

Why Evolution Is True

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## Relevant readings

Apropos of our recent discussions, here are three new pieces to check out:

Last week Quinn O’Neill wrote a piece on *Three Quarks Daily* that seemed to ask skeptics to give religion a pass. A fair few bloggers, including me, took her apart. This week, in “[Religion should not get a pass](#),” she explains what she really meant. The title tells it all.

The systematic indoctrination of children is unethical and must be stopped. Strictly speaking, religious freedom is a state protected right. But I think we can agree that freedom to choose a religion can be restricted in a more practical sense. For students at a religious school, the choice is free in a legal sense. It’s not a free choice in any practical sense, since all but one of the options have been obscured. If you are only exposed to one option, you don’t have a choice.

Curiously, despite O’Neill’s strong (and proper) claim that “systematic indoctrination of children is unethical and must be stopped,” she doesn’t mention that this brainwashing isn’t limited to the schools.

Speaking of giving a pass, [over at Butterflies and Wheels](#) Edmund Standing argues that we shouldn’t stop criticizing Islam—even the moderate version—just because not all Muslims are extremists.

Ultimately, Islam and the Qur’an do not pose problems because of ‘misinterpretation’, but rather because they belong to a world far from modernity and are actually of no relevance to modernity. Atheists have every right to point this out, even if it means criticising those who are nonetheless doing good work against extremism. Moderate Islam and moderate Quranic ‘interpretation’ offer no real bulwark against those who read the text of the Qur’an and take it at face value, as a perfect and divinely authored text. Only by acknowledging that any notion of a divinely authored book is simply false, by accepting the harsh reality that this book is in fact useless (and indeed dangerous) in the modern context, and by embracing human reason and freethinking will the curse of Islamic extremism ultimately be overcome.

Finally, in today’s *New York Times*, Carl Zimmer writes about the new [Nowak et al. paper in Nature](#) that questions the value of inclusive fitness theory. Zimmer even manages to dig up a few people who agree with the paper. But Zimmer’s a good science reporter, so he also sounds out the critics:

Andy Gardner, an evolutionary biologist at Oxford, said bluntly, “This is a really terrible article.” One problem Dr. Gardner points to is the Harvard team’s claim that the past 40 years of research on inclusive fitness has yielded nothing but “hypothetical explanations.”

“This claim is just patently wrong,” Dr. Gardner said. He points to the question of how many sons and daughters mothers produce among the many insights inclusive fitness has brought.

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*This entry was written by [whyevolutionistrue](#) and posted on August 31, 2010 at 5:00 am and filed under [atheism](#), [biology](#), [religion](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). Follow any comments here with the [RSS feed for this post](#). Post a comment or leave a [trackback](#): [Trackback URL](#).*

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1.

**Irène**Posted August 31, 2010 at 5:23 am | [Permalink](#)

Speaking of giving a pass, over at Butterflies and Wheels Edmund Standing argues that we shouldn't stop criticizing Islam—even the moderate version—just because not all Muslims are extremists.

Absolutely. We always should be able to criticize religious dogma and religious institutions, even in their more benign versions – as long as that criticism is informed. And as long as we keep in mind that “criticism” is not the same as reflexive bashing. Which is something people often do when they talk about a religion they don't like and/or don't know. (A frequent misunderstanding is to talk about “Islam” as if it was one entity, which is paradoxically a worldview straight from the ideological toolbox of militant Islamism.)

Reply



MrsCobb

Posted August 31, 2010 at 7:27 am | [Permalink](#)

Hear, hear.

Reply



Torbjörn Larsson, OM

Posted August 31, 2010 at 12:23 pm | [Permalink](#)

I reserve my reflexive bashing to religious supernatural claims and, where applicable, moral claims and ritualism. (Since nature is nature, morality is innate and ritualism is easily perverted for harm.)

In everything else I'm happy to join PZ Myer's non-reflexive notion that religion would do a good knitting club some day.

Reply



o

GrueBleen

Posted August 31, 2010 at 6:23 pm | [Permalink](#)

So what you're saying is that we must now do to Islam what we then did to the (various sects of) Christianity starting in the Enlightenment – viz, 'criticise' it into fecklessness.

I can certainly support that idea, but will it work in today's world ?

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2.

mike m

Posted August 31, 2010 at 5:35 am | [Permalink](#)

Religion is an addition. Not unlike each brand of cigarettes. If you're my age you'll remember the Lucky Strike guy with the black eye. They eye any attack on their personal religion as taking their cigs away. Telling someone they can't have religion in school is like telling them to go smoke outside.

[Reply](#)



o

Torbjörn Larsson, OM

Posted August 31, 2010 at 12:27 pm | [Permalink](#)

It is an addition to normal life and empirical findings, and it can become an addiction too. Both can be harmful.

[Reply](#)



3.

Curt Cameron

Posted August 31, 2010 at 7:07 am | [Permalink](#)

About the religious schools section, you've probably heard this before but...

Teach a child one religion and you indoctrinate him.

Teach him many religions and you inoculate him.

[Reply](#)



4.

Gingerbaker

Posted August 31, 2010 at 7:47 am | [Permalink](#)

**"Curiously, despite O'Neill's strong (and proper) claim that "systematic indoctrination of children is unethical and must be stopped,""**

That's a very bold and highly contentious assertion, to say the least, and deserves fleshing out. What serious argument can possibly be made, especially in the U.S. where we have First Amendment rights to freedom of religion, to enjoin religious instruction deemed appropriate by parents for their own children?

While children are legally "protected" from exposure to pornography, alcohol, recreational drugs etc, how can an argument be made that would extend such protection to a Constitutionally protected right? It seems to me that we simply can't go there, and

should not want to go there, despite how insidious we, as atheists, perceive religious indoctrination.

Reply



o Torbjörn Larsson, OM  
Posted August 31, 2010 at 12:31 pm | [Permalink](#)

You seem to perceive the constitution as a perfect and/or all knowing document. (Not unlike how the religious tradition we criticize perceive itself.)

Which is ironical, when you refer to amendments.

Reply



o GrueBleen  
Posted August 31, 2010 at 6:31 pm | [Permalink](#)

You seem to not appreciate that the whole purpose of 'indoctrination' is to limit and restrict freedom.

By 'indoctrinating' children you override their First Amendment right to have the freedom to make up their own mind what, if any, religion they wish to 'believe' by forcing them into a specific religion when they are too young to be able to make up their own minds.

Now maybe we have to do this with some things (eg. I'm all in favour of 'indoctrinating' children against thuggery and murder), but please let us remember that parents don't 'own' children, not even their own, and do not have unlimited 'rights' to determine everything they want their children to believe and to do.

Reply



5. Michael Kingsford Gray  
Posted August 31, 2010 at 8:29 pm | [Permalink](#)

Generally speaking, I think we should pay greater attention to strategy and tactics. More specifically, I think secular education should be our top priority. To this end, non-threatening persuasion tactics may be especially useful. It will be a long battle and we should identify of (sic) our most effective weapons.

– Quinn O'Neill

Well, we have 2300 years of evidence that proves beyond all sane doubt that the tactic of appeasement fails completely and utterly.

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