



The Dawkins Letters - 10. Childhood Abuse and Gap Theology

David Robertson

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Dear Dr Dawkins,

You ask "Isn't it a form of child abuse to label children as possessors of beliefs that they are too young to have thought about?" This question is the whole purpose of your chapter nine. You reinforce your view that children should not be taught religion by a horror story of the kidnapping of an Italian Jewish boy in the 19th century; abuse by the Catholic church; an interview with Pastor Keenan Roberts who sets up Hell Houses to educate children; testimonies from people brought up in Christian homes who are now atheists; a wee go at the Amish; a six page attack on Emmanuel school in the North East of England and an appeal against the labelling of children on the basis of their parents' religion. You finish by arguing that religious education should be about learning the Bible as literature. All in all those who are atheists will share your horror at what you call this religious child abuse and others may be influenced to think that perhaps you will have a case. But let me suggest that there are some major problems with your case.

You underplay the role of sexual abuse in order to demonstrate the horrors of the psychological

abuse caused by children. You openly admit that you were a victim of child sexual abuse in your English boarding school from a teacher 'whose affection for small boys overstepped the bounds of propriety'; something you describe as "an embarrassing but otherwise harmless experience". This leads you to talk about the horrific child abuse cases that have come to light regarding the Catholic church and then to make the extraordinary statement that "horrible as sexual abuse no doubt was, the damage was arguably less than the long term psychological damage inflicted by bringing up the child Catholic in the first place" (a comment which you inform us was made to an audience of Dublin intellectuals and received spontaneous applause). And it is not just the Catholics you have a go at – although you do seem to have a particular disdain for both them and American evangelicals. You also mention the Exclusive Brethren, a "more than unusually odious sect". Later on you come to the Amish and in a few disparaging sentences suggest that modern society is guilty of allowing Amish parents to abuse their children.

All this is of course leading to an inevitable and shocking conclusion. If the situation is as you say and religion is a virus then the logical thing is to protect children. You cite with evident approval the psychologist Nicholas Humphrey – "Children, I'll argue, have a human right not to have their minds crippled by exposure to other people's bad ideas – no matter who those other people are.... So we should no more allow parents to teach their children to believe, for example, in the literal truth of the Bible or that the planets rule their lives, than we should allow parents to knock their children's teeth out or to lock them in a dungeon". We are almost coming full circle here. You began with the story about the kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara, who was taken away from his parents because a servant had baptised him as a Catholic and his parents were Jewish. The Catholic authorities were prepared to 'save' the boy from the Jewish upbringing that they believed would cause him harm. You are rightly horrified by this and yet you have now moved on to an almost similar position. I have taught and will continue to teach my children that the Bible is true and you are now accusing me of doing them more harm than if I sexually abused them. Perhaps in the Brave New World of the Atheist State the religious thought police will be sent round to ensure that

my children are being taught 'correct' thoughts. If it is right for the State to take children away from parents who would sexually abuse them, and if you believe that bringing a child up in the Christian faith is more abusive, then logically you must believe that the State should have the right to remove children from such abusive situations. If you follow your logic through then the story of Edgardo Mortara will be the story of many more children whose parents do not accept the atheist zeitgeist of the new moral order. As Marilyn Robinson, the brilliant and perceptive author of the best novel of the past century, *Gilead*, points out:

And how might it have been worse? If the child had fallen, as in the next century so many would, into the hands of those who considered his Jewishness biological rather than religious and cultural. To Dawkins's objection that Nazi science was not authentic science I would reply, first, that neither Nazis nor Germans had any monopoly on these theories, which were influential throughout the Western world, and second, that the research on human subjects carried out by those holding such assumptions was good enough science to appear in medical texts for fully half a century. This is not to single out science as exceptionally inclined to do harm, though its capacity for doing harm is by now unequalled. It is only to note that science, too, is implicated in this bleak human proclivity, and is one major instrument of it.

The notion that keeping children away from religion will somehow save the world is a fanciful one which ignores logic, common sense and human history. As regards the latter I am reminded of an asylum seeker in the Netherlands whom I met last year. She is an educated doctor from Azerbaijan. She has experienced the horrors of religious ethnic cleansing – having been forced from her country by Muslim fundamentalists. You would expect that having experienced the evil effects of some religion she would have been supportive of your point of view. But when I discussed it with her she completely disagreed with you. “We spent 70 years”, she told me, “70 years when we were not allowed to be taught about God. We lived in an atheist state where only atheism was taught. They even tried to ban God from our homes”. The results were all too clearly seen in the atheist Soviet Union. The philosophy and ideas you put forward in this

chapter have been tried already and as already pointed out; they have been a spectacular failure. It does scare me a little that the basic position you outline in this chapter is one which labels me both as abused and abuser. I was brought up in the Brethren. There are aspects of it I did not like and I met some strange people and heard some strange things. However I also met some wonderful people and was taught some wonderful things – not least that I should use my own mind. It was doing precisely that which caused me first of all to reject the faith I had been brought up with and secondly to return, not to Brethrenism, but to Jesus Christ. My childhood was largely a happy one within the context of a loving family and an open community. Yet you think I would have been better off being sexually abused by some boarding school master than being brought up having been taught about Jesus Christ. And you accuse me of being worse than a paedophile because I happily teach young children that God loves them, that they are important and have a purpose and a place in his world. Is it little wonder that people think that your logic is a bit twisted by your secular fundamentalism and are they not right to be more than a little frightened by the consequences of such a perverse view?

