

Oxford Amnesty Lecture, 1997. Published as Nicholas Humphrey, 1998, "What shall we tell the children?", *Social Research*, 65, 777-805; also as, 1998, "What shall we tell the children?" in *The Values of Science*, ed. Wes Williams, pp 58-79, Oxford: Westview Press.

WHAT SHALL WE TELL THE CHILDREN? ¹

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," the proverb goes. And since, like most proverbs, this one captures at least part of the truth, it makes sense that Amnesty International should have devoted most of its efforts to protecting people from the menace of sticks and stones not words. Worrying about words must have seemed something of a luxury.

Still the proverb, like most proverbs, is also in part obviously false. The fact is that words *can* hurt. For a start, they can hurt people indirectly by inciting others to hurt them: a crusade preached by a pope, racist propaganda from the Nazis, malevolent gossip from a rival. . . They can hurt people, not so indirectly, by inciting them to take actions that harm themselves: the lies of a false prophet, the blackmail of a bully, the flattery of a seducer. . . And words can hurt directly, too: the lash of a malicious tongue, the dreaded message carried by a telegram, the spiteful onslaught that makes the hearer beg his tormentor say no more.

Sometimes indeed mere words can kill outright. There is a story by Christopher Cherniak about a deadly "word-virus" that appeared one night on a computer screen.² It took the form of a brain-teaser, a riddle, so paradoxical that it fatally twisted the mind of anyone who heard or read it, making him fall into an irreversible coma. A fiction? Yes, of course. But a fiction with some horrible parallels in the real world. There have been all too many examples historically of how words can take possession of a person's mind, destroying his will to live. Think, for example, of so-called voodoo death. The witch-doctor has merely to cast his spell of death upon a man and within hours the victim will collapse and die. Or, on a larger and more dreadful scale, think of the mass suicide at Jonestown in Guyana in 1972. The cult leader Jim Jones had only to plant certain crazed ideas in the heads of his disciples, and at his signal nine hundred of them willingly drank cyanide.

"Words will never hurt me"? The truth may rather be that words have a unique power to hurt. And if we were to make an inventory of the man-made causes of human misery, it would be words, not sticks and stones, that head the list. Even guns and high explosives might be considered playthings by comparison. Vladimir Mayakovsky wrote in his poem "I": "On the pavement / of my trampled soul / the soles of madmen / stamp the print of rude, crude, words."³

Should we then be fighting Amnesty's battle on this front too? Should we be campaigning for the rights of human beings to be protected from verbal oppression and manipulation? Do we need "word laws", just as all civilised societies have gun laws, licensing who should be allowed to use them in what circumstances? Should there be Geneva protocols establishing what kinds of speech act count as crimes against humanity?

No. The answer, I'm sure, ought in general to be "No, don't even think of it." Freedom of speech is too precious a freedom to be meddled with. And however painful some of its consequences may sometimes be for some people, we should still as a matter of principle resist putting curbs on it. By all means we should try to make up for the harm that other people's words do, but not by censoring the words as such.

And, since I am so sure of this in general, and since I'd expect most of you to be so too, I shall probably shock you when I say it is the purpose of my lecture tonight to argue in one particular area just the opposite. To argue, in short, in favour of censorship, against freedom of expression, and to do so moreover in an area of life that has traditionally been regarded as sacrosanct.

I am talking about moral and religious education. And especially the education a child receives at home, where parents are allowed – even expected – to determine for their children what counts as truth and falsehood, right and wrong.

Children, I'll argue, have a human right not to have their minds crippled by exposure to other people's bad ideas – no matter *who* these other people are. Parents, correspondingly, have no god-given licence 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.

In short, children have a right not to have their minds addled by nonsense. And we as a society have a duty to protect them from it. So we should no more allow parents to teach their children to believe, for example, in the literal truth of the Bible, or that the planets rule their lives, than we should allow parents to knock their children's teeth out or lock them in a dungeon.

That's the negative side of what I want to say. But there will be a positive side as well. If children have a right to be protected from false ideas, they have too a right to be succoured by the truth. And we as a society have a duty to provide it. Therefore we should feel as much obliged to pass on to our children the best scientific and philosophical understanding of the natural world – to teach, for example, the truths of evolution and cosmology, or the methods of rational analysis – as we already feel obliged to feed and shelter them.

I don't suppose you'll doubt my good intentions here. Even so, I realise there may be many in this audience – especially the more liberal of you – who do not like the sound of this at all: neither the negative, nor still less the positive side of it.

In which case, among the good questions you may have for me, will probably be these.

First, what is all this about "truths" and "lies"? How could anyone these days have the face to argue that the modern scientific view of the world is the only *true* view that there is? Haven't the post-modernists and relativists taught us that more or less anything can be true in its own way? What possible justification could there be, then, for presuming to protect children from one set of ideas or to steer them towards another, if in the end all are all equally valid?

Second, even supposing that in some boring sense the scientific view really is "more true" than some others, who's to say that this truer world-view is the *better* one? At any rate, the better for everybody? Isn't it possible – or actually likely – that particular individuals, given who they are and what their life situation is, would be better served by one of the not-so-true world-views? How could it possibly be right to insist on teaching children to think this modern way when, in practice, the more traditional way of thinking might actually work best for them?

Third, even in the unlikely event that almost everybody really would be happier and better off if they were brought up with the modern scientific picture, do we – as a global community – really want everyone right across the world thinking the same way, everyone living in a dreary scientific monoculture? Don't we want pluralism and cultural diversity? A hundred flowers blooming, a hundred schools of thought contending?

And then, last, why – when it comes to it – should *children's* rights be considered so much more important than those of other people? Everyone would grant of course that children are relatively innocent and relatively vulnerable, and so may have more need of protection than their seniors do. Still, why should their special rights in this respect take precedence over everybody else's rights in other respects? Don't parents have their own rights too, their rights as parents? The right, most obviously, to be parents, or literally to bring forth and *pre-pare* their children for the future as *they* see fit?

