

Should society expect/force children to follow a specific religion?

Is it acceptable to expect children to follow the same religion as those around them?

Since leaving a preparatory school that had a strong Christian ethos and gave the pupils very little option to believe anything else, I have been interested in whether telling children what to believe because they do not know any different is actually acceptable or not. I will focus on some of the various rites of passage that children go through such as baptism, starting school and learning about life also the influence that parents' decisions can have on a child's beliefs. I am going to look at whether choosing a religious option for the child is acceptable or whether they should be secular until the child is old enough to choose what they believe in.

As with every controversial issue there are, of course, two sides. The website 'debate.org' conducted a poll on the question 'Should parents choose their child's religion?' The conclusion was 12% said yes and 88% said no. The arguments included some of the following thoughts:

The first is that the parents of a child are the child's first and most important teachers. They teach them how to walk and how to get dressed and will go on to try to prepare them for life. Parents with strong beliefs feel they need to follow the word of God. One reason that many parents include their child in the same religion as themselves is that they want their daughter or son to get into heaven (or the equivalent within that religion). On the other hand some people feel very strongly that giving an unconsenting and unknowing child a label as a member of a certain religion is a kind of child abuse as the child probably would not even know that there was the option to not believe what they were told to by their parents or even their school. No person should be forced to believe that God either exists or does not because it cannot be proved definitely either way so I think that each individual should balance the facts up for themselves and reach their own conclusion when they are old enough. Telling someone that something exists or does not exist and banishing all other possibilities has been described by somebody I talked to as "the most heinous act that can be committed."

In an article in the Washington Post (4), the reporter wrote:

"Why do modern parents believe we hold the right to force our children to practice certain religious beliefs? Why don't we expose our children to multiple religions without picking one, and then let them decide for themselves as adults -- as we do with most important decisions, such as careers, spouses and where to live?"

This is a fair point and something that I believe should be widely discussed as it seems to be a multinational problem. Your parents are Jewish, Muslim, Sikh therefore you will be. Dr Lesley Steiner who writes the article goes on to say that in our modern society religion still seems to be something that parents feel they can choose for their offspring. The author was exposed to a wide range of religions as she grew up and is now in a multi faith marriage and so is bringing her children up with both religions (similar to one of my Questionnaires) Her article throws up the question to the reader "Where does the line between influence and coercion lie?"(4) This is my point that exposing children to a diversity of experiences is good parenting but indoctrination is not.

As part of my research I sent out Questionnaires to a range of people of varying ages 15 to 80 and of different religious beliefs from atheists to Jewish, Catholic, Christian and lapsed Christians. (See Appendix A)

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Some religious groups believe in the baptism of babies; however other people say that before someone is baptised a person should be old enough to accept responsibility to his or her own decision as to whether they want to live a Christian life. That is individual responsibility and personal accountability. There are some Bible quotes about the act of Baptism that seem to go against the idea of infant baptism. There are certain things the bible says you must do before baptism.

Mark 16:15,16 - All who are baptized, must first have the gospel preached to them

Mark 16:15,16 - Every creature who is baptized must first believe the gospel which they have been taught.

Acts 2:38 - Every person who is baptized ("every one of you") must first repent

There is no way a baby can do any of the above things. A baby cannot believe, therefore a baby would not meet this requirement for one to be baptised.

According to the Christian Reformed web site (1):

“Should babies be baptized or not? It can be dangerous to ask that question. One danger is that Christians might be divided against each other. Christians don't all agree about infant baptism, so if they focus more on this area of disagreement than on their unity in Jesus Christ, it can cause division. A second, related danger is that if Christians disagree openly with each other, it can become an excuse for non-Christians to ignore Jesus and the Bible. Why pay attention to Christianity if Christians can't agree among themselves what to believe?”

This implies that if Christians themselves can't agree whether it is a good thing or not then perhaps there is doubt whether it is the word of God. Is it therefore acceptable to baptise a baby and install the parent's beliefs on the baby? Even the Christians themselves cannot agree whether this is correct and it appears to be a transference of the parent's beliefs and a confirmation that the parents are going to try to bring the baby up in a Christian household. Therefore, it seems to be more of a parenting issue than an issue with the beliefs of the child.