Speaking of schools your American readers must be wondering why you spend six pages attacking one state school in the North East of England. What kind of evil and horrendous place is this that it results in you, the Bishop of Oxford and almost all the English intelligentsia uniting to condemn and attack it? Emmanuel school is a state school. In Britain we do not have a formal separation of Church and State and therefore many state schools are meant to be based upon a Christian ethos. A considerable number of schools in England are Anglican and it is still the case that most schools have at least one act of public Christian worship per week. However much of the state system in Britain is in crisis – the fact that the decline in standards has arisen at the same time as the decline in Christianity and the rise of secularism may or may not be apposite. Many of the poorest are being left behind in run-down schools with very poor academic records. The government for better or for worse have tried to encourage rich benefactors to invest in State schools in poorer areas known as ‘city academies’. One person who has invested is Reg Vardy a millionaire car dealer and a Christian. One of the

schools he has supported, to the tune of £2 million is Emmanuel Christian College in Gateshead in the North East of England. So why are you, and so many of your friends, so bitterly opposed to this school? Why in a book about the God Delusion, and a chapter about religious child abuse, do you devote so much space to attacking this school and calling it an educational scandal? Because the head of science, Stephen Layfield, is a Christian and wrote a paper on the “The teaching of science: a biblical perspective”. In this he commits the cardinal sin of daring to question evolution. Now he may or may not be wrong – and I am sure that if the basic principles of science are taught then his pupils will soon be able to discern the truth. But are you really justified in labelling Emmanuel Christian school as a place where child abuse is taking place? Are you right to label it a ‘creationist college’ which brainwashes students to accept the biblical view uncritically? I decided to find out and not surprisingly the truth is somewhat different.

The policy of the College is to teach the arguments for and against evolution, intelligent design etc. Students are encouraged to take a critical approach and not to accept things without subjecting them to scrutiny and discussion. Teachers and students are encouraged to state their own views. Of the nine science staff, three would hold to a young earth creationist position, three to a theistic evolutionist position and three are non-christian evolutionists. Does this sound like a school which is designed to ignore current scientific thinking? As far as I can recall it reflects my own experience of school where my chemistry teacher was an atheist, my physics teacher was a Christian and my biology teacher was a young earth creationist. They were all good teachers who did not seek to impose their views. So why are you so bitterly opposed to Emmanuel?

This is made even more puzzling when we look at how well Emmanuel is doing. In March 2006, Emmanuel received its third ‘outstanding’ rating from Ofsted – one of only twelve schools in the country at the time. August saw exam results which placed the College in the top five comprehensive schools in England. This is not a school in the elitist green suburbs of Oxford. It is a school in one of the poorest areas of England and its 2000 pupils are receiving an excellent education in a good school. Surely as a liberal

humanitarian you should be delighting in this success – even if the head of science has views which you consider to be wrong. Your attitude to this is puzzling and smacks more of the fundamentalist ethos than a liberal humanitarian view which sees education as a good in and of itself.

It is worth noticing that the campaign against this highly successful school was begun by the *National Secular Society*. Why? Why have they not begun a campaign to raise all our schools to the level and standards of Emmanuel? Why are they not shouting from the rooftops at the scandal of the declining education system in our country, especially for the poor, instead of attacking a school that is actually working? It is because they are more concerned for their ideology than they are for people. I even know one official of that society who whilst publicly campaigning against any sort of Christian influence in state schools, sends his own children to a private Christian school because ‘they get a better education there’. Hypocrisy.

Coming from a working class background I did not go to boarding schools and I do not have the money to buy my children the ‘best’ education. I am more than happy to send them to State schools but I do not want them to be indoctrinated by the minority of secularists and atheists who seem to think that their philosophy is the only one which should have any credence. I have noticed that although atheists talk the talk about education, when it comes to walking the walk, they do not generally build schools or put their money where their mouth is. Instead they prefer to seize cuckoo like, the work, money and initiatives of others so that they can then use these to teach on the basis of their own philosophy. My own country, Scotland, was famous for its education system. A system which provided opportunity, education and advancement for all who were prepared to take it. It was a system which was based upon Christian principles and operated on the notion of where there was a church there should be a school. All our major Universities were founded on Christian principles and in general that system has served us well. It is no coincidence that as the basic principles of Christianity have been driven out of school and culture Scotland has become a significantly dumbed down culture and we are

rapidly slipping down the international educational league table.

