

## **Chapter 9 – Childhood, Abuse and Religion**

Before I read the book I assumed this chapter would wind me up the most. However, some of his criticisms are actually fair, even if some are plain wrong, and many are totally unfounded.

Dawkins' essential argument is that if children are brought up as "Christian children" or "Muslim children" then this is a form of child abuse as they are not being taught to think, but are being indoctrinated.

### 1. Some fair criticisms

He does cite some terrible examples of children being scared witless by stories about hell in order to make them believe in God, and of parents disowning children who turned to atheism. This is not Christian behaviour.

He says that children should be brought up to be taught *how* to think, not *what* to think. I couldn't agree more. And if he read through Proverbs I believe he would see that is the bible's view too.

### 2. Some wrong criticisms

His underlying presupposition is that all religious upbringings are doctrinaire and force children to believe what their parents believe. Clearly that is untrue as a significant number of people do not adopt the faith of their parents, and a significant number come to faith even when their parents are not believers.

Since Dawkins likes to build his case on anecdotal evidence and personal testimony, I will permit myself the luxury of doing the same.

I was brought up in a Christian home by loving Christian parents. Whilst belief in God was always assumed, I never felt forced to believe anything. On the contrary, I was brought up with a love of sciences and to question how things worked and why they happened. (My father was a chemist by training, and is far more of a real scientist than I ever was or will be!)

At the age of 11 I had to do a school project. I chose to look at how the bible's story of creation and the scientific story of evolution fitted together. As part of my research I actually got my father's copy of "The Origin of Species" down from the shelf and read at least part of the first chapter. (I can't imagine I would have read or understood much of it, but at least I tried!).

Over 20 years on, I would now disagree with the conclusions that my 11 year old self drew. But significantly, my parents didn't disagree with me then. They encouraged the enterprise. So much for indoctrination then, in my case at least!

### 3. The lack of foundation to his argument

Perhaps the most serious flaw in this chapter though is that Dawkins has no objective standard by which to critique other people's beliefs. Having disposed of God (to his mind at least) in Chapter 4, he actually is left with no objective moral standard of truth or morality by which to judge whether the way others bring up their children is correct or not.

Instead, he just assumes his worldview and values are superior to everyone else's and therefore should be adhered to by all.

### 4. The hypocrisy of his argument

Point 3 leads us straight on to point 4. There is a danger that by arguing that his way is right and everyone else's is wrong, and by saying that children should not be brought up "religious" Dawkins is essentially being hypocritical. He rails against absolutism, but then seems to be introducing a new form of absolutism.

For example there is no such thing as a neutral upbringing. It's not as if bringing up children as atheists means they are somehow a blank sheet. To be fair, Dawkins does say that children should be brought up to learn how to think, not what to think (which we agree with) but he is not entirely absolved from the accusation that we would just teach children to be atheists. How would he respond if one of his children became a Christian? From what I heard when an undergraduate in Oxford, he wasn't exactly fair-minded and gentle with his students who were Christians. Would he treat his own children more kindly if they turned to Christ? Or could they never turn to Christ because they have been so indoctrinated against God as part of their upbringing? I guess we'll never know.

The other way in which he shows his own intolerant absolutism is in his comments about Christian schools that teach Intelligent Design or Six Day Creationism alongside traditional evolutionary theory. In arguing that only evolution should be taught he is in effect stifling debate and not giving young people an opportunity to listen to the evidence and reason for themselves. He is behaving in exactly the same way as the Pope behaved when Galileo put forward the idea that earth revolved around the sun, not the sun around the earth! As he will not allow for alternatives on this point he is effectively dictating that children should be taught what to think, not how to think. I guess he feels this is OK so long as it is what he believes that is being taught. Thus he ends up advocating doing in one area what he so despises in another.