care – had become an object of suspicion, demonization and contempt. It was official: under austerity, the one group in society who had been supposedly untouchable was now said to be unaffordable'.[54]

Other demons have been identified in the move towards a more neoliberal authoritarian government, including lawyers and judges as they question the legality of government decisions. The demonisation of children has followed a similar pattern. Sir Al Aynsley-Green, the then children's commissioner for England, told a House of Lords committee in 2009 that the demonisation of children by the government and media could be seen to start at the time of the James Bulger murder.[55] He had collated media articles, over 70 per cent of which he characterised as negative about children and young people, rarely mentioning their capabilities or anything positive about them. Furthermore, if those children are from working-class backgrounds they are even more demonised.[56]

Davis and Bourhill firmly place the contemporary demonisation of children at the feet of neoliberalism. As Margaret Thatcher ushered in neoliberalism she found she had to point to the culprits, the demons of the apparent broken society, to justify a new era of social conservatism: 'The "enemies within" were many: "muggers", miners, trade-unionists, "loony-left" councils, immigrants, travellers, youths and, most recently, the homeless, single parents and their children. Those most affected by mass unemployment and impoverishment have been those consigned to the social margins, condemned roundly for their own misfortune'.[57]

It is necessary to create demons to highlight the beauty and godliness of the present system. Kotsko argues that we can see secularised elements of medieval theology embedded in our society. There must be a spectacle to ensure lessons are learnt, to ensure loyalty and obedience.[58] There have to be moments of revelation highlighting

the antichrist and the behaviour needed for salvation. Drawing on Agamben's idea of 'bare life', Kotsko points to a world in which there is a hellish foundation (bottom of the pyramid) and an 'aspirational zone of pugatory where, by dint of hard work and sacrifice, we can make it to heaven' (or the top of the pyramid).[59] Kotsko compares this to God rescuing Israelites and demonstrating his all-powerful nature, and 'ability to defeat the mightiest of earthly powers, with astounding and devastating miracles'.[60] Thus further cementing himself as God and worth loyalty and obedience.

'Bare life' (*nuda vita*) Agamben argued is human life at its most basic, biological sense, stripped of communal relations, and recognition whether legal or political.[61] Society excludes people by marginalising them and rendering them 'bare life'. It is this act of exclusion, Agamben suggests, that establishes the political community – they are clear about what they are not. Similarly, Michaela can be seen to use this tactic, rendering many children as 'bare life'– that is to say, those who are not Michaela. Michaela is understood to be a wonderous God-like school as it takes the poorest children and turns them into high achievers – as can be seen by their progress eight score and the high number of leavers going to Russell Group universities. The school's two books are full of stories of demon – or bare life – children whom they have brought through to salvation. It is clear that without Michaela children are rude, untrustworthy and delinquent. 'My daughter's going off the rails. She needs a school like yours,' a caretaker tells Barry Smith.[62] Teacher Katie Ashford catalogues stories of salvation: children who were once 'bare life' are now *Michaela*, including Jayrelle, who had been excluded from two schools and now has a high number of merits, and Fabrizio, who was barely literate and is now a talented writer and mathematician.[63] In the second book, Ashford argues that a curriculum based on old white men is necessary to expand the world, literacy and empathy of the pupils, as 'in gangland Brent, our pupils urgently need to be rescued from alienation. If we can't help them, they join the ranks of the disengaged and drift further away from our culture'.[64]

Children are thus seen either as innocent victims with a propensity to be corrupted and in need of protection, or as threats to societal order. Children must be 'managed' via the different institutions, such as schools, and prevented from being corrupted. Neoliberal schooling has become a project of management to move the demonic children from A to B in the most efficient way possible, thus requiring compliance with authority. This management of demons underpins Michaela's bootcamp. Teacher Joe Kirby details how the 'life-changing' bootcamp at the start of year seven sets the children up for success. It is needed due to the behaviour of these children on arrival being 'surprisingly venomous … and sexualised, even at 11 years old. Blame and excuses are default reactions to reprimands … Mendacity seems prevalent'.[65] The bootcamp instils discipline and respect for authority, and thus rescues the bare-life children.

Conclusion

Using such language as 'authoritarianism', 'populism', 'enmity', and 'demonisation' when talking about education might be distasteful for some, and overly melodramatic to others. I hope it brings a different lens to a heated debate. However, there is a need for a cautionary note. It might be easy to assume that I am targeting Michaela and other educational traditionalists, yet it is not that simple. Traditionalists happen to be in favour at the moment, with the government and Ofsted signalling a welcome of zero-tolerance behaviour policies and the knowledge-rich design of GCSEs. However, most progressive schools and teachers are still working and adhering to the neoliberal system. Whilst the last century may have extended education to the masses and not just kept it to the elite, it is still widely the case that some children reach 'salvation' while other remain 'bare life'. We know that not all schoolchildren will leave school with a clutch of the expected GCSEs, yet the system emphasises the need to worry about whether we can distinguish between the very top students.

We are in danger of losing a fully comprehensive education for all. Is it possible to embrace a different theology – one that sees the good in children from the start and encourages nourishment and growth? Nearly a century after Benjamin's warnings about not accepting states of emergency as the norm, maybe we need to question this creeping authoritarianism and populism in education.[66] As Benjamin put it, we need to exploit a messianic moment where the current prevalent and pervasive political theology is ruptured and we can move towards a more democratic education.

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Notes

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