My questionnaires indicate that any religious upbringing that the children had were more about installing moral values and a sense of belonging. If this is the main lasting effect on them then baptism itself appears to be a fairly pointless exercise. One of the people questioned said “It was presented as a fact, “ There was, however, an “option to question and debate” when questioned further they felt they spent their childhood believing that this was the only way and every other way was wrong until they became a teenager and encountered other religions at school.

This brings us on to the next rite of passage: schooling. There are a variety of faith schools in the UK. Parents have the right to select the school their child attends currently 36% of primary schools in the UK are run by churches. Parents argue that the Faith schools are somehow better for their child and will even lie about their faith to get their child into the Faith school as they are often at the top of league tables. This is generally because they are selective schools; any school that is able to select their pupils can get good grades. “Selection, even on religious grounds, is likely to attract well-behaved children from stable backgrounds,” said a spokesperson for Ofsted in the *Times Educational Supplement*, 16/2/01.

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Parents argue that Faith Schools give students a sense of identity but are you just bringing children up in a segregated society which will impact their life later when they join society as an adult and have to mix with people with other faiths and points of view?

Governments have been seen to encourage the increase of faith schools although this is currently backfiring in Birmingham as the Daily Mail online (2) explains “Police, the Government and school inspectors are investigating alleged attempts by radicals to seize control of 20 schools in the city after claims of plot emerged in March” This radicalisation of schools and therefore the pupils education is a dangerous, but possibly inevitable next step to Faith Schools. It calls into question whether religious groups of any type should be allowed to control children’s education and whether this singular religious education is correct to equip children in today’s multicultural Britain. Is a parent preparing a child to join society when they only understand one point of view?

It is summed up by the Humanism Organisation (3):

“Some faith schools will not even try to serve the whole community, and will divide children not just by religion but also ethnically – especially if Muslims, Sikhs, Seventh Day Adventists and other minority religions and denominations get more than the tiny handful of schools they have now. Northern Ireland and Bradford are examples of what happens to communities where children are educated separately and grow up knowing little of each other.”

However, if Faith schools were disapproved of then they would be empty; they wouldn’t attract good teachers, and their results would be poor.

There is no easy, one size fits all answer to this. The closest one can get is to realize that children generally don’t have the type of needs filled by religion. You can avoid it altogether, or raise them in a strict religious environment, it makes no difference. As they mature as individuals, they will eventually make their own decisions. So the answers to my original questions are: Asking a child to choose a religion is like asking them what car they will drive when they grow up. They may have an answer now, but it will likely change in the next ten or twenty years. By the same token, forcing a child to embrace a set of beliefs they cannot yet fully understand is just wrong. Childhood should be a religion-free zone. They should be allowed to figure it out when they're ready.

“It is impossible for children to grow up in a moral vacuum where they are entirely free to make decisions without adult influence on what to believe.”(4) Parents will always have a choice over what the child does and as my questionnaires definitely demonstrate parents have a very strong influence on the moral and values of a child as they are growing up and consequently on the young adult until they are ready to question these. This is not in question but whether it is acceptable to force a religion on children. “Where does the line between influence and coercion lie?” (4)

Many parents will say that if a child is given a formal religious education (no matter the faith) it gives them a good moral grounding and makes it less likely for cults to ‘get their claws into them’ should they reach a crisis in their later lives

One of the people who I asked questions of, (a Jew) felt that understanding their religion was important as it gave them an understanding of their roots and heritage. It is interesting to note that when questioned further that she has exposed both her children to Christian and Jewish lifestyles

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and they are going to be allowed to make an independent decision about choice of religion when they feel they are ready.

Whatever your views on the subject, we ARE a multicultural, multiracial and multifaith society and the sooner we all accept our part within this whole and give our children the best possible way to integrate into this whole in a peaceful way, the better it will be for everyone.

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Appendix A

Questionnaires

Approximate age: 75

Was your family religious when you were growing up?

If yes, did they tell you about religion as fact or did they give you the option of believing or not?

Yes! It was just an accepted way of life. Occasional church services, but regular Sunday school. I found the different denominations from Quaker to Roman Catholic to be confusing. All Christian, did not think of other religions.

Was your education religious?

If yes, was religion taught as fact?

Yes all fact, but different depths at each school. It was great to go to school on religious holidays (such as Ascension Day) for a service and have the rest of the day as holiday.