Good questions? Knock-down questions, some of you may think, and questions to which any broad-minded and progressive person could give only one answer.

I agree they are good-ish questions, and ones that I should deal with. But I don't think it is by any means so obvious what the answers are. Especially for a liberal. Indeed, were we to change the context not so greatly, most people's liberal instincts would I'm sure pull quite the other way.

Let's suppose we were talking not about children's minds but children's bodies. Suppose the issue were not who should control a child's intellectual development but who should control the development of her hands or feet . . . or genitalia. Let's suppose indeed that this is a lecture about female circumcision. And the issue is not whether anyone should be permitted to deny a girl knowledge of Darwin, but whether anyone should be permitted to deny her the uses of a clitoris.

And now here I am suggesting that it is a girl's right to be left intact, that parents have no right to mutilate their daughters to suit their own socio-sexual agenda, and that we as a society ought to prevent it. What's more, to make the positive case as well, that every girl should actually be encouraged to find out how best to use to her own advantage the intact body she was born with.

Would you still have those good questions for me? And would it still be so obvious what the liberal answers are? There will be a lesson – even if an awful one – in hearing how the questions sound.

First, what's all this about "intactness" and "mutilation"? Haven't the anthropological relativists taught us that the idea of there being any such thing as "absolute intactness" is an illusion, and that girls are – in a way – just as intact without their clitorises?

Anyway, even if uncircumcised girls are in some boring sense "more intact", who's to say that intactness is a virtue? Isn't it possible that some girls, given their life situation, would actually be better off being not-so-intact? What if the men of their culture consider intact women unmarriageable?

Besides, who wants to live in a world where all women have standard genitalia? Isn't it essential to maintaining the rich tapestry of human culture that there should be at least a few groups where circumcision is still practised? Doesn't it indirectly enrich the lives of all of us to know that some women somewhere have had their clitorises removed?

In any case, why should it be only the rights of the girls that concern us? Don't other people have rights in relation to circumcision also? How about the rights of the circumcisers themselves, their rights *as* circumcisers? Or the rights of mothers to do what they think best, just as in their day was done to them?

You'll agree, I hope, that the answers go the other way now. But maybe some of you are going to say that this is not playing fair. Whatever the superficial similarities between doing things to a child's body and doing things to her mind, there are also several obvious and important differences. For one thing, the effects of circumcision are final and irreversible, while the effects of even the most restrictive regime of education can perhaps be undone later. For another, circumcision involves the removal of something that is already part of the body

and will naturally be missed, while education involves selectively adding new things to the mind that would otherwise never have been there. To be deprived of the pleasures of bodily sensation is an insult on the most personal of levels, but to be deprived of a way of thinking is perhaps no great personal loss.

So, you might argue, the analogy is far too crude for us to learn from it. And those original questions about the rights to control a child's education still need addressing and answering on their own terms.

Very well. I'll try to answer them just so – and we shall see whether or not the analogy with circumcision was unfair. But there may be another kind of objection to my project that I should deal with first. For it might be argued, I suppose, that the whole issue of intellectual rights is not worth bothering with, since so few of the world's children are in point of fact at risk of being hurt by any *severely* misleading forms of education – and those who are mostly far away and out of reach.

Now that I say it, however, I wonder whether anyone could make such a claim with a straight face. Look around – close to home. We ourselves live in a society where most adults – not just a few crazies, but most adults – subscribe to a whole variety of weird and nonsensical beliefs, that in one way or another they shamelessly impose upon their children.

In the United States, for example – which I take as the example since it's where I currently reside – it sometimes seems that almost everyone is either a religious fundamentalist or a New Age mystic or both. And even those who aren't will scarcely dare admit it. Opinion polls confirm that, for example, a full 98% of the US population say they believe in God, 70% believe in life after death, 50% believe in human psychic powers, 30% think their lives are directly influenced by the position of the stars (and 70% follow their horoscopes anyway – just in case), and 20% believe they are at risk of being abducted by aliens.⁴

The problem – I mean the problem for children's education – is not just that so many adults positively believe in things that flatly contradict the modern scientific world view, but that so many do not believe in things that are absolutely central to the scientific view. A survey published last year showed that half the American people do not know, for example, that the earth goes round the sun once a year. Fewer than one in ten know what a molecule is. More than half do not accept that human beings have evolved from animal ancestors; and less than one in ten believe that evolution – if it has occurred – can have taken place without some kind of external intervention. Not only do people not know the results of science, they do not even know what science is. When asked what they think distinguishes the scientific method, only 2% realised it involves putting theories to the test, 34% vaguely knew it has something to do with experiments and measurement, but 66% didn't have a clue.⁵

Nor do these figures, worrying as they are, give the full picture of what children are up against. They tell us about the beliefs of typical people, and so about the belief environment of the average child. But there are small but significant communities just down the road from us – I mean literally just down the road, in New York, or London or Oxford – where the situation is arguably very much worse: communities where not only are superstition and ignorance even more firmly entrenched, but where this goes hand in hand with the imposition of repressive regimes of social and inter-personal conduct – in relation to hygiene, diet, dress, sex, gender roles, marriage arrangements, and so on. I think, for example of the Amish Christians, Hasidic Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Orthodox Muslims . . . or, for that matter, the radical New Agers . . . all no doubt very different from each other, all with their own peculiar hang-ups and neuroses, but alike in providing an intellectual and cultural dungeon for those who live among them.

In theory, maybe, the children need not suffer. Adults might perhaps keep their beliefs to themselves and not make any active attempt to pass them on. But we know, I'm sure, better than to expect that. This kind of self-restraint is simply not in the nature of a parent-child relationship. If a mother, for example, sincerely believes that eating pork is a sin, or that the best cure for depression is holding a crystal to her head, or that after she dies she will be reincarnated as a mongoose, or that Capricorns and Aries are bound to quarrel, she is hardly likely to withhold such serious matters from her own offspring.

