

What Children Are Learning in Sunday school

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Recently, a young woman I know told her daughter to sing a “cute” song she learned in vacation Bible school. The four-year-old sang that we must “shake off the Devil” if we want to be good. Not surprisingly, some of the adults listening to the song applauded the little girl’s singing and her supposedly positive message.

While it is great that young children learn in Sunday school that they should be good, they are also taught to be irrational. They are being taught that a possibly existent demon tempts us to do evil. In this way, they are being set up to accept many more irrational ideas as they mature. However, it seems to me that the cultivation of rationality is at least as important as the cultivation of morality. After all, as many philosophers have pointed out, we human beings are as dependent upon the use of our brains for survival as birds are dependent upon their wings, as cheetahs are dependent upon their speed, and as fish are dependent upon their ability to swim for their survival.

Moreover, as children get older, they need to learn about the real causes of immorality such as poverty, lack of opportunity, corporate greed, family dysfunction, easy access to guns, racism, etc. Of course, to tackle these kinds of issues would require dealing with societal problems and challenging the status quo. It is much easier to attribute alleged “sin” to the possibly existent Devil.

There are many other problems that come along with positing the Devil as the powerful being that tempts us to do evil. If the Devil exists, we must do whatever is necessary to combat his influence. Sadly, that is why so many children and elderly women in Africa and other parts of the world are ostracized, persecuted, and sometimes killed as alleged witches and warlocks. Obviously, if no one believed in the Devil, witches and warlocks, no one would ever ostracize, persecute or kill an alleged witch or warlock.

In the U.S. and other parts of the Western world, some religious fanatics actually perform deadly exorcisms on people, including children; and just think of all the people with psychiatric problems throughout Christian history that were ostracized, persecuted and imprisoned because most people believed that they were possessed by demons.

This song about shaking off the Devil started me thinking about other lessons that children are receiving in Sunday school. Children learn that human beings were created in their present form, perhaps 6,000 years ago, and that the Earth was created before the sun. In other words, they are receiving unscientific and anti-scientific misinformation. Do we want them to be scientifically literate or not?

What would Sunday school be without learning about Noah’s Ark? This is probably the first biblical lesson in which young children learn that it is important not to ask serious questions about biblical teachings and, more importantly, not to demand logical answers to those questions. They learn that it is important to believe in that which is physically impossible, i.e. the housing of at least two of every animal in an ark. Furthermore, many of these children learn that it is a sin not to believe any biblical teaching. Such a mindset is not always conducive to human survival, especially these days.

But wait, it gets worse! Over two decades ago, a young Sunday school teacher related in a letter to the editor of *Freethought Today*, the newspaper of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) a story about a lesson she was giving on Noah’s Ark and the drowning of all life on the planet. Upon hearing the

story, one little girl burst into tears. The Sunday school teacher asked her why she was crying. The little girl sobbed, "All those poor kittens and bunnies." To paraphrase Robert Green Ingersoll, we should seriously question any story that shocks the mind of a child.

Many Sunday school children are learning that Christianity is the only true religion and that the only way to Heaven is through Jesus Christ. (Contrast the arrogance that such a mindset encourages to the supposed Christian virtue of humility.) It was this teaching that led to the enslavement and oppression of Africans and the decimation of the First Nations peoples or Native Americans. Today it leads to bullying, anti-Jewish bigotry, Islamophobia, the persecution of Muslims, attempts at Christian theocracy, etc.

Sunday school children learn that woman was cursed with pain during childbirth because Eve led Adam astray. The unscientific nature of this idea should be the very least of our concerns. Do we really want young, impressionable children exposed to this sexist nonsense?

Sunday school children learn to believe in a fiery hell where sinners go to suffer. This fills many of their young heads with irrational fear. As difficult as life can be for young children, it is sad that they have to be exposed to manufactured fears rooted in the sick imaginations of primitive men.

I have never heard of a single child that has learned that the Devil, Hell, Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, etc. are simply metaphors. They learn to believe in all of this stuff literally. Many of them never overcome the intellectual blunders forced upon them, no matter how long they live.