

# **Developmental Autonomy and the Ethics of Religious Socialization: Against Non-Consensual Belief Formation in Children**

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that the imposition of religious belief systems on children who lack the cognitive and developmental capacity to evaluate, question, or refuse those systems constitutes a violation of what Joel Feinberg called the child's right to an open future. Drawing on developmental psychology, philosophy of autonomy, and the neuroscience of fear-conditioned learning, I distinguish between two forms of religious transmission: introduction, which preserves epistemic openness, and installation, which forecloses it. Installation — characterized by fear, eternal consequence framing, and identity foreclosure — causes harm whose contours are described here with graduated epistemic confidence. The paper is not an argument against religious identity in adults. It is an argument that the mechanism of transmission matters morally, and that beliefs tied specifically to fear and punishment should not be imposed before a child possesses the capacity to evaluate or refuse them.

## **1. The Problem of Belief Without Consent**

There is a structural peculiarity in how Western liberal societies approach the rights of children with respect to belief formation. Adults are broadly protected from coerced belief. We prohibit thought reform programs. We treat forced confession as a violation. We recognize that beliefs formed under duress or before adequate understanding lack the epistemic and moral standing of genuine assent. And yet we normalize, legally protect, and culturally celebrate the transmission of comprehensive religious cosmologies to children who are neurologically and developmentally incapable of critical evaluation.

The standard defense appeals to parental rights: parents have both the legal authority and the moral standing to raise their children within their own religious tradition. This defense has considerable force. Cultural continuity, family cohesion, and the development of moral identity through embedded practice are genuine goods. I do not dispute them. What I dispute is the conflation of cultural participation with belief installation — and the failure to distinguish between the many forms religious transmission can take, only some of which respect the developmental autonomy of the child.

The core question is not whether children may be raised in contact with religion. It is whether a specific class of transmission mechanisms — those organized around fear, infinite consequence, and the pathologizing of doubt — constitutes a harm. I will argue that it does, and that this harm is independent of whether the beliefs transmitted are true.

## **2. The Right to an Open Future**

Joel Feinberg's 1980 paper “The Child's Right to an Open Future” provides the most precise philosophical framework for this argument. Feinberg distinguishes between three categories of rights: A-rights, which belong to adults only; C-rights, which children share with adults; and rights-in-trust, which belong to children as future adults. These rights-in-trust cannot be exercised by the child now, but they can be violated now through actions that foreclose the adult the child will become.

Among these rights-in-trust is the right to a range of life options sufficient to allow the future adult to construct an autonomous identity. When a belief system is installed in a child in a manner that makes subsequent rejection psychologically costly, socially dangerous, or neurologically encoded as threatening, the future adult's range of genuine choice is narrowed — not by their own prior decisions, but by decisions made for them before they could consent.

Feinberg's framework is important because it does not require us to claim that religion is false, harmful in content, or socially destructive. A belief system could be entirely true and still violate this right if its transmission forecloses the child's capacity to arrive at it through genuine inquiry. The harm is in the mechanism, not the message.

Critics often respond to arguments about childhood religious education by pointing to the social benefits of religious community, the moral scaffolding religion provides, or statistical correlations between religiosity and positive life outcomes. These responses may all be factually accurate and remain orthogonal to the present argument. A mechanism of transmission can produce genuine goods and still constitute an epistemic wrong. We recognize this in other domains: educational propaganda that produces well-behaved citizens is still propaganda.

### **3. Developmental Incapacity and the Timing of Belief Installation**

Jean Piaget's account of cognitive development identifies the formal operational stage — characterized by abstract reasoning, hypothetical thinking, and the capacity for systematic doubt — as typically emerging in early adolescence, roughly between ages eleven and fifteen. Prior to this stage, children process claims through concrete operational logic: they categorize, they trust authority, and they lack the metacognitive apparatus to evaluate the evidential basis of claims made by caregivers.

This means that the primary window during which religious belief is transmitted — early childhood, ages two through ten — is precisely the window during which children are least equipped to evaluate whether what they are being told is true. They are not being offered a worldview to assess. They are being shaped before assessment is possible.

The developmental literature on theory of mind is relevant here as well. The capacity to recognize that beliefs can be false develops across early childhood and is reasonably mature by around age four to six for simple cases. But the capacity to apply this insight to one's own deeply embedded cultural framework — to step outside one's

own worldview and evaluate it as one framework among others — is a considerably more sophisticated cognitive achievement that continues developing through late adolescence and early adulthood.