But, more important, as Richard Dawkins has explained so well,⁶ this kind of self-restraint is not in the nature of successful belief systems. Belief systems in general flourish or die out according to how good they are at reproduction and competition. The better a system is at creating copies of itself, and the better at keeping other rival belief systems at bay, the greater its own chances of evolving and holding its own. So we should expect that it will be characteristic of successful belief systems – especially those that survive when everything else seems to be against them – that their devotees will be obsessed with education and with discipline: insisting on the rightness of their own ways and rubbishing or preventing access to others. We should expect, moreover, that they will make a special point of targeting children in the home, while they are still available, impressionable and vulnerable. For, as the Jesuit master wisely noted, "If I have the teaching of children up to seven years of age or thereabouts, I care not who has them afterwards, they are mine for life."⁷

Donald Kraybill, an anthropologist who made a close study of an Amish community in Pennsylvania, was well placed to observe how this works out in practice. "Groups threatened by cultural extinction," he writes, "must indoctrinate their offspring if they want to preserve their unique heritage. Socialization of the very young is one of the most potent forms of social

control. As cultural values slip into the child's mind, they become personal values – embedded in conscience and governed by emotions. . . The Amish contend that the Bible commissions parents to train their children in religious matters as well as the Amish way of life. . . An ethnic nursery, staffed by extended family and church members, moulds the Amish world view in the child's mind from the earliest moments of consciousness."⁸

But what he is describing is not, of course, peculiar to the Amish. "An ethnic nursery, staffed by extended family and church members . ." could be as much a description of the early environment of a Belfast Catholic, a Birmingham Sikh, a Brooklyn Hasidic Jew – or maybe the child of a North Oxford don. All sects that are serious about their own survival do indeed make every attempt to flood the child's mind with their own propaganda, and to deny the child access to any *alternative* viewpoints.

In the United States this kind of restricted education has continually received the blessing of the law. Parents have the legal right, if they wish to, to educate their children entirely at home, and nearly one million families do so.⁹ But many more who wish to limit what their children learn can rely on the thousands of sectarian schools that are permitted to function subject to only minimal state supervision. A US court did recently insist that teachers at a Baptist school should at least hold teaching certificates; but at the same time it recognised that "the whole purpose of such a school is to foster the development of their children's minds in a religious environment" and therefore that the school should be allowed to teach all subjects "in its own way" – which meant, as it happened, presenting all subjects only from a biblical point of view, and requiring all teachers, supervisors, and assistants to agree with the church's doctrinal position.¹⁰

Yet, parents hardly need the support of the law to achieve such a baleful hegemony over their children's minds. For there are, unfortunately, many ways of isolating children from external influences without actually physically removing them or controlling what they hear in class. Dress a little boy in the uniform of the Hasidim, curl his side-locks, subject him to strange dietary taboos, make him spend all weekend reading the Torah, tell him that gentiles are dirty, and you could send him to any school in the world and he'd still be a child of the Hasidim. The same – just change the terms a bit – for a child of the Muslims, or the Roman Catholics, or followers of the Maharishi Yogi.

More worrying still, the children themselves may often be unwitting collaborators in this game of isolation. For children all too easily learn who they are, what is allowed for them and where they must not go – even in thought. John Schumaker, an Australian psychologist, has described his own Catholic boyhood: "I believed wholeheartedly that I would burn in eternal fire if I ate meat on a Friday. I now hear that people no longer spend an eternity in fire

for eating meat on Fridays. Yet, I cannot help thinking back on the many Saturdays when I rushed to confess about the bologna and ketchup sandwich I could not resist the day before. I usually hoped I would not die before getting to the 3 p.m. confession."¹¹

All the same . . . this particular Catholic boy actually escaped and lived to tell the tale. In fact Schumaker became an atheist, and has gone on to make something of a profession of his godlessness. Nor of course is he unique. There are plenty of other examples, known to all of us, of men and women who as children were pressured into becoming junior members of a sect, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Marxist – and yet who came out the other side, free thinkers, and seemingly none the worse for their experience.

Then perhaps I am, after all, being too alarmist about what all this means. For sure the *risks* are real enough. We do live – even in our advanced, democratic, Western nations – in an environment of spiritual oppression, where many little children – our neighbours' children if not actually ours – are daily exposed to the attempts of adults to annexe their minds. Yet, you may still want to point out that there's a big difference between what the adults want and what actually transpires. All right, so children do frequently get saddled with adult nonsense. But so what. Maybe it's just something the child has to put up with until he or she is able to leave home and learn better. In which case I would have to admit that the issue is certainly nothing like so serious as I have been making out. After all there are surely lots of things that are done to children either accidentally or by design that – though they may not be ideal for the child at the time – have no lasting ill effects.

I'd reply: Yes and No. Yes, it's right we should not fall into the error of a previous era of psychology of assuming that people's values and beliefs are determined once and for all by what they learn – or do not learn – as children. The first years of life, though certainly formative, are not necessarily the "critical period" they were once thought to be. Psychologists no longer generally believe that children "imprint" on the first ideas they come across, and thereafter refuse to follow any others. In most cases, rather, it seems that individuals can and will remain open to new opportunities of learning later in life – and, if need be, will be able to make up a surprising amount of lost ground in areas where they have earlier been deprived or been misled.¹²

Yes, I agree therefore we should not be *too* alarmist – or too prissy – about the effects of early learning. But, No, we should certainly not be too sanguine about it either. True, it may not be so difficult for a person to unlearn or replace factual knowledge later in life: someone who once thought the world was flat, for example, may, when faced by overwhelming evidence to the contrary, grudgingly come round to accepting that the world is

round. It will, however, often be very much more difficult for a person to unlearn established procedures or habits of thought: someone who has grown used, for example, to taking everything on trust from Biblical authority may find it very hard indeed to adopt a more critical and questioning attitude. And it may be nigh impossible for a person to unlearn attitudes and emotional reactions: someone who has learned as a child, for example, to think of sex as sinful may never again be able to be relaxed about making love.