I don't want a Stalinist system which bans Christianity from school and home. Nor do I want an American secularist model which leaves the wealthy and middle class to send their children to private schools (often based on Christian principles) whilst often allowing the poor to rot in an underfunded state system based on a poor philosophy of education. Teaching children on the basis of Christian principles of love, mutual respect, inquiry, truth and justice is not abuse. Denying children the opportunity to a decent education because of the bias of your philosophy – that is abuse. And accusing parents who seek to bring their children up in the love and peace of Christ as child abusers is contemptible.

There is however one area where I can agree with you. You lament the biblical illiteracy of our current society. I agree. Totally. Mind you it is only such ignorance which means that you can get away with many of the claims you make about the Bible in your books. Anyone who is biblically literate would soon recognise that your representation of the Bible is distorted and out of context. However what may shock you even more (it certainly depresses me) is how biblically illiterate many professing Christians are. If Christians knew the Word better and were better taught then we would not have much to fear from the resurgent atheism you are trying to encourage. The Bible is so much more than an interesting literary and cultural collection. It is the living and enduring Word of God. Heaven and earth will pass away but the Word of God will endure forever.

Let's move briefly onto chapter ten. This is a somewhat strange and disjointed chapter which skirts over the notion of religion as some kind of consolation, the Christian attitude to death and ends up with the theories of quantum physics. You seem to think that those of us who believe in God are in effect children who have not grown out of the need for an imaginary friend. Apart from the patronising aspect of this the question arises to me that if the God of the Bible, or the God of the Catholics or the God of anyone is as horrible as you state, how can belief in him be a consolation? As regards death you imply that if we really believed what we said then we would all be happy

about dying. Of course if we all went delirious to the grave you would be then be citing this as evidence of the power of religion to brainwash! One of the reasons I believe is precisely because of death. It would be so easy and such a relief in some ways to believe that once I died that was it. Imagine no after life. No one to answer to. No heaven. No hell. Nothing unknown. Just death, stillness and nothingness. To believe that would for many people be bliss. It is little wonder that some of your converts describe such a belief with religious fervour. And yet I have tried that route. And it just does not work. It does not work because it does not ring true. It does not work because there is something inside me that tells me there is more to life than this life. It does not work because the whole universe screams out the majesty and glory of God. It does not work because I have a mind which tells me that I am neither an inanimate object nor just a collection of molecules on their way to nothing. It does not work because I know that my body is more than a throwaway survival machine just as I know that the world is not flat and life is not meaningless. The atheist answer to death is found in Camus' *L'Etranger*. It is hopeless. The Christian answer is vastly different. It is Christ.

In reviewing your book I think we have come across two competing philosophies. They actually don't have all that much to do with science except insofar as both will cite the discoveries of science as evidence. Your philosophy of logical positivism means that your science replaces God. It is your world view. It is your life. It is your faith. No wonder that you are so religious in defending it and so keen on rooting out heretics and wishy washy appeasers! In chapter ten you talk about 'removing the Burka', meaning removing the limited view we have of Middle World (I think Tolkien should sue!). You suggest that now we see only partially but soon science will enable us to see clearly. I was blind but now I see. It's almost Messianic in its fervour and Biblical in its language – now we see through a glass darkly then we shall see clearly.

And this last chapter is where you finally and completely blow away any pretension that your view is based upon empirical, observable, testable evidence. Throughout the book you have been using the existence of the material as the lens through which we are to judge everything.

You flavour this with what you deem to be commonsense experience and especially probability. And yet in chapter ten you move way beyond that. You cite Steve Grand, a computer scientist who specializes in artificial intelligence:

Matter flows from place to place and momentarily comes together to be you. Whatever you are, therefore, you are not the stuff of which you are made. If that doesn't make the hair stand up on the back of your neck, read it again until it does, because it is important.

Grand also goes on to argue that if you remember an experience from your childhood you should remember that you were not really there:

What we see of the real world is not the unvarnished real world but a model of the real world, regulated and adjusted by sense data – a model that is constructed so that it is useful for dealing with the real world!

This is brilliant stuff which seems to fit with the spiritual, and perhaps even with the biblical notion of the soul, but it is a million miles away from the empirical evidence that you keep demanding. In fact most of it is highly entertaining guess work – trying to explain and fill in the gaps that science cannot answer. I call it ABGism – Anything-But-God-ism.

Your final sentence declares: “Even better, we may eventually discover that there are no limits”. Of course you don’t mean that. Because you draw the line at God. You cannot believe in a God who created the universe (that’s a limit). You refuse to believe in a God who raised Jesus from the dead (another limit). And you ridicule the notion that this God could communicate with human beings through his Spirit and his Word (another limit). You are only prepared to accept no limits in terms of human knowledge. Indeed you want to replace God with humanity. You want us as the Higher Consciousness, to become like God. I believe that a long time ago there was someone else who once offered humanity the key to all knowledge. We fell for it then and have ever since been paying the price. I pray that we will not fall for that one again.

Yours etc

David

Read Part 11.

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