How has your upbringing (whether religious or not) influenced the way in which you've brought your children up (if you have any)?

Yes, it is the expectations I grew up with and developed as a family.

If you had a religious upbringing can you explain one good thing that you have gained from it?

Moral Standards and probably the way I think.

If you did not have a religious upbringing where do you think that your thoughts and morals have come from?

N/A

Was it life events/family/education/culture that influenced your religious or non-religious beliefs? Please expand.

I don't think my beliefs as such have changed at all, but religious practice has gone with the flow of life and those around me at the time.

The title of my essay is "*Is it acceptable to expect/force children to follow the same religion as those around them?*" Are there any other further comments you would like to make regarding this?

Yes to expect your family to have religious harmony. - Just listen to the Daily News to hear the problems in the name of religion which is often confused with ethnic origins. This is a timeless problem, just think of the Crusades

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Approximate age: 70

Was your family religious when you were growing up?

If yes, did they tell you about religion as fact or did they give you the option of believing or not?

Yes – Told about religion as fact

Was your education religious?

If yes, was religion taught as fact?

Religious Knowledge taught as fact

How has your upbringing (whether religious or not) influenced the way in which you've brought your children up (if you have any)?

N/A

If you had a religious upbringing can you explain one good thing that you have gained from it?

Moral Values

If you did not have a religious upbringing where do you think that your thoughts and morals have come from?

N/A

Was it life events/family/education/culture that influenced your religious or non-religious beliefs? Please expand.

All four of the above influenced Religious beliefs to some extent.

The title of my essay is *"Is it acceptable to expect/force children to follow the same religion as those around them?"* Are there any other further comments you would like to make regarding this?

It is acceptable to expect, but not to force children to follow the same religion as those around them, but when sufficiently mature allow them to make their own choice under Guidance.

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Approximate age: 65

Was your family religious when you were growing up? Not really

If yes, did they tell you about religion as fact or did they give you the option of believing or not?

I did go to Sunday school but it was just the bible stories.

Was your education religious?

If yes, was religion taught as fact?

No, it was just stories from the old and new testaments

How has your upbringing (whether religious or not) influenced the way in which you've brought your children up (if you have any)?

Yes, honesty was important and being kind and helping people

If you had a religious upbringing can you explain one good thing that you have gained from it?

Going to church and Sunday school was the thing to do. I don't think there was much I gained apart from a sense of belonging to a group, which is always a nice feeling to have.

If you did not have a religious upbringing where do you think that your thoughts and morals have come from?

Was it life events/family/education/culture that influenced your religious or non-religious beliefs? Please expand.

I did go to church in my late teens, mainly for the social side of it(the 18+ group was fun, as I got older and realised that there were many contradictions about God and the fact he didn't seem to help an awful lot of people who needed it that I became an atheist.

The title of my essay is "*Is it acceptable to expect/force children to follow the same religion as those around them?*" Are there any other further comments you would like to make regarding this?

I think that giving children a sound moral code is a good thing, whether from an organised religion or not. If you bring your child up in a particular religion then I feel that you should give them the option to decide not to follow it when they are adult.

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Approximate age: 45

Was your family religious when you were growing up?

If yes, did they tell you about religion as fact or did they give you the option of believing or not?

My mum and Dad were not but when I stayed at my gran's, she would always pray before she went to sleep. She did not go to the local church as they were cliques. There were always bibles in the house and I use to read my mum's children's book of bible stories.

Was your education religious?

If yes, was religion taught as fact?

The village primary school was attached to the church. We went to services at Christmas, Easter and for Harvest Festival. Before lunch you had to say grace. Think this was more to do with the era rather than being religious.

How has your upbringing (whether religious or not) influenced the way in which you've brought your children up (if you have any)?

It has not really. I have not bought my son up to be religious but that is more to do with experiences as an adult rather than as a child.

If you had a religious upbringing can you explain one good thing that you have gained from it?

If you did not have a religious upbringing where do you think that your thoughts and morals have come from?

Looking at the world from a wider perspective. I went through a religious stage in my early 20s but found that Christians tend to be very judgemental and constantly felt guilty about wanting to know about other beliefs like chakras, feng shui.

Was it life events/family/education/culture that influenced your religious or non-religious beliefs? Please expand.

