

'Political correctness' and the need to criticise religion.

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This is <http://www.cs.bham.ac.uk/research/projects/cogaff/misc/pc-and-religion.html>

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However, I was pleased to discover that my local MP, Lynne Jones, is also opposed to public funding for faith-based schools. She is to be congratulated for her courage in persistently opposing the bad policies of her own party's leaders.

Note Added 17 Jan 2007

For an excellent outburst against wishy-washy scientists (and politicians) who lower their intellectual standards when discussing religion see MY GOD PROBLEM By Natalie Angier atheist Pulitzer prize-winning New York Times science journalist.

Why is there so little discussion of the damage done by religion?

There has been much discussion recently of a book claiming that pressures to conform to requirements for 'political correctness' (PC) have distorted public discussion and debate on important issues, and led to bad decisions.

I've been too busy to listen continuously, but one taboo that has not been mentioned in discussion of PC that I've heard is criticism of religion.

All the recent concern about not offending people who have religious beliefs of one sort or another is a dreadful tendency. E.g. there are very strong arguments against allowing faith-based schools to receive any public support, because they corrupt young minds by forcing them down narrow channels, stultifying the development of critical, analytical facilities --- yet people dare not present those arguments.

Some time after writing that, I was proved wrong by the television broadcasts (in the UK) in which Richard Dawkins was allowed to present the arguments, as [reported here, for example](#).

Unfortunately, while I share many of his scientific views, I don't think he finds the most effective ways of communicating with his opponents -- not that it is easy to communicate with closed-minded bigots whose analytical thinking processes were damaged in childhood. The ones who are in it for financial gain and power are a different matter and have too much to lose so arguing with them is probably a waste of time.

But the effort should be made, just in case. I've known cases where it took a long time, but worked. However, it requires great skill in giving philosophical tutorials, for which most scientists are not well trained.

We should not be prevented from speaking the truth in the (long term) public interest just because it may offend someone. We must criticise those who bind the minds of their children just as we must criticise groups who bind the feet of their children as described [here](#) and [here](#)

Many people regard foot-binding as cruel and morally reprehensible and something to be criticised strongly, even if that is what some parents want for their children.

Mind-binding to stop the mind growing naturally by interacting with many physical things and many ideas from many sources (as illustrated in the theory about child learning outlined [here](#)) is just as cruel and morally reprehensible as foot-binding.

If the parents feel offended when we criticise them, that is no reason to let the malpractice continue. People who are offended by comment or criticism have no right to silence the criticism. They have every right to produce counter-arguments and evidence to point out mistakes. If their only evidence is argument from authority, they cannot expect free spirits to be convinced. But they have the right to try.

Governments who try to criminalise the giving of offence because they wish to win votes from religious bigots with bound minds, should also be strongly resisted.

In the UK it is acceptable to say that casting chicken entrails to discover the future is superstition, or that the practice of treating children as witches in the Congo is cruel and superstitious (see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/2660757.stm>).

But it seems to have become politically incorrect to point out that allowing sex only between people who have been through a religious ritual is superstitious prejudice, or that praying to your god to make the future go your way is foolish superstition, often matched by the superstition of others who are praying for the opposite result at the same time -- sometimes even praying to the same god.

I did not hear any public comment on the Wimbledon tennis winner (Ivanovic) who thought his god had caused him to win (though he was happy enough to accept the trophy as if he had won it!).

It's OK to say that what Hitler wrote about ethics is wicked, but not that the recent Pope was wicked when he compared abortion to the holocaust (as reported by the BBC: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4288103.stm>), since policies based on such views do dreadful harm to many women (and their families) in Catholic countries.

How much cruelty is caused by the superstitious religious objection to birth control in many parts of the world? That sort of harm done by Pope Paul was never mentioned when there were all the hushed reverent broadcasts about him before and shortly after his death.

A lot of muddled thinking goes unchallenged in BBC religious broadcasts, e.g. claims that everyone needs some form of religion, that it is impossible to have moral standards without religion, and other completely unsubstantiated generalisations uttered by unctuous religious representatives.

Morals without religion

Margaret Knight gave a talk on "Morals without religion" some time in the 1950s pointing out the ignorance and stupidity of such views in the BBC woman's hour radio programme, and created a storm of protest. She then wrote an excellent little book about the episode "Morals without religion" 1955.

Note added 19 Oct 2010

See:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_K._Knight

<http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/moralswithoutreligion.pdf>

<http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/christianitythedebitaccount.pdf>

That book should be regularly referenced in all schools, but I fear it would not now be politically correct to *require* faith schools to introduce their students to criticisms of religion, including moral as well as scientific criticism.

As a result, far too many impressionable young minds have their intellectual development stunted: their minds are bound and prevented from growing, to meet the wishes of priests and parents, and in some cases, less obviously, political rulers. Many of the people who are most strongly offended by criticisms of their religion do not know that that strong feeling of offence and the vindictive rage that they feel as a result, is part of a mechanism by which they are being used as pawns of priests and others who have enslaved their minds in order to maintain power and control.

So, strictly, we should not be criticising *the parents who bind the minds of their children*, but rather *the thoughts, morals, principles and religious views* by which their own minds have been bound and prevented from developing properly. The people who are so enslaved do not know what they are doing for they have never tasted another life.

(Unlike them I was never exposed to an educational system that forced me to adopt my opinions: I have never been forbidden to read any books, to look at any pictures, to consider any arguments or evidence.)

I fear that the result may be a growing drift towards religious fundamentalism in the UK, as a result of which important political decisions will be influenced by superstition and vicious moral absolutism.

We've already seen it happen elsewhere, and we even have a prime minister who thinks it's OK to cause bombs to be dropped on both guilty and innocent people when he 'passionately believes' something is right.

(Try giving "passionately believe" + "blair" to google, to see how often he uses *his* passionate belief as a justification for his decisions. That's not the decision-making of a rational leader. Perhaps religious education stunted his intellectual development?)

Note added 5 Mar 2006

In a [speech delivered in July 2005](#) reported on the BBC new site, Blair stated

The 20th century showed how powerful political ideologies could be. This is a religious ideology, a strain within the world-wide religion of Islam, as far removed from its essential decency and truth as Protestant gunmen who kill Catholics or vice versa, are from Christianity. But do not let us underestimate it or dismiss it.

Those who kill in its name believe genuinely that in doing it, they do God's work; they go to paradise.

Now he has been on a television chat show not quite saying that his killings in Iraq could be defended as a way of doing God's work, but coming very close to it. He did not confess to wanting to go to paradise.

Incidentally, unlike some atheist scientists I am not afraid of having opposing views taught and analysed in schools. I've argued here <http://www.cs.bham.ac.uk/~axs/id> that 'Intelligent Design' should be taught alongside the theory of evolution in order to help educate youngsters about the differences between science and superstition, and also to explain how bad theories need to be refuted -- just as students should learn about the ptolemaic theory of planetary motion, Priestly's phlogiston theory, and Newton's mechanics, now outdated by Einstein.

If well informed, philosophically educated science teachers were available in schools it would be a wonderful opportunity to confront the superstition of religious beliefs with ways of thinking characteristic of the open-minded, empirical and analytical, search for truth. I fear there are not enough of them.

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