But there is another even more pressing reason not to be too sanguine, or sanguine in the least. Research has shown that *given the opportunity* individuals can go on learning and can recover from poor childhood environments. However, what we should be worrying about are precisely those cases where such opportunities do not – indeed are not allowed to – occur.

Suppose, as I began to describe above, children are in effect locked out by their families from access to any alternative ideas. Or, worse, that they are so effectively immunised against foreign influences that they do the locking out themselves.

Think of those cases, not so uncommon, when it has become a central plank of someone's belief system that they must not let themselves be defiled by mixing with others. When, because of their faith, all they want to hear is one voice, and all they want to read is one text. When they treat new ideas as if they carry infection. When, later, as they grow more sophisticated, they come to deride reason as an instrument of Satan. When they regard the humility of unquestioning obedience as a virtue. When they identify ignorance of worldly affairs with spiritual grace. . . In such case, it hardly matters what their minds may still remain capable of learning, because they themselves will have made certain they never again use this capacity.

The question was, does childhood indoctrination matter: and the answer, I regret to say, is that it matters more than you might guess. The Jesuit did know what he was saying. Though human beings are remarkably resilient, the truth is that the effects of *well-designed* indoctrination may still prove irreversible, because one of the effects of such indoctrination will be precisely to remove the means and the motivation to reverse it. Several of these belief systems simply could not survive in a free and open market of comparison and criticism: but they have cunningly seen to it that they don't have to, by enlisting believers as their own gaolers. So, the bright young lad, full of hope and joy and inquisitiveness, becomes in time the nodding elder buried in the Torah; the little maid, fresh to the morning of the world, becomes the washed up New Age earth mother lost in mists of superstition.

Yet, we can ask, if this is right: what would happen if this kind of vicious circle were to be forcibly broken? What would happen if, for example, there were to be an externally imposed

"time-out"? Wouldn't we predict that, just to the extent it is a vicious circle, the process of becoming a fully-fledged believer might be surprisingly easy to disrupt? I think the clearest evidence of how these belief systems typically hold sway over their followers can in fact be found in historical examples of what has happened when group members have been involuntarily exposed to the fresh air of the outside world.

A interesting test was provided in the 1960's by the case of the Amish and the military Draft.¹³ The Amish have consistently refused to serve in the armed forces of the United States on grounds of conscience. Up to 1960's young Amish men who were due to be drafted for military service were regularly granted "agricultural deferments" and were able to continue working safely on their family farms. But as the draft continued through the Vietnam war, an increasing number of these men were deemed ineligible for farm deferments and were required instead to serve two years working in public hospitals – where they were introduced, like it or not, to all manner of non-Amish people and non-Amish ways. Now, when the time came for these men to return home, many no longer wanted to do so and opted to defect. They had tasted the sweets of a more open, adventurous, free-thinking way of life – and they were not about to declare it all a snare and a delusion.

These defections were rightly regarded by Amish leaders as such a serious threat to their culture's survival, that they quickly moved to negotiate a special agreement with the government, under which all their draftees could in future be sent to Amish-run farms – so that this kind of breach of security should not happen again.

Let me take stock. I have been discussing the survival strategies of some of the more tenacious beliefs systems – the epidemiology, if you like, of those religions and pseudo-religions that Richard Dawkins has called "cultural viruses".¹⁴ But you'll see that, especially with this last example, I have begun to approach the next and more important of the issues I wanted to address: the ethical one.

Suppose that, as the Amish case suggests, young members of such a faith would – if given the opportunity to make up their own minds – *choose to leave*. Doesn't this say something important about the morality of imposing any such faith on children to begin with? I think it does. In fact I think it says everything we need to know in order to condemn it.

You'll agree that, if it were female circumcision we were talking about, we could build a moral case against it based just on considering whether it is something a woman would choose for herself. Given the fact – I assume it is a fact – that most of those women who were circumcised as children would, if they only knew what they were missing, have preferred to remain intact. Given that almost no woman who was not circumcised as a child volunteers to undergo the operation later in life. Given in short that it seems not to be what free women

want to have done to their bodies. Then it seems clear that whoever takes advantage of their temporary power over a child's body to perform the operation must be abusing this power and acting wrongly.

Well then, if this is so for bodies, the same for minds. Given, let's say, that most people who have been brought up as members of a sect would, if they only knew what they are being denied, have preferred to remain outside it. Given that almost no one who was not brought up this way volunteers to adopt the faith later in life. Given in short that it is not a faith that a free-thinker would adopt. Then, likewise, it seems clear that whoever takes advantage of their temporary power over a child's mind to impose this faith, is equally abusing this power and acting wrongly.

So I'll come to the main point – and lesson – of this lecture. I want to propose a general test for deciding when and whether the teaching of a belief system to children is morally defensible. As follows. If it is ever the case that teaching this system to children will mean that later in life they come to hold beliefs that, were they in fact to have had access to alternatives, they would most likely not have chosen for themselves, then it is morally wrong of whoever presumes to impose this system and *to chose for them* to do so. No one has the right to *choose badly* for anyone else.

This test, I admit, will not be simple to apply. It is rare enough for there to be the kind of social experiment that occurred with the Amish and the military draft. And even such an experiment does not actually provide so strong a test as I'm suggesting we require. After all the Amish young men were not offered the alternative until they were already almost grown up, whereas what we need to know is what the children of the Amish or any other sect would choose for themselves if they were to have had access to the full range of alternatives all along. But in practice of course such a totally free-choice is never going to be available.