Life events were the many influence in life and also some of the people I meet. As I have said, I found the Christians I associated with were very judgemental. For instance they stopped me running a youth group because I was not divorced but was seeing one of the other leaders.

The title of my essay is *"Is it acceptable to expect/force children to follow the same religion as those around them?"* Are there any other further comments you would like to make regarding this?

Although we live in a country that seems to be losing its religious beliefs, I feel that it is important to bring up your children with the principles of Christianity. In some ways other religions are a culture rather than just beliefs and so for children to live in their parent's world they have to follow the rules – whether this is right or wrong. However there should be a time when they can choose to leave.

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Approximate age: 50

Was your family religious when you were growing up?

If yes, did they tell you about religion as fact or did they give you the option of believing or not?

Yes – it was just part of our life from an early age so it was not a case of being enforced until we were teenagers and we were not allowed to go out on a Friday night as it was the Sabbath. There was no option to opt out, it was never considered as a choice.

Was your education religious?

If yes, was religion taught as fact?

I went to Sunday school every week to learn Hebrew if that's what you mean. I also studied for my Batmitzvah when I was 12.

How has your upbringing (whether religious or not) influenced the way in which you've brought your children up (if you have any)?

I think Judaism has a wonderful approach to the family so I think I have wanted to instil this in my children. However, I have not introduced any of the everyday religious traditions e.g. keeping kosher, attending synagogue etc.

If you had a religious upbringing can you explain one good thing that you have gained from it?

A sense of belonging & pride. I understand my roots & heritage

If you did not have a religious upbringing where do you think that your thoughts and morals have come from?

Was it life events/family/education/culture that influenced your religious or non-religious beliefs? Please expand.

My family – particularly my mother's experience of the Holocaust

The title of my essay is "*Is it acceptable to expect/force children to follow the same religion as those around them?*" Are there any other further comments you would like to make regarding this?

I think age plays a role – once a child is old enough to express what is important to them and what they believe in then it should be up to them what religion they follow, if any.

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Approximate age: 50

Was your family religious when you were growing up?

If yes, did they tell you about religion as fact or did they give you the option of believing or not?

Yes, my family believed in god and went to church regularly. I accepted it what I learnt so I am unsure if it was presented as fact and whether there was an option to believe. There was an option to question and debate.

Was your education religious?

If yes, was religion taught as fact?

Yes, religion was taught. We learnt about different faiths.

How has your upbringing (whether religious or not) influenced the way in which you've brought your children up (if you have any)?

I don't have any children

If you had a religious upbringing can you explain one good thing that you have gained from it?

Understanding and tolerance of religion, whatever the faith.

If you did not have a religious upbringing where do you think that your thoughts and morals have come from?

Was it life events/family/education/culture that influenced your religious or non-religious beliefs? Please expand.

I no longer attend a church. This is not because I now disbelieve but I now have more questions. This is probably because I no longer live in an environment where the traditions and beliefs are accepted without question

The title of my essay is "*Is it acceptable to expect/force children to follow the same religion as those around them?*" Are there any other further comments you would like to make regarding this?

I think it is important to remember that there is a difference between religion and a moral upbringing. Traditionally a religious upbringing was considered to provide the guidance and a set of good moral standards by which to live and behave. Today, it cannot be assumed that these 2 things go together.

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Approximate age: 15

Was your family religious when you were growing up?

If yes, did they tell you about religion as fact or did they give you the option of believing or not?

Yes my parents attend church and I go when I'm around. I didn't really have a choice. I was baptised as a baby and then taken to confirmation classes. Guess I'll make my own mind up later.

Was your education religious?

If yes, was religion taught as fact?

Yes it was taught as a fact in church but as a discussion in school.

How has your upbringing (whether religious or not) influenced the way in which you've brought your children up (if you have any)?

Too young!

If you had a religious upbringing can you explain one good thing that you have gained from it?

I feel that I have good morals and values and am accepting of others.

If you did not have a religious upbringing where do you think that your thoughts and morals have come from?

Was it life events/family/education/culture that influenced your religious or non-religious beliefs? Please expand.

Family

The title of my essay is "*Is it acceptable to expect/force children to follow the same religion as those around them?*" Are there any other further comments you would like to make regarding this?

I think Parents have to do what they think it right for their baby and that will often be influenced by their upbringing whether that is a positive or negative experience.

