

Chapter 4

Saving children from their parents

By Greg Nacu, 2012

This is a troubling chapter. It seems that D'Souza really feels as though atheists have an agenda to root out Christianity and that they're playing dirty pool by trying to prevent children from learning about it. Here's a quote, "It is to a large degree orchestrated by teachers and professors to promote anti-religious agendas." Where children are concerned, atheists and religious people seem genuinely to be at odds. Adults at least have the cognitive maturity to determine for themselves what they ought to believe and how they ought to live. Children on the other hand are ready and open to absorb the cultural norms and biases of their parents. Religious people obviously want to teach their children about religion from a young age so that they are well accustomed to a variety of spiritual and moral concepts. Atheists on the other hand clearly want to imbue children with a well functioning sense of reason and logic. Either approach seems to impede on the goals of the other.

In order to support his claims D'Souza offers some examples, "Defenders of evolution accuse the offending parents and school boards of retarding the acquisition of scientific knowledge in the name of religion." In response to this seeming injustice, he counters, "How many high school graduates could tell you the meaning of Einstein's famous equation? Lots of young people don't have a clue about photosynthesis or Boyle's law. So why isn't there a political movement to fight for the teaching of photosynthesis?" He is using this argument to demonstrate that atheists and darwinists are not fighting against a flawed education system, but rather they are systematically attacking religion as the sole cause of that failure. It's a very interesting observation. He's right, atheists are attacking religion as a major part of the problem, however the argument, and the complaint, doesn't prove much. Boyle's law and photosynthesis, and Einsteinian physics are specific sub-branches of a larger body of rational, scientific thought. Religion—supernaturalism, more specifically—opposes not just evolution but all scientific principles. Bertrand Russell immortally pointed out that something false which is taken as an axiom can be used to prove anything. As the possibly-apocryphal story tells it, one of Russell's students raised his hand and said, "If $1 = 0$ then prove that I am the pope." Without skipping a beat, he replied, "Adding 1 to both sides, $2 = 1$. The set which contains just you and the pope contains 2 people. However since $2 = 1$, they are the same person, therefore you are the pope." The point is that religion and supernaturalism teach the mind to think in irrational ways. And irrationality is a wedge that harms peoples ability to think clearly and arrive at objectively correct conclusions. Therefore, it is far more important that

atheists try to stop the teaching of irrationality, than it is for them merely to promote a stronger focus on some particular branch of science.

D'Souza also sees the situation as a plot to supplant traditional religion with some different ideology masquerading as science. Thus he argues, "Just as some people oppose the theory of evolution because they believe it to be anti-religious, many others support it for the very same reason. This is why we have Darwinism but not Keplerism; we encounter Darwinists but no one describes himself as an Einsteinian. Darwinism has become an ideology." The most telling problem with this argument is that he provides no references to support his claim. Where are these teachers and professors who support "Darwinism" because it is anti-religious rather than because it makes sense and is supported by scientific evidence? The claim is unfounded but worse it comes off with an air of paranoia. People are not asked to ignore their own rational judgement in order to reap the rewards and benefits of believing in the teachings of Darwin. But they are asked that of religion. If Darwinism is a religious ideology it also has a healthy side of comedy to go with it. Witness the "Darwin fish", which is a Jesus fish with little legs sprouting out of its body. It is a self-conscious jab at Christianity, not an actual sacred symbol to be taken seriously. There is a serious question to ask though. Why do we believe in what Einstein, Newton and Kepler discovered, but by and large we as a people still don't accept what Darwin discovered? D'Souza wants us to believe it is because Darwin is in fact wrong, and that the only reason some people do believe in Darwin is because, ironically, they're following him as though they were converting to his new religion. I think the answer to the hidden question is quite a bit simpler. Consider this: Kepler discovered that the planets don't orbit in perfectly spherical patterns, Newton discovered that macroscopic physical objects follow laws of motion with astonishing mathematical precision, and Einstein discovered something that most people don't have any clue about whatsoever. Something about warped space and how gravity works, and what-the-heck that all means is truly beyond the understanding of the everyday person. What do these discoveries all have in common? None of them directly challenges the religious person's perception of the world. So the planets move in ellipses, that's the way God made them, right? Physical objects follow laws of motion, but God created and sustains those very laws, which is how His natural world ticks along. He is therefore an engineer or a mathematician not a wizard. And the implications of Einstein's discoveries by-and-large elude people altogether. But what about Darwin? Darwin's discovery was that the human species was not specially created. That we share a common ancestor with every other living creature on earth; not just with Apes, but with worms, fish and bacteria. And the unspoken implications are that we most likely do not have a soul. The discovery of evolution was no less scientific than the discoveries of other pioneering scientists, but the implications of what Darwin discovered have significantly farther reaching consequences. And make no mistake, evolution tramples upon traditionally held

religious ideas and values. Is it really any wonder at all that people have been reluctant to accept Darwin's discovery? In order to explain people's lack of acceptance of Darwin, I don't think we need to postulate that, maybe the reason people don't believe in evolution is because it isn't real. The evidence is damning and there is a strong motive for people to want to ignore that evidence. You mean, grandpa's not watching us from heaven? You mean, my child who died didn't die because of an important plan? Such news is more than just difficult to accept, for most people it's worth actively rejecting.