Still, utopian as the criterion is, I think its moral implications remain pretty obvious. For, even supposing we cannot know – and can only guess on the basis of weaker tests – whether an individual exercising this genuinely free choice would himself choose the beliefs that others intend to impose upon him, then this state of ignorance in itself must be grounds for making it morally wrong to proceed. In fact perhaps the best way of putting this is to put it the other way round, and say: only if we know that teaching a system to children will mean that later in life they come to hold beliefs that, were they to have had access to alternatives, they would still have chosen for themselves, only then can it be morally allowable for whoever imposes this system and choses for them to do so. And in all other cases, the moral imperative must be to hold off.

Now, I expect most of you will probably be happy to agree with this – so far as it goes. Of course, other things being equal, everybody has a right to self-determination of both body and mind – and it must indeed be morally wrong of others to stand in the way of it. But this is: *other things being equal*. And, to continue with those questions I raised earlier, what happens when other things are not equal?

It is surely a commonplace in ethics that sometimes the rights of individuals have to be limited or even overruled in the interests of the larger good or to protect the rights of other people. And it's certainly not immediately obvious why the case of children's intellectual rights should be an exception.

As we saw, there are several factors that might be considered counter-balancing. And of these the one that seems to many people weightiest, or at least is often mentioned first, is our interest as a society in maintaining cultural diversity. All right, you may want to say, so it's tough on a child of the Amish, or the Hasidim or the Gypsies to be shaped up by their parents in the ways they are – but at least the result is that these fascinating cultural traditions continue. Would not our whole civilisation be impoverished if they were to go? It's a shame, maybe, when individuals have to be sacrificed to maintain such diversity. But there it is: it's the price we pay as a society.

Except, I would feel bound to remind you, *we* do not pay it, *they* do.

Let me give a telling example. In 1995, in the high mountains of Peru, some climbers came across the frozen mummified body of a young Inca girl. She was dressed as a princess. She was thirteen years old. About five hundred years ago, this little girl had, it seems, been taken alive up the mountain by a party of priests, and then ritually killed – a sacrifice to the mountain's Gods in the hope that they would look kindly on the people below.

The discovery was described by the anthropologist, Johan Reinhard, in an article for the National Geographic magazine.¹⁵ He was clearly elated both as a scientist and as a human being by the romance of finding this "ice maiden", as he called her. Even so, he did express some reservations about how she had come to be there: "we can't help but shudder," he wrote, "at [the Incas'] practice of performing human sacrifice."

The discovery was also made the subject of a documentary film shown on American television. Here, however, no one expressed any reservation whatsoever. Instead, viewers were simply invited to marvel at the spiritual commitment of the Inca priests and to share with the girl on her last journey her pride and excitement at having been selected for the signal honour of being sacrificed. The message of the Tv programme was in effect that the practice of human sacrifice was in its own way a glorious cultural invention – another jewel in the crown of multiculturalism, if you like.

Yet, how dare anyone even suggest this? How dare they invite us – in our sitting rooms, watching television – to feel uplifted by contemplating an act of ritual murder: the murder of a dependent child by a group of stupid, puffed up, superstitious, ignorant old men? How dare they invite us to find good for ourselves in contemplating an immoral action against someone else?

Immoral? By Inca standards? No, that's not what matters. Immoral by ours – and in particular by just the standard of free-choice that I was enunciating earlier. The plain fact is that none of *us*, knowing what we do about the way the world works, would freely choose to be sacrificed as she was. And however "proud" the Inca girl may or may not have been to have had the choice made for her by her family (and for all we know she may actually have felt betrayed and terrified), we can still be pretty sure that she, if she had known what we now know, would not have chosen this fate for herself either.

No, this girl was used by others as a means for achieving their ends. The elders of her community valued their collective security above her life, and decided for her that she must die in order that their crops might grow and they might live. Now, five hundred years later, we ourselves must not, in a lesser way, do the same: by thinking of her death as something that enriches *our* collective culture.

We must not do it here, nor in any other case where we are invited to celebrate other people's subjection to quaint and backward traditions as evidence of what a rich world we live in. We mustn't do it even when it can be argued, as I'd agree it sometimes can be, that the maintenance of these minority traditions is potentially of benefit to all of us because they keep alive ways of thinking that might one day serve as a valuable counterpoint to the majority culture.

The US Supreme Court, in supporting the Amish claim to be exempt from sending their children to public schools, commented in an aside: "We must not forget that in the Middle Ages important values of the civilisation of the Western World were preserved by members of religious orders who isolated themselves from all worldly influences against great obstacles."¹⁶ By analogy, the Court implied, we should recognise that the Amish may be preserving ideas and values that our own descendants may one day wish to return to.

But what the Court has failed to recognise is that there is a crucial difference between the religious communities of the Middle Ages, the monks of Holy Island for example, and the present-day Amish: namely, that the monks made their own choice to become monks, they did not have their monasticism imposed on them as children, and nor did they in their turn impose it on their own children – for indeed they did not have any. Those mediaeval orders survived

by the recruitment of adult volunteers. The Amish, by contrast, survive only by kidnapping little children before they can protest.

The Amish may – possibly – have wonderful things to teach the rest of us; and so may – possibly – the Incas have done, and so may several other outlying groups. But these things must not be paid for by the children's lives.

This is, surely, the crux of it. It is a cornerstone of every decent moral system, stated explicitly by Immanuel Kant but already implicit in most people's very idea of morality, that human individuals have an absolute right to be treated as *ends in themselves* – and never as *means* to achieving other people's ends. It goes without saying that this right applies no less to children than to anybody else. And since, in so many situations, children are in no position to look after themselves, it is morally obvious that the rest of us have a particular duty to watch out for them.

So, in every case where we come across examples of children's lives being manipulated to serve other ends, we have a duty to protest. And this, no matter whether the other ends involve the mollification of the Gods, "the preservation of important values for Western civilisation", the creation of an interesting anthropological exhibit for the rest of us . . . or – now I'll come to the next big question that's been waiting – the fulfilment of certain needs and aspirations of the child's own parents.

There is, I'd say, no reason whatever why we should treat the actions of parents as coming under a different set of moral rules here.

