

Religious education and child abuse: Is it permissible for parents to teach their kids Young Earth Creationism?

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Richard Dawkins has argued on several occasions that bringing up your child religiously is a form of child abuse. According to Dawkins, teaching children *about* religion is fine (it helps them to understand cultural references, for instance), but *indoctrinating* children – by which Dawkins means any form of education that teaches religious beliefs as facts – is morally wrong and harmful. Dawkins is not alone: the American theoretical physicist Lawrence Krauss, for instance, recently argued that teaching Young Earth Creationism (henceforth YEC) is a form of child abuse.

Here, I want to focus on the role of parents in instilling religious beliefs in their children, especially beliefs that are incompatible with science, such as YEC. Instead of using the rather laden term “child abuse,” I want to tease apart two questions: Are YEC parents harming their children, and is what they do morally wrong?

Let’s start out from the reality of parenting and the transmission of beliefs. Whereas schools can aim for neutrality in the transmission of knowledge, parents, in practice, cannot. All forms of parenting involve transmitting, or attempting to transmit one’s personal religious viewpoints. This is also true for humanists like Dawkins, who teach their children that no religious beliefs are true. There is no viewpoint from nowhere in parenting. The belief that we can dispassionately teach our children something about religion without expressing any opinions about the truth of religious claims strikes me as highly unrealistic. Intuitively, it seems problematic to teach your child that the Earth was created 6,000 years ago, that humans and dinosaurs co-existed, and that all current biodiversity can be traced back to the survivors of a major flood, lucky enough to be on the ark. By contrast, it is not at all obvious that more liberal religious believers, e.g., the liberal protestant who teaches her child that God loves us, and who also accepts the results of science and geology, are doing anything harmful. Dawkins, for instance, has often prided himself on being a “cultural Anglican”.

But where can we draw the line? Under what circumstances does the transmission of religious beliefs harm the child? An interesting model to consider the moral dimension of parenting is the stewardship model. This model proposes that parents are not owners, but stewards, of their children. The Christian philosopher of education Mike Austin, in his book *Wise Stewards: Philosophical Foundations of Christian Parenting* takes the stewardship model as the foundation of good parenting. According to Austin, Christian parents are stewards of God’s creation (including the human beings they are parents to), and their task is to steward their children responsibly. Stewardship is aimed at helping children flourish, and laying the foundations for helping to them to

thrive in later life. Parents, as stewards, can do this, by providing their children with knowledge and values that facilitate their integration in society, as citizens and fellow human beings. Austin contrasts this with the ownership model, which can lead to a form of absolutism over children. The stewardship model could also be translated into secular terms: as parents we are stewards on behalf of the future self of the child, and on behalf of the society where he or she will live in.

Given this model, do we harm children by instilling false religious beliefs? This question is not straightforward to answer. It seems unrealistic to say that instilling *any* false belief is harmful. Even parents who are knowingly giving their children false information aren't always doing harm. Think about deliberate lies like "Santa will come and fill your stocking tonight". Such transient Santa beliefs don't seem to be psychologically harmful for the child in the long run, and they do not lead to adults with false Santa beliefs.

The difference with between Santa and YEC is that YEC beliefs do persist into adulthood, and that they impede a child's scientific literacy. Teaching such beliefs potentially harms the child's future capacity to flourish in a scientifically literate society. This is not only because YEC is factually false, but also because – like other forms of creationism – it promotes a deep distrust of science, both of its results and methods. YEC educational materials for children foster this distrust actively, by dismissing scientific findings ("Were you there? How do you know?") and by promoting a conflict model between science and literalist interpretations of the Bible. So from the stewardship point of view, teaching YEC to children is harmful.

Next to harm, we need to consider moral responsibility. As parents, we sometimes unwittingly pass on false information. If a YEC parent sincerely believes YEC to be true, can she be held morally accountable for teaching those beliefs to her children? It depends to what extent the parent expects the child to accept YEC. When Dawkins says that indoctrinating your children to accept particular religious views is morally wrong, he isn't clear what he means by "indoctrinating" – he seems to think this covers any presentation of religious beliefs as facts. But there are different ways in which we can transmit beliefs. Under the ownership model, we own our children and we can do whatever we want (within limits of what the law permits), which includes coercing them into accepting our beliefs. In the stewardship model, by contrast, we can attempt to instill the beliefs we sincerely think are correct, but we can't go as far as to try to control our children's thoughts. Proper stewardship means that we teach our children what we sincerely believe is right and true, without infringing upon their autonomy in forming personal opinions.

In the psychology of parenting, this is referred to as the distinction between an *authoritative* and an *authoritarian* parenting style. An authoritative parent supervises and guides a child's development, sets high expectations and clear guidelines, instills the beliefs and values she thinks are right, but at the same time has high acceptance of the child's personality and interests, and allows and encourages the child to develop, be independent, and express personal opinions. Authoritative parenting has better long-term outcomes on school achievements and adult flourishing than permissive parenting or authoritarian parenting, two

alternative parenting styles. Permissive parents do not provide their children with any guidance at all, do not set high expectations, do not attempt to instill beliefs and values, and let their children do and think whatever they please. At the other extreme, we find authoritarian parenting, where parents try to control every aspect of a child's beliefs and personality, and do not tolerate any deviations from their high expectations. Authoritarian parents also attempt to control the environment of their children, trying to shield them from different views and lifestyles. For instance, an authoritarian YEC parent may choose to homeschool his children because he does not want them to be confronted with evolutionary theory. An authoritarian humanist parent would punish a child who wants to attend Sunday school.

Within an authoritative parenting style, teaching YEC may be morally acceptable, as it doesn't infringe the child's autonomy. However, this requires that these parents do not control their child's beliefs through negative feedback, or do not try to shield their child from alternative worldviews. Unfortunately, authoritarianism correlates strongly with religious fundamentalism (not with religious belief by itself), so fundamentalist Christians are more likely to try to indoctrinate their children than more liberal religious believers. But the problem here seems to be the restrictive parenting style, not the fact that those beliefs have religious content.