What this means in practice is that doctrinal content transmitted in early childhood is not processed as one possible description of reality among others. It is processed as reality itself. The child does not hold the belief tentatively pending further evidence. The belief becomes constitutive of the child's understanding of what the world is, and subsequent contradictory evidence is processed against that prior structure rather than on equal epistemic footing.

#### **4. Fear Conditioning and the Evidence for Installation Harm**

The ethical analysis deepens when we consider the specific mechanisms through which installation operates. Many traditions — particularly evangelical and orthodox variants prevalent in the United States — transmit belief through what I will call eternal consequence framing: the structuring of doctrinal content around the possibility of infinite punishment for disbelief, doubt, or transgression. Assessing the harm of this mechanism requires distinguishing three tiers of evidence.

**Well-established:** The neuroscience of fear conditioning is not in serious dispute. The amygdala encodes threat-associated stimuli with persistent salience that is not easily extinguished through rational deliberation alone (LeDoux, 1996). When children are taught that invisible agents monitor their thoughts and that doubt courts eternal suffering, this content activates and consolidates threat-response pathways. This is not a claim about religion specifically; it is a claim about what happens neurologically when fear is used as an instructional mechanism in developing brains. The basic architecture of fear conditioning in children is established independent of the religious context.

**Suggestive but requiring further study:** The clinical literature on religious trauma syndrome documents a characteristic pattern — hypervigilance around thoughts

framed as sinful, difficulty trusting one's own cognitive processes, shame responses to doubt, and persistent anxiety organized around surveillance and judgment (Winell, 2011). These presentations are clinically real and recognized by practitioners. However, the causal pathway from specific transmission mechanisms to these outcomes remains underspecified in the research literature. Selection effects are difficult to control for: individuals raised in high-control religious environments differ from comparison groups on many dimensions. The correlation between fear-based religious formation and later anxiety presentations is strong; the precise mechanism through which installation produces it, as distinct from other features of those environments, warrants more controlled study.

**Theoretically plausible but not yet directly established:** The claim that installation specifically — as opposed to religious formation generally — is the causally relevant variable in these outcomes rests on a theoretically coherent but empirically underspecified argument. It is plausible that the fear-and-foreclosure mechanism, rather than religious content per se, is doing the psychological work. This is consistent with the evidence, and it is supported by the observation that religious formation without fear framing does not produce the same pattern of sequelae. But direct experimental evidence isolating mechanism from content is sparse. This is a gap the present argument identifies as warranting targeted research.

This graduated account does not weaken the ethical argument. The structure of the argument here is precautionary: where a mechanism is well-established as capable of producing harm, and where that mechanism is being applied to a vulnerable population, the burden of justification falls on continuation rather than cessation — even when the precise causal pathway to the worst-case outcome is not yet fully mapped. We apply this logic elsewhere: we restrict childhood exposure to lead not because every child who encounters it develops a measurable deficit, but because the harm mechanism is understood and the population is vulnerable. We do not wait for outcome proof before restricting mechanisms that are already known to exploit developmental vulnerability.

The same standard should apply here. Uncertainty about the precise causal chain from fear-based installation to specific clinical presentations does not license continuing a practice whose activation of well-established harm pathways is not in doubt. The burden should not fall entirely on demonstrating harm when the mechanism for producing it is already well understood.

## **5. Introduction Versus Installation: A Moral Distinction**

The argument so far might seem to imply that children should receive no religious education whatsoever. This is not my position. The morally relevant distinction is not between religious exposure and no religious exposure. It is between two modes of transmission I will call introduction and installation.

Introduction presents religious content as one framework among others through which human beings have understood the world, organized meaning, built community, and confronted mortality. It preserves epistemic openness. It frames stories as stories, invites questions, tolerates doubt, and treats the child as a future autonomous agent whose conclusions are theirs to reach. It is possible to raise a child in deep engagement with religious practice and community while maintaining this epistemic posture.

Installation presents religious content as the authoritative description of reality, enforced by social belonging and threatened with supernatural consequence for doubt or departure. It forecloses epistemic openness. It treats doubt as spiritual failure, frames questions as dangerous, and organizes the child's identity around doctrinal compliance in a manner that makes subsequent revision psychologically costly.

For the purposes of this argument, installation can be identified operationally by three co-occurring features: (1) dissent is framed as danger — doubt is not an open question but a spiritual or moral failure; (2) identity is structurally tied to doctrinal compliance — departure threatens belonging, family, and self-concept simultaneously; and (3) consequences are encoded as irreversible and unbounded — typically through infinite punishment framing that attaches ultimate stakes to belief-maintenance.