The relationship of parent to child is of course a special one in all sorts of ways. But it is not so special as to deny the child her individual personhood. It is not a relationship of co-extension, nor one of ownership. Children are not a part of their parents, nor except figuratively do they "belong" to them. Children are in no sense their parents' private property. Indeed, to quote the US Supreme Court, commenting in a different context on this same issue: it is a "moral fact that a person belongs to himself and not others nor to society as a whole"¹⁷.

It will therefore be as much a breach of a child's rights if he or she is used by their parents to achieve the parents' personal goals, as it would be if this were done by anyone else. No one has a right to treat children as anything less than ends in themselves.

Still, some of you I'm sure will want to argue that the case of parents is not *quite* the same as that of outsiders. No doubt we'd all agree that parents have no more right than anyone else to exploit children for ends that are obviously selfish – to abuse them sexually, for example, or to exploit them as servants, or to sell them into slavery. But, first, isn't it different when the

parents at least think their own ends are the child's ends too? When their manipulation of the child's beliefs to conform to their's is – so as far as they are concerned – entirely in the child's best interests? And then, second, isn't it different when the parents have already invested so much of their own resources in the child, giving him or her so much of their love and care and time? Haven't they somehow earned the reward of having the child honour their beliefs, even if these beliefs are – by other people's lights – eccentric or old fashioned?

Don't these considerations, together, mean that parents have at least some rights that other people don't have? And rights which arguably should come before – or at least rank beside – the rights of the children themselves?

No. The truth is these considerations simply don't add up to any form of *rights*, let alone rights that could outweigh the children's: at most they merely provide mitigating circumstances. Imagine. Suppose you were misguidedly to give your own child poison. The fact that you might think the poison you were administering was good for your child, the fact that you might have gone to a lot of trouble to obtain this poison, and that if it were not for all your efforts your child would not even been there to be offered it, none of this would give you *a right* to administer the poison – at most, it would only make you less culpable when the child died.

But in any case, to see the parents as simply misguided about the child's true interests is, I think, to put too generous a construction on it. For it is not at all clear that parents when they take control of their children's spiritual and intellectual lives really do believe they are acting in the child's best interests rather than their own. Abraham when he was commanded by God on the mountain to kill his son, Isaac, and dutifully went ahead with the preparation, was surely not thinking of what was best for Isaac – he was thinking of his own relationship with God. And so on down the ages. Parents have used and still use their children to bring *themselves* spiritual or social benefits: dressing them up, educating them, baptising them, bringing them to confirmation or Bah Mitzvah in order to maintain their own social and religious standing.

Consider again the analogy with circumcision. No one should make the mistake of supposing that female circumcision, in those places where it's practised, is done to benefit the girl. Rather, it is done for the honour of the family, to demonstrate the parents' commitment to a tradition, to save them from dishonour. Although I would not push the analogy too far, I think the motivation of the parents is not so different at many other levels of parental manipulation – even when it comes to such apparently unselfish acts as deciding what a child should or should not learn in school.

A Christian Fundamentalist mother, for example, forbids her child from attending classes on evolution: though she may claim she is doing it for the child and not of course

herself, she is very likely motivated primarily by a desire to make a display of her own purity. Doesn't she just know that God is mighty proud of her for conforming to His will? . . . The chief mullah of Saudi Arabia proclaims that the Earth is flat and that anyone who teaches otherwise is a friend of Satan¹⁸: won't he himself be thrice blessed by Allah for making this courageous stand? A group of rabbis in Jerusalem try to ban the showing of the film Jurassic Park on the grounds that it may give children the idea that there were dinosaurs living on earth sixty million years ago, when the scriptures state that in fact the world is just six thousand years old¹⁹: are they not making a wonderful public demonstration of their own piety?

What we are seeing, as often as not, is pure self interest. In which case, we should not even allow a mitigating plea of good intentions on the part of the parent or other responsible adult. They are looking after none other than themselves.

Yet, as I said, in the end it hardly matters what the parents' intentions are. Because even the best of intentions would not be sufficient to buy them "parental rights" over their children. Indeed the very idea that parents or any other adults have "rights" *over* children is morally insupportable.

No human being, in any other circumstances, is credited with having rights *over* any one else. No one is entitled, as of right, to control, use or direct the life-course of another person – even for objectively good ends. It's true that in the past slave-owners had such legal rights over their slaves. And it's true too that, until comparatively recently, the anomaly persisted of husbands having certain such rights over their wives – the right to have sex with them, for instance. But neither of these exceptions provides a good model for regulating parent-child relationships.

Children, to repeat, have to be considered as having interests independent of their parents. They cannot be subsumed as if they were part of the same person. At least so it should be. Unless, that is, we make the extraordinary mistake that the US Supreme Court apparently did when it ruled, in relation to the Amish, that while the Amish way of life may be considered "odd or even erratic" it "interferes with no rights or interests of *others*"²⁰ (my italics). As if the children of the Amish are not even to be counted as potentially "others".

I think we should stop talking of "parental rights" at all. In so far as they compromise the child's rights as an individual, parents' rights have no status in ethics and should have none in law.²¹

That's not to say that other things being equal parents should not be treated by the rest of us with due respect and accorded certain "privileges" in relation to their children. "Privileges", however, do not have the same legal or moral significance as rights. Privileges

are by no means unconditional, they come as the *quid pro quo* for agreeing to abide by certain rules of conduct imposed by society at large, and anyone to whom a privilege is granted remains in effect on probation: a privilege granted can be taken away.

Let's suppose that the privilege of parenting will mean for example that, provided parents agree to act within an agreed framework, they shall indeed be allowed – without interference from the law – to do all the things that parents everywhere usually do: feeding, clothing, educating, disciplining their own children – and enjoying the love and creative involvement that follow from it. But it will explicitly *not* be part of this deal that parents should be allowed to offend against the child's more fundamental rights to self-determination. If parents do abuse their privileges in this regard, the contract lapses – and it is then the duty of those who granted the privilege to intervene.