After providing a number of quotes from leading scientists, such as Hitchens, Wilson, Weinberg and Dawkins, it is made fairly clear that these scientists definitely think religious education is damaging for children. Their suggestion is that the power of science to explain phenomena should serve as a good tool to undermine the credibility of religious teachings. He summarizes in the following way, "By abolishing all transcendent or supernatural truths, science can establish itself as the only source of truth, our only access to reality." This of course begs the question, is there such a thing as transcendent or supernatural truth to abolish in the first place? If the supernatural does not exist, then it never was a means to truth, but rather it was our collective cultural invention. Much like the Santa Claus syndrome, is it fair to make the following statement? By denying that Santa Claus exists, anti-Santa propagandists are attempting to abolish the Santa-source of knowledge and supplant it with rationality only. If you don't already believe in Santa the argument sounds rightly absurd. One has to establish the existence of something, not presuppose it. And unfortunately, there is nothing in all our history that demonstrates the existence of a supernatural source of knowledge. Nothing that religious people have ever determined about life or the world has ever been something that could not have been determined through natural means. In fact far more often than not the things religious people have thought they've known have turned out to be wrong.

One thing that D'Souza successfully argues is that there are at least some high-profile scientists who are very vocal about where religion should be situated in the education system. He says, "Daniel Dennett urges that the schools teach religion as a purely natural phenomenon. By this he means that religion should be taught as if it were untrue." I believe D'Souza must be using the word religion here as a stand-in for Christianity. Surely he is not arguing that Islam should be taught as though it were true. How can we teach religion in a public school system any other way? I'm sure Jewish parents don't want their children to be taught about the divinity of Jesus. Which religious group is right? Millions of Christians, millions of Hindus, millions of Muslims, Millions of Jews, Millions of Buddhists? They can't all be right, and scientific observations of nature don't support any of them. If anything is to be granted to D'Souza it is that we should temper the certainty with which we teach the current scientific paradigm. It is not anti-scientific to

acknowledge that what we know today is the best we have given what we know.

Are some scientists overreaching, maybe. "Nature is all there is, ever was, or ever will be." This is a Carl Sagan quote which D'Souza provides. It certainly sounds ideological. I mean, how could Sagan have known this to be true? Isn't he being preachy in a pseudo-religious fashion by making such a sweeping statement? Maybe. But for Sagan that was his personal slogan. And while it's not necessarily what we should be teaching children in school, it is significantly better supported by observation than any religious alternative. At least if what we teach our children in school is to have open, skeptical, and inquiring minds, then if statements like that one made by Sagan are unsubstantiated, our children will have the intellectual discipline to recognize it as such and to question it. Religious faith, on the contrary, encourages people to believe, not only without evidence, but often in spite of evidence, leaving them vulnerable to less reputable cults and charismatic individuals.

In an effective attempt to show that many atheists may be overstepping their bounds, he quotes psychologist Nicholas Humphrey, "Parents, correspondingly, have no god-given license to enculturate their children in whatever ways they personally choose: no right to limit the horizons of their children's knowledge, to bring them up in an atmosphere of dogma and superstition, or to insist they follow the straight and narrow paths of their own faith." I do tend to agree with D'Souza here. Don't parents have the right to raise their children as they see fit, as long as they are raising them within the bounds of the law? I mean, how many parents teach their children that money is important, and that they should hold conservative views? Who are we to interfere with the philosophies that parents imbue their children with? We don't want to outlaw the teaching of religion. Ultimately, if a child is taught about religion at home, and is taught about science in school, we can only hope that they will come to understand that their parents were mistaken. I'm not willing to accept that teaching a child about religion constitutes "abuse." After all, in order to constitute as willfully teaching a manifest falsehood, it would have to be proven that the parent actually knows that the religion they teach is false, and that they teach it anyway. I have no reason to believe that the people who are teaching religion secretly know it's false. If I thought that, then I'd be the paranoid one. As much as I think D'Souza is wrong in his beliefs, I certainly don't think that he knows he's wrong and is teaching others falsehoods because he's wicked. He's not doing anything wrong, he's simply mistaken. And it's not a crime to be wrong. Heaven help us if it ever becomes one.

He finishes up the chapter with this, "Children spend the majority of their waking hours in school. Parents invest a good portion of their life savings in college education to entrust their offspring to people who are supposed to educate them. Isn't it wonderful that educators have figured out a way to make parents the

instruments of their own undoing? Isn't it brilliant that they have persuaded Christian moms and dads to finance the destruction of their own beliefs and values? Who said atheists weren't clever?" Now, that is ad hominem. How is one supposed to respond to that? He's basically saying that all atheists are devious and have figured out a way to trick parents into handing over their children. Why not look at the situation as it is? There are some religious people in the education system and there are some atheists in the education system. Beyond that, the hard reality of the world according to the statistics is that as people become more educated they come to realize that religious truth is less and less plausible. Consequently, the rate of atheism is much higher in academic circles than in other areas of society. Now, you can either assume that that is because of some sort of atheist conspiracy which has infiltrated the world through the education system, and is bent on destroying our children's connection with God, or you can start to wonder, isn't it possible that objective knowledge and rational thinking are incompatible with religion?