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Approximate age:15

Was your family religious when you were growing up?

If yes, did they tell you about religion as fact or did they give you the option of believing or not?

My mother is Christian and she has worked in churches for my whole life, as an organist. She "taught" us about religion, as though it were true, and read to my brother and me from a children's Bible when we were young.

My father was brought up Catholic and holds a loose Catholic faith, but he didn't share his faith with us or go to church. However, he didn't encourage us to think about what our mother was saying, so it was effectively a lie of omission... I do remember him once telling me that I could choose my religion, however that sentence went "... can choose her religion when she's older... but when she does, she's going to be Christian"

Was your education religious?

If yes, was religion taught as fact?

I went to a regular primary school, i.e., not a faith school, but we sang hymns and learned about Creationism without being told that it wasn't true! It's now against the law to teach Creationism as fact in schools, so I feel a little resentful about that.

How has your upbringing (whether religious or not) influenced the way in which you've brought your children up (if you have any)?

I don't intend to have children, but if I were to adopt one I would encourage them to think carefully before coming to a decision about their beliefs, and try to show them that it is illogical to believe in something without any scientific proof. I would also make sure the child was well-educated about religion, so that they could understand the beliefs of others.

If you had a religious upbringing can you explain one good thing that you have gained from it?

One *good* thing...? I think that my religious upbringing is part of what makes me so interested in religion. In addition, having been brought up as a Christian, I am aware of the techniques used by religious people to brainwash their subjects, so I find it easy to see through the propaganda and know that what I believe is correct.

If you did not have a religious upbringing where do you think that your thoughts and morals have come from?

My moral code is very simple: I try to reduce suffering as much as I can - though of course I frequently fail when it comes to offending/ upsetting people - which is why I am vegan and supportive of charities that help to reduce suffering around the world. I don't believe that you need a Bible to tell you when your actions are causing pain - it's basic human instinct.

Was it life events/family/education/culture that influenced your religious or non-religious beliefs? Please expand.

Not really... as soon as I began to think properly about the world I realised that the concept of a deity was completely ludicrous and unfeasible. However, I think I would have realised this sooner, had I had a secular upbringing.

The title of my essay is "*Is it acceptable to expect/force children to follow the same religion as those around them?*" Are there any other further comments you would like to make regarding this?

I think that is unacceptable to raise children teaching them religion as fact. Children are impressionable, and for the first few years of life rely heavily on their parents for information about the world, meaning that they will not question their parents' beliefs being forced upon them. I think that education should be secular too - I find it chilling that my state-funded primary school was allowed to have mandatory assemblies containing religious content... we didn't sing Jewish songs or say prayers to Allah; we just went with what was traditional in England: brainwashing children by indoctrinating them to a faith without giving them the scientific facts that would allow them see the truth.

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Approximate age: 15

Was your family religious when you were growing up?

If yes, did they tell you about religion as fact or did they give you the option of believing or not?

They weren't religious, and definitely didn't tell religion as a fact: quite the opposite!

Was your education religious?

If yes, was religion taught as fact?

It wasn't religious, but in assembly we sometimes sang a religious song or one that mentioned God, and also we quite often sang this Jewish prayer song.

How has your upbringing (whether religious or not) influenced the way in which you've brought your children up (if you have any)?

If you had a religious upbringing can you explain one good thing that you have gained from it?

If you did not have a religious upbringing where do you think that your thoughts and morals have come from?

My brain, my human instincts, and what my parents and others have told me as I went along.

Was it life events/family/education/culture that influenced your religious or non-religious beliefs? Please expand.

My family brought me up atheist/humanist so I guess that's the main reason why. They brought me up teaching me facts and telling me about science and everything. Also researching and learning about other religions has also persuaded me to be atheist.

The title of my essay is "*Is it acceptable to expect/force children to follow the same religion as those around them?*" Are there any other further comments you would like to make regarding this?

My answer to that question would be no.

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- 1) <http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/baptism/should-babies-be-baptized>
- 2) <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2646053/Officials-warned-hardline-Muslims-allegedly-trying-Birmingham-school-Trojan-Horse-style-plot-2008.html>
- 3) <https://humanism.org.uk/education/education-policy/faith-schools-why-not/>
- 4) http://voices.washingtonpost.com/onbalance/2008/04/do_parents_have_the_right_to_f_1.html