Intervene *how*? Suppose we – I mean we as a society – do not like what is happening when the education of a child has been left to parents or priests. Suppose we fear for the child's mind and want to take remedial action. Suppose indeed we want to take pre-emptive action with all children to protect them from being hurt by bad ideas and to give them the best possible start as thoughtful human beings. What should we be doing about it? What should be our birthday present to them from the grown-up world?

My suggestion at the start of this talk was: science – universal scientific education. That's to say, education in learning from observation, experiment, hypothesis testing, constructive doubt, critical thinking – and the truths that flow from it.

And so I've come at last to the most provocative of the questions I began with. What's so special about science? Why *these* truths? Why should it be morally right to teach *this* to everybody, when it's apparently so morally wrong to teach all those other things?

You do not have to be one of those out-and-out relativists to raise such questions – and to be suspicious that any attempt to replace the old truths by newer scientific truths might be nothing other than an attempt to replace one dogmatism by another. The Supreme Court, in its judgement about Amish schooling, was careful to warn that we should never rule out one way of thinking and rule another in, merely on the basis of what happens to be the modern, fashionable opinion. "There can be no assumption," it said, "that today's majority is 'right' and the Amish and others are 'wrong'," the Amish way of life "is not to be condemned because it is different".²²

Maybe so. And yet I'd say the Court has chosen to focus on the wrong issue there. Even if science *were* the “majority” world-view (which, as we saw earlier, is sadly not the case), we'd all agree that this in itself would provide no grounds for promoting science above

other systems of thought. The "majority" is clearly not right about lots of things, probably most things.

But the grounds I'm proposing are firmer. Some of the other speakers in this lecture series will have talked about the values and virtues of science. And I am sure they too, in their own terms, will have attempted to explain why science is different – why it ought to have a unique claim on our heads and on our hearts. But I will now perhaps go even further than they would. I think science stands apart from and superior to all other systems for the reason that it alone of all the systems in contention meets the criterion I laid out above: namely, that it represents a set of beliefs that any reasonable person would, if given the chance, choose for himself.

I should probably say that again, and put it in context. I argued earlier that the only circumstances under which it should be morally acceptable to impose a particular way of thinking on children, is when the result will be that later in life they come to hold beliefs that they would have chosen anyway, no matter what alternative beliefs they were exposed to. And what I am now saying is that science is the one way of thinking – maybe the only one – that passes this test. There is a fundamental asymmetry between science and everything else.

What do you reckon? Let's go to the rescue of that Inca girl who is being told by the priests that, unless she dies on the mountain, the Gods will rain down lava on her village, and let's offer her another way of looking at things. Offer her a choice as to how she will grow up: on one side with this story about divine anger, on the other with the insights from geology as to how volcanoes arise from the movement of tectonic plates. Which will she choose to follow?

Let's go help the Muslim boy who's being schooled by the mullahs into believing that the Earth is flat, and let's explore some of the ideas of scientific geography with him. Better still, let's take him up high in a balloon, show him the horizon, and invite him to use his own senses and powers of reasoning to reach his own conclusions. Now, offer him the choice: the picture presented in the book of the Koran, or the one that flows from his new-found scientific understanding. Which will he prefer?

Or let's take pity on the Baptist teacher who has become wedded to creationism, and let's give her a vacation. Let's walk her round the Natural History museum in the company of Richard Dawkins or Dan Dennett – or, if they're too scary, David Attenborough – and let's have them explain the possibilities of evolution to her. Now, offer her the choice: the story of Genesis with all its paradoxes and special pleading, or the startlingly simple idea of natural selection. Which will she choose?

My questions are rhetorical because the answers are already in. We know very well which way people will go when they really are allowed to make up their own minds on

questions such as these. Conversions from superstition to science have been and are everyday events. They have probably been part of our personal experience. Those who have been walking in darkness have seen a great light. The aha! of scientific revelation.

By contrast conversions from science back to superstition are virtually unknown. It just does not happen that someone who has learnt and understood science and its methods and who is then offered a non-scientific alternative chooses to abandon science. I doubt there has ever been a case, for example, of someone who has been brought up to believe the geological theory of volcanoes moving over to believing in divine anger instead, or of someone who has seen and appreciated the evidence that the world is round reverting to the idea that the world is flat, or even of someone who has once understood the power of Darwinian theory going back to preferring the story of Genesis.

People do, of course, sometimes abandon their existing scientific beliefs in favour of newer and better scientific alternatives. But to choose one scientific theory over another is still to remain absolutely true to science.

The reason for this asymmetry between science and non-science is not – at least not only – that science provides so much better – so much more economical, elegant, beautiful – explanations than non-science. Although there is that. The still stronger reason, I'd suggest, is that science is by its very nature a participatory process and non-science is not.

In learning science *we learn why we should believe* this or that. Science doesn't cajole, it doesn't dictate, it lays out the factual and theoretical arguments as to why something is so – and invites us to assent to them, to see it for ourselves. Hence, by the time someone has understood a scientific explanation they have in an important sense already chosen it as theirs.

How different is the case of religious or superstitious explanation. Religion makes no pretence of engaging its devotees in any process of rational discovery or choice. If we dare ask *why* we should believe something, the answer will be because it has been written in the Book, because this is our tradition, because it was good enough for Moses, because you'll go to heaven that way . . . Or, as often as not, don't ask.

Contrast these two positions. On one side the second century Roman theologian, Tertullian, with his abject submission to authority and denial of our personal involvement in choosing our beliefs. "For us," he wrote, "curiosity is no longer necessary after Jesus Christ nor inquiry after the Gospel."²³ This being the same man, I might remind you, who said of Christianity: "It is certain because it is impossible." On the other side the twelfth century English philosopher, Adelard of Bath, one of the earliest interpreters of Arab science, with his injunction that we all make ourselves personally responsible for understanding what goes on around us. "If anyone living in a house is ignorant of what it is made, . . . he is unworthy of its

shelter", he said, "and if anyone born in the residence of this world neglects learning the plan underlying its marvellous beauty . . . he is unworthy . . . and deserves to be cast out of it." ²⁴

Imagine that the choice is yours. That you have been faced, in the formative years of your life, with a choice between these two paths to enlightenment – between basing your beliefs on the ideas of others imported from another country and another time, and basing them on ideas that you have been able to see growing in your home soil. Can there be any doubt that you will choose for yourself, that you will choose science?

