

WHAT SHALL WE TELL THE CHILDREN?

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Bulletin Quote:

It was the schoolboy who said, “Faith is believin’ what you know ain’t so.” – Mark Twain

Leave religion alone until you’ve grown up. – George Bernard Shaw

Main Talk:

We here at UFR are getting closer to the ability to offer religious education to the children of our members, our friends, and our community. What shall we tell the children? While reading Dan Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, his words, some of which are included below, prompted considerable reflection upon this weighty question. What shall we tell the children? The parents and grandparents among us have mostly resolved this question individually as to their own children, presumably, with varying levels of satisfaction and success as they look upon the results of their efforts. The question applies to society in general as well as UFR in particular. In the area of religion, what shall we tell the children?

Dennett reports **that** the ocean of research, some good, some bad, on all aspects of early childhood development carefully sidesteps religion, which is still largely off limits to such work. Sometimes there are very good—indeed, unimpeachable—ethical reasons for this. All the carefully erected and protected barriers to injurious medical research with human subjects apply with equal force to any research we might imagine conducting on variation in religious upbringing. We aren’t going to do placebo studies in which group **A** memorizes one catechism while group **B** memorizes a different catechism and Group **C** memorizes nonsense syllables. We aren’t going to do cross-fostering studies in which babies of Islamic parents are switched with babies of Catholic parents. These are clearly off limits, and should remain so. But what ARE the limits? All these policy questions lie unexamined in the shadows cast by a spell, the one that says that religion is out of bounds, period. We should not pretend that this is benign neglect on our part, since we know full well that under the protective umbrellas of personal privacy and religious freedom there are widespread practices in which parents subject their own children to treatments that would send any researcher, clinical or otherwise, to jail. What are the rights of parents in such circumstances, and “where do we draw the line”?

Some people will scoff at the very idea that certain kinds of religious upbringing COULD be harmful to a child—until they reflect on some of the more severe religious regimens to be found around the world, and recognize that, in the United States, we already prohibit religious practices that are widespread in other parts of the world. Richard Dawkins goes further. He has proposed that no child should ever be identified as a Catholic child or a Muslim child or an atheist child or a Unitarian Universalist child, since this identification itself prejudices decisions that have yet to be properly considered. And, in the case of a UU child, we know that our UU perspective has passions and foibles that are not

necessarily representative of the priorities other thinking adults decide to use in guiding their lives and offspring.

“We’d be aghast to be told of a Leninist child or a neo-conservative child or a Hayekian monetarist child or, to take it to the level of silliness, a smoking child or a drinking child, all based upon their parents’ inclinations. And some might even claim it to be a kind of child abuse to speak of a Catholic child or a Protestant child, especially in Northern Ireland and Glasgow where such labels, handed down over generations, have divided neighborhoods for centuries and can amount to a death warrant.

Maybe that’s why the Irish Protestant roots of George Bernard Shaw impelled him to simplify the issue with, “Leave religion alone until you grow up.”

This statement has been attributed to the Jesuits, “Give me a child until he is seven, and I will show you the man,” but nobody—not the Jesuits or anybody else—really knows or has determined how resilient children are. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence of young people turning their backs on their religious traditions after years of immersion and walking away with a shrug and a smile and no visible ill effects. However, we all here know that the extremes of anecdotes, while making good fodder for Oprah, Jerry Springer, and story lines for the afternoon soaps, the distortions they bring outside the normalcy of everyday life contribute almost nothing to in depth understanding. On the other hand, we do know some children are raised in such ideological prisons that they willingly become their own jailers forbidding themselves any contact with the liberating ideas that might well change their minds. There is a question, and it is a valid question, as to whether the teaching of a belief system to children is morally defensible.

There is precedent where we make such conscientious decisions on behalf of people who cannot, for one reason or another, make an informed decision for themselves, and this set of problems can be addressed using the understanding that we have already hammered out through political consensus on other topics.

The resolution of the dilemma of how to respect and deal with those who are insufficiently informed to make good decisions is not obvious, to say the least. Using examples in the extreme help us think about these challenges.

Compare it with the closely related issue of what we, on the outside, should do about the Sentinelese and the Jarawas and other peoples who still live a stone-age existence in remarkable isolation on the Andaman and Nicobar islands, far out in the Indian Ocean. These people have managed to keep every one of the most intrepid explorers and traders at bay for centuries by their ferocious bow and arrow defense of their island territories, so **little** is known about them, and for some time now the government of India, of which the islands form a distant part, has prohibited all contact with them. Now that they have been drawn to the world’s attention in the wake of the great tsunami of December 2004, it is hard to imagine that this isolation can be maintained, but even if it could be, should it be? Who has the right to decide the matter? Certainly not the anthropologists, although they have worked hard to protect these people from contact—even with themselves—for decades. Who are **they** to “Protect” these human beings? The anthropologists do not

own them as if they were laboratory specimens carefully gathered and shielded from contamination, and the idea that these islands should be treated as a human zoo or preserve is offensive—even when we contemplate the even more offensive alternative of opening the doors to missionaries of all faiths, who would not doubt eagerly rush in to save their souls.

It is tempting, but illusory, to think that the islanders have solved the ethical problem for us, by **THEIR** adult decision to drive away all outsiders without asking if they are protectors, exploiters, investigators, or soul-savers. They clearly want to be left alone, so we should leave them alone! There are two problems with this convenient proposal: Their decision is so manifestly ill informed that if we let it trump all other considerations are we not as culpable as somebody who lets a person drink a poisoned cocktail “of his own free will” without deigning to warn him? And in any case, although the adults may have reached the age of consent, are their children not being victimized by the ignorance of their parents? We would never permit a neighbor’s child to be kept so deluded, so shouldn’t we cross the ocean and step in to rescue these children, however painful the shock? What should **WE** tell **THEIR** children?