Introduction may share some surface features with installation — strong claims, communal identity, moral seriousness — but it does not combine all three. It is the conjunction of these features, not any single one, that produces the foreclosure this paper argues against.

The moral difference between these modes is not primarily about content — the same doctrines can be transmitted through either mode. It is about the relationship to the child's future autonomy. Introduction treats the child as a subject whose developing rationality deserves respect. Installation treats the child as a vessel for the transmission of beliefs whose acceptance cannot wait for consent.

James Dwyer's work on children's rights within religious communities is useful here. Dwyer argues that the doctrine of parental rights, as it has developed in American law, conflates the parents' rights to religious freedom with a right to shape the religious identity of their children — and that these are not the same right. The parents' freedom of belief is absolute. But the transmission of belief to another person, even a child in one's care, is not simply the exercise of one's own freedom: it is an act that affects another person's freedom, and it is subject to moral evaluation on those grounds.

## **6. The Parental Rights Argument at Full Strength**

The argument of this paper does not succeed unless it can survive a rigorous encounter with the strongest version of the opposing position. That position, stated charitably, runs as follows.

Parents must shape their children's worldview from the beginning. There is no neutral starting point. A child raised without religious formation is not raised in a blank epistemic space; they are raised within a secular framework with its own commitments, its own answers to questions of meaning and mortality, and its own identity-forming pressures. Delaying religious formation until the child can consent is not a preservation of autonomy — it is the imposition of a particular framework (secular rationalism) over others. The parental prerogative to transmit a comprehensive worldview, including one

that makes strong metaphysical claims and organizes identity around them, is inseparable from the task of moral and cultural formation that all parents must undertake.

Furthermore, the claim that early transmission forecloses future autonomy proves too much. Language is transmitted before children can evaluate its conceptual commitments. Moral frameworks are transmitted before children can assess their foundations. Cultural identity is formed before consent is possible. If the argument against religious installation is that it installs commitments before the critical faculties are mature, then the same argument applies to every dimension of early formation. The objection, applied consistently, would prohibit childhood itself.

This argument is serious and deserves a serious response, not dismissal.

The response has two parts. First, the argument proves too much only if we apply the objection uniformly across all early transmission. But the present argument is not a general objection to early formation. It is a targeted objection to a specific mechanism: the use of fear, infinite consequence framing, and the pathologizing of doubt as transmission tools. Language acquisition does not involve threatening children with eternal suffering for mispronunciation. Moral formation does not require teaching children that invisible agents will punish them for bad thoughts. The fear-based eternal consequence mechanism is not an inevitable feature of early value transmission; it is a specific tool used by specific traditions, and it is that tool — not early formation as such — that is the target of this argument.

Second, the neutrality objection — that secular formation is just another framework — is partially correct but ultimately overstated. A more careful version of this objection would note that secular contexts produce their own social pressures: exclusion for nonconformity, moral shame, identity costs for departing from community norms. These pressures are real, and conceding their existence does not weaken the present argument — it sharpens it. The relevant asymmetry is not between the presence and absence of social pressure. It is between pressure that is bounded and

revisable and pressure that is encoded as infinite and permanent. Secular social exclusion is painful and can be severe. It does not include the claim that the excluded person will suffer without limit for eternity as a metaphysical consequence of their departure. It does not wire the stakes of nonconformity into a cosmological framework that precedes and survives any human community. That difference in the structure of consequences — bounded versus unbounded, revisable versus cosmologically permanent — is precisely what the operational definition of installation tracks. A framework that can be departed from at finite psychological cost is categorically different, from the standpoint of children's rights, from one that encodes departure as infinite existential danger.

## **7. The Cultural Exemption Problem**

One of the more striking features of public discourse about childhood religious formation is the asymmetric treatment it receives relative to other forms of psychological influence on children. Consider the following structural parallel: if a secular organization systematically taught children that invisible agents were monitoring their every thought, that failure to comply with the organization's norms would result in infinite suffering, and that doubt about the organization's doctrines was a form of moral failure requiring confession and correction, we would recognize this as coercive manipulation of vulnerable minds. High-control groups that operate through these mechanisms are treated as dangerous precisely because of those mechanisms.

Religious institutions receive a categorical exemption from this analysis. The exemption is grounded partly in constitutional protections, partly in cultural deference to religion as a historically significant domain of human life, and partly in the genuine goods — community, meaning, moral formation — that religious participation provides. None of these grounds is trivial. But none of them specifically justifies the use of fear-based eternal consequence framing on children who lack the developmental capacity to evaluate it.