And because people will so choose, *if* they have the opportunity of scientific education, I say we as a society are entitled with good conscience to *insist* on their being given that opportunity. That is, we are entitled in effect to choose this way of thinking for them. Indeed we are not just entitled: in the case of children we are morally obliged to do so – so as to protect them from being early victims of other ways of thinking that would remove them from the field.

Then – let me catch the question from the back of the hall – "How would *you* like it if some Big Brother were to insist on *your* children being taught *his* beliefs? How'd you like it if *I* tried to impose my personal ideology on *your* little girl?" I have the answer: that teaching science isn't like that, it's not about teaching someone else's beliefs, it's about encouraging the child to exercise her powers of understanding to arrive at her own beliefs.

For sure, this is likely to mean she will end up with beliefs that are widely shared with others who have taken the same path: beliefs, that is, in what science reveals as the *truth* about the world. And yes, if you want to put it this way, you could say this means that by her own efforts at understanding she will have become a scientific conformist: one of those predictable people who believes that matter is made of atoms, that the universe arose with the Big Bang, that humans are descended from monkeys, that consciousness is a function of the brain, that there is no life after death, and so on. . . . But – since you ask – I'll say I'd be only too pleased if a big brother or sister or school-teacher or you yourself, sir, should help her get to that enlightened state.

The habit of questioning, the ability to tell good answers from bad, an appetite for seeing how and why deep explanations work – such is what I would want for my daughter (now two years old) because I think it is what she, given the chance, would one day want for herself. But it is also what I would want for her because I am too well aware of what might otherwise befall her. Bad ideas continue to swill through our culture, some old, some new, looking for receptive minds to capture. If this girl, because she were to lack the defences of critical reasoning, were ever to fall to some kind of political or spiritual irrationalism, then I and you – and our society – would have failed her.

Words? Children are made of the words they hear. It matters what we tell them. They can be hurt by words. They may go on to hurt themselves still further, and in turn become the kind of people that hurt others. But they can be given life by words as well.

“I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing,” – these are the words of Deuteronomy – “therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live.”²⁵ I think there should be no limit to our duty to help children to choose life.²⁶

1. Oxford Amnesty Lecture, 1997. Published as Nicholas Humphrey, 1998, “What shall we tell the children?”, *Social Research*, 65, 777-805; also as, 1998, “What shall we tell the children?” in *The Values of Science*, ed. Wes Williams, pp 58-79, Oxford: Westview Press.
2. Christopher Cherniak, 1979/1981, "The Riddle of the Universe and its Solution", reprinted in *The Mind's I*, ed. Douglas R. Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett, New York: Basic Books.
3. Vladimir Mayakovsky, 1912/1955, "I", in *Mayakovsky and his Poetry*, trans. George Reavey, Bombay: Current Book House.
4. Statistics from sources quoted in Nicholas Humphrey, 1995, *Soul Searching: Human Nature and Supernatural Belief*, London: Chatto and Windus.
5. National Science Board, 1996, *Science and Engineering Indicators – 1996*, Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office..
6. Richard Dawkins, 1976, *The Selfish Gene*, Ch. 11, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
7. Jesuit divine (apocryphal).
8. Donald B. Kraybill, 1989, *The Riddle of Amish Culture*, p. 119, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.
9. "Home schools: How do they affect children", APA Monitor, December 1996.
10. Court ruling Iowa, 1985, cited by James G. Dwyer, 1994, "Parents' religion and children's welfare: debunking the doctrine of parents' rights," *California Law Review*, 82, 1371-1447.
11. John F Schumaker, 1990, *Wings of Illusion*, p. 33, London: Polity Press.
12. See, for example, the review by Jerome Kagan, 1996, "Three pleasing ideas," *American Psychologist*, 51, 901-908.
13. Donald B. Kraybill, 1989, op. cit., p. 218.
14. Richard Dawkins, 1993, "Viruses of the mind," in *Dennett and His Critics*, ed. Bo Dahlbom, pp. 13-27, Oxford: Blackwell.

15. Johan Reinhard, 1996, "Peru's Ice Maidens," *National Geographic*, June.
16. Supreme Court ruling, 1972, cited by James G. Dwyer, 1994, "Parents' religion and children's welfare: debunking the doctrine of parents' rights," p. 1385, *California Law Review*, 82, 1371-1447.
17. Supreme Court ruling, 1986, cited by James G. Dwyer, 1994, *op. cit.*, p.1409.
18. Cited by Carl Sagan, 1996, *The Demon-Haunted World*, p. 325, New York: Random House.
19. Cited by Carl Sagan, 1996, *op. cit.* p. 325.
20. Supreme Court, 1972, cited by Donald B. Kraybill, 1989, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
21. See the extended discussion by James G. Dwyer, 1994, "Parents' religion and children's welfare: debunking the doctrine of parents' rights," *California Law Review*, 82, 1371-1447; also James G. Dwyer, 1996, "The children we abandon: religious exemptions to child welfare and education laws as denials of equal protection to children of religious objectors," *North Carolina Law Review*, 74, 101-258..
22. Supreme Court, 1972, cited by Donald B. Kraybill, 1989, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
23. Tertullian, 2nd century, *The Prescription of Heretics*.
24. Adelard of Bath, 12th century, *Astrolabium*.
25. Deuteronomy, 30: 19.
26. I am indebted for several of the ideas here to James Dwyer, whose critique of the idea of parents' rights stands as a model of philosophical and legal reasoning.