I hope you feel a slight adrenaline surge at this moment. This issue of parental rights versus children’s rights has no clear rivals for triggering emotional responses in place of reasoned responses, and I suspect that this is one place where a genetic factor is playing a quite direct role. In mammals and birds who must care for their offspring the instinct to protect one’s young from all outside interference is universal and extremely potent; we will risk our lives unhesitatingly—unthinkingly—to fend off threats, real or imagined. It’s like a reflex. And in this case, we can “feel it in our bones” that parents **DO** have the right to raise their children the way they see fit. Never make the mistake of wandering in between a mother bear and her cub, and, **NOTHING** should come between parents and their children. That’s the core of “family values.” At the same time, we have to admit that parents don’t literally **OWN** their children (the way slave owners once owned slaves), but are, rather, their stewards or guardians and our society has developed a position that they ought to be held accountable by outsiders for their guardianship, which does imply that outsiders have a right to interfere—which sets off that adrenaline alarm again. When we find that what we feel in our bones is hard to defend in the court of reason, we get defensive and testy, and start looking around for something to hide behind. How about the sacred and (hence) unquestionable bond? Ah, that’s the ticket! And we’ve come full circle. What should we, society, teach the children about religion?

There is this obvious (but seldom discussed) tension between the supposedly sacred principles invoked at this point. On the one hand, many declare, there is the sacred and inviolable right to life: every unborn child has a right to life, and no prospective parent has the right to terminate a pregnancy (except maybe if the mother’s life is itself in jeopardy). On the other hand, many of the same people declare that, once born, the child loses its right not to be indoctrinated or brainwashed or otherwise psychologically abused by those parents, who have the right to raise the child with any upbringing they choose, short of physical torture. Let us champion the values of freedom worldwide—but not as applied to the children, apparently.

No child has a right to freedom from indoctrination.

Shouldn't we change that?

What! And let OUTSIDERS have a say in how I raise MY KIDS? (Now do you feel the adrenaline rush?)

While we wrestle with the questions about the Adaman Islanders, we can see that we are laying the political foundations for similar questions about religious upbringing in general. We shouldn't assume, while worrying over the likely effects, that the seductions of Western culture will automatically swamp all the fragile treasures of other cultures. It is worth noting that many Muslim women, raised under conditions that many non-Muslim women and men should consider intolerable, when given informed opportunities to abandon their veils and many of their other traditions, choose instead to maintain them.

That is their informed choice, their right. But what do we teach the children until they are informed enough and mature enough to decide for themselves?

We teach them about ALL the world's religions, in a matter-of-fact, historically and biologically informed way, the same way we teach them about geography, arithmetic, science, and the best of the non-biased, agenda-free history courses. We should teach the children creeds and customs, prohibitions and rituals, texts and music, and when we cover the history of religion, we should include both the positive—the role of the churches in the civil-rights movement of the 1960's, the flourishing of science and the arts in early Islam, and the role of the Black Muslims in bringing hope, honor, and self-respect to the otherwise shattered lives of many inmates in our prisons, for instance—and the negative—the Inquisition, anti-Semitism over the ages, the role of the Catholic Church in spreading AIDS in Africa through its opposition to condoms. No religion should be favored, and none ignored. And as we discover more and more about the biological and psychological bases for religious practices and attitudes, these discoveries should be added to the curriculum, the same way we update our education about science, health, and current events. And we should teach them bridge building between faiths and rejection of generalizations like the BRIGHTS call the believers morons and the Evangelists want to take over the government. We need to teach them perspective so they understand the wide range of beliefs and motivations that come under each religious classification and to reject the bigotry of painting all with a single brush. That is building bridges of understanding. Isn't this the basis of portions of the current UUA curricula? For the most part, yes. But, UUA publications are not free of bigotry and evangelism in their favorite themes as well. Bottom line is that we here are responsible.

We know there is a need, a need we can fulfill.

And if religion were taught along **these** guidelines, why shouldn't the seed be planted that this be part of the mandated curriculum for both public schools and home-schooling

as well? Religion is part of our world, our social structure, and on the list of decisions young adults address as they find their way through life. Should those decisions not be informed decisions?

Ah, the challenge of educational control! And the temptation to indoctrinate.

Here's a fantasy world proposal then: as long as parents don't teach their children anything that is likely to close their minds (1) through fear and hatred or (2) by disabling them from inquiry (by denying them an education, for instance, or keeping them entirely isolated from the world), then they may teach their children whatever religious doctrines they like. It's just an idea, and perhaps there are better ones to consider, but it should appeal to freedom lovers everywhere: the idea of insisting that the devout of all faiths should face the challenge of making sure their religion is worthy enough, attractive and plausible and meaningful enough, to withstand the temptations of its competitors.

Yes, banning the teaching of fear, hate, and that questioning is blasphemy in my fantasy world might just do the trick. It would be intriguing to see which belief systems survive in a less pre-programmed free market of religious thought.

The proposition is that if you have to hoodwink—or blindfold—your children to ensure that they confirm their faith when they are adults, your faith OUGHT to go extinct. And that proposition could be our own checks and balances, our own in-house test, in answering the question: “what shall we tell the children?”