Mill's harm principle holds that the only legitimate basis for restricting individual freedom is the prevention of harm to others. Mill himself was explicit that children occupy a different moral category from adults with respect to paternalistic intervention, precisely because the formation of autonomous rational agency is itself an ongoing process that can be supported or undermined. The cultural exemption for religious formation, applied without qualification to fear-based transmission mechanisms, is difficult to justify within any serious framework of children's rights.

I am not arguing for state prohibition of religious education. I am arguing for moral clarity about what it is — and for cultural honesty about the gap between the goods religion can genuinely provide and the specific harms that particular transmission mechanisms produce.

## **8. The Consent Survival Test and Its Limits**

There is a rhetorical test that has appeared in critiques of childhood religious formation: if a belief system requires that it be transmitted before the recipient can evaluate and refuse it, this is evidence that the belief system does not survive rational scrutiny well enough to be offered to autonomous adults. The test has real force, but it requires careful scoping.

Applied broadly, the test is too strong. Many things transmitted in childhood do not survive intact through adulthood — childhood moral intuitions, familial loyalties, cultural aesthetics, foundational language structures. This does not mean they are epistemically disreputable. Early transmission is a feature of formation as such, not a mark against any particular content.

Applied narrowly to the specific mechanism this paper targets — beliefs tied to fear, infinite punishment for disbelief, and the explicit framing of doubt as transgression — the test regains its force. The relevant question is not whether the content is transmitted early, but whether the transmission mechanism is designed to make later revision prohibitively costly. A belief system that requires eternal

consequence framing specifically because it cannot compete in the open marketplace of adult inquiry has not merely transmitted early; it has armed itself against revision by exploiting neurological vulnerability. That is a different thing.

The narrowed test holds: beliefs that require fear-based foreclosure mechanisms to ensure transmission are demonstrating, through that requirement, that they cannot be relied upon to survive adult scrutiny. The mechanism reveals something about the belief's relationship to evidence and rational evaluation. And beliefs that cannot survive consent — specifically, beliefs that depend on bypassing the evaluation capacity before it matures — should not be transmitted through mechanisms designed to prevent that evaluation from ever occurring.

## **9. Implications: Cultural, Professional, and Ethical**

The argument of this paper aims at moral clarity about a practice that currently enjoys substantial cultural protection from serious ethical examination. Three levels of implication follow.

**Cultural implications:** Religious communities that use fear-based eternal consequence framing in the formation of children are not simply exercising a traditional prerogative. They are making a choice — one that can be made differently. Introduction-mode transmission of religious heritage is possible, is practiced in many communities, and does not require abandoning doctrinal commitments. What it requires is a different relationship to those commitments: one that can hold them as offered rather than installed, as invitations rather than assignments. Communities capable of this reorientation preserve the genuine goods of religious formation while closing the gap between their practice and their professed regard for human dignity.

**Professional implications:** Clinicians working with adults who present with anxiety, shame, and hypervigilance organized around religious content should be equipped to recognize the psychological architecture of installation. This means attending not only to religious belief as content but to the mechanism through which it

was transmitted. Therapists, counselors, and educators who encounter children in formation contexts should understand the distinction between introduction and installation as clinically and developmentally significant. Pediatricians and child psychologists are positioned to contribute to research that more precisely identifies which transmission mechanisms produce which outcomes, and to advocate for evidence-based standards in discussions of children's wellbeing in religious contexts.

**Ethical boundaries:** The argument does not locate clear lines that institutions or families have crossed into legally actionable harm — it locates a moral structure that current legal frameworks do not track adequately. The ethical boundary that is most defensible is this: transmission mechanisms that deliberately exploit developmental incapacity by using fear of infinite consequence to foreclose doubt are not equivalent, in moral terms, to transmission mechanisms that do not. We already draw this line in other domains. We prohibit manipulation of children through terror in commercial advertising. We prohibit the exploitation of developmental vulnerability in institutional contexts. The fact that religious formation has historically been exempted from these standards does not mean the exemption is principled.

The children who sit in pews before they have language for doubt, who absorb cosmologies before they understand metaphor, who learn fear before they understand choice — those children are not vessels for tradition. They are people. And people deserve to arrive at their deepest beliefs through their own encounter with evidence, argument, and experience, not through the foreclosure of that encounter before it can begin.

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