

# **NO! Against Adult Supremacy Vol. 14**

Various Authors

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## The Pedagogy of Religion

### *Peter Gelderloos*

It was my grandfather's memorial service, and the Dutch Reform pastor took a break from talking about God and Heaven to the members of the congregation, in which I, as a dutiful grandson, was unfortunately included for the moment, in order to address the children in the audience, the grand-kids and great grand-kids of the deceased, nearly all of them baptized into the Dutch Reform church or a like-minded denomination, as the apple does not fall far from the tree.

"Now, you all might be wondering," began the pastor in a condescending tone, only slightly more exact in diction and enunciation than that with which he had been addressing the adults, "what all this is about. On Friday, when you found out that Grandpa died, your mommy and your daddy told you that Grandpa had gone to Heaven. They told you that he is leaving us for a while, because God called him up to be with Him in Heaven." His surety of this occurrence seemed about as strong as his conviction regarding my grandfather's posthumous fate. The one being an empirical fact (mommy and daddy either did or they did not explain the death in this fashion) and the other a supersensory, non-rational statement of faith (Heaven and the soul not being subject to scrutiny or observation), the pastor's narrations were less a conjecture of fact than a reminder of orthodoxy. By trustingly assuming that all parents present used the death as an opportunity to confound young minds into an acceptance of religion, the pastor was also issuing a stern reminder that it was their responsibility to do so, thus talking to the parents as much as he was to the children. The children were not being given the lesson so much as they were the lesson.

"But then when you went to the funeral home on Sunday," he continued, "and saw Grandpa lying there in the coffin, you must have been confused. Didn't mommy and daddy say Grandpa was in Heaven now? Why is he lying here? Well, I'll tell you why. That wasn't Grandpa lying there in the funeral home. It was just his body. You see, the body is just a house for the soul. And when the body dies, that means the soul has gone to heaven. Grandpa is in Heaven now with God, because God called him up, and said: "Hey, it's your time. Come to my side and live with me in Heaven." So Grandpa left his body-house and went to Heaven. But since God made the house, since the house is his creation, and he loves it too, that is why we treat it with respect, dress it up, make it look nice, and put it in a coffin and bury it in the ground. But the soul lives forever, and you and I, we're the souls and our bodies are just a house. The body will die one day, but Christians live forever. When we die, we move out of our body-house to live in the Kingdom of God. It was moving day for Grandpa."

There was a severity underlying the warmth and softness of the pastor's pedantic sermon, as though he were driving home a point that had already been addressed, his words holding the children hostage so as to deliver a message to the rest of us. But I had little more time to think on this theme, as the lady at the piano began cranking out a bunch of dreary hymns about Jesus loving us and dying for us, and we should love Jesus so we can go live with God in the Kingdom of Heaven, etc. I wondered incredulously that these people sat through such repetitions once or twice a week.

On another Sunday several months removed, I awoke to more such hymns by accident when my radio-alarm, normally set to news or music, switched on in time for the broadcast of a local Mennonite church's morning service. An entirely different denomination, but hymns with the

exact same hackneyed themes about loving Jesus and going to live with God when we die, as though these white, middle-class parishioners faced lives of utmost agony and oppression that they had to hold their breaths for a life after this one before they could have satisfaction, until that time secure in the knowledge that some invisible leprechaun in the awnings loved them and would protect them from all suffering, except for all the suffering they actually did experience, which, well, was just a test.

Afterwards, the preacher-figure in this congregation brought some children up to the stage, or pulpit, or whatever this particular church had at the front, and interrogated them for the sake of some merry lesson.

“What are some things that make you happy?” asked the preacher.

“Playing with friends,” “Sunshine,” “Birthdays,” came the lisped, falsetto responses.

“Oh, Birthdays, yes. And what are some things that make you angry?” asked the preacher expressively, like some novice actor. The timid responses were inaudible. “Now when something makes you happy or angry,” continued the preacher, “who can you talk to about this?” The children seemed uncertain: there were no answers. “Who can you talk to? Who loves you and who takes care of you?”

This answer they knew, and the responses came without hesitation: “My friends.” “My parents.”

“Yes, your parents. Your parents love you more than anyone!” Once again, this was not a certified fact but the expression of an ideal relationship, and the preacher’s confirmation was not extended to the relationship of friend – the difference being, perhaps, that age-group peers cannot provide what parents can: mentoring in the aged hierarchy that comes with religion. “But who else? Do you remember the hymns we just sang? Who else loves you?”

No longer speaking from certain knowledge, instead thinking back to that morning’s melodized lesson, the children responded by rote, with the tone of someone who has performed a newly learned trick and expects a reward (I could almost see their tails wagging): “God!”

“Good! That’s right!” lavished the preacher. “God loves you more than anyone, even more than your parents! And any time you need to, you can talk to God, because God loves you and He wants to know what you’re thinking, He wants to know what is inside your heart. So any time you feel like it, you should talk to God, and tell him what makes you happy, and what makes you angry, even if you’re angry at Him.” Preparing them for disappointment at such a young age. The sermon continued...

The use of children to explain a moral lesson is worth noting, and I say “use” deliberately. In both instances, children were made the centerpiece of the sermon, and their indoctrination was a sort of play or fable directed at the adults. The children’s role as props is made apparent by the totality with which they are ignored before and after their appearance in the lesson plan. That both conversations were pedagogical is plainly demonstrated by the teacher-figure in each case, the one who lectured no less so than the one who entertained a dialogue, a farce clearly intended to lead the children to offer up the “right” answer.

Religion’s tautological nature offers some explanation for the priest’s use of children to instruct the parents. There are no complex truths in religion to be understood or imparted only by the “mature” mind. Rather, the mind of the believer must be suspended in an “immature” state, in order to accept as profound and unquestionable mysteries the mystifications with which religion dutifully disguises the fully historical moral systems, social relationships and power structures of the status quo. Christianity, for example, is a philosophically simplistic religion (perhaps this is a

redundant phrase) and what is required in the believer above all is a childish (Childishness being a socially constructed value and not a trait inherent to children) suspension of disbelief, a never-ending leap of faith even beyond the perennial fantasy of Santa Claus, who at least dispenses some measurable reward in return for the piety he receives. As such, the child, fully trained to admit her ignorance and trust the mythic wisdom of the adult, is the ideal disciple of the church, and the demonstration of the child being taught his lesson is above all a demonstration of the proper behaviour, for all members of the congregation, of a believer before a moral authority figure.

Therefore, the ideal relationship between the constituency and leadership of the church is a fundamentally patriarchal one; that of father and children, or shepherd and sheep, with God as the father and the congregation the children. Not being an active or even present participant, God needs an intermediary: the priest. The priest uses a relationship between himself and the congregation's children to show what must be reproduced between God (represented by himself) and the entire congregation. They are his flock. Other demonstrations of morally sanctioned power (the recent drama in the Catholic church for one) arise from this hierarchical relationship, as a shepherd will do what he must with his sheep.

However, the entire congregation cannot arrest itself, politically, at the level of infantile powerlessness (whereas such a retardation at the intellectual level is far more sustainable over time). The priest alone would not be able to maintain such a tyranny without assistance. Though they do not speak for God, propertied males grow in time to become church elders, in conjunction with contemporaneous systems of hierarchy, though they can do this only so far as they speak with one voice, and offer no rebuttal to the word of God, which is solely the domain of the priest (and accordingly the priest can say nothing unexpected, but must repeat moral lessons by polished rote, like the recitation of a multiplication table). This single-mindedness within the moral hierarchy is not nourished by discourse; it is replicated by inculcation, signified by the programmatic education of children. And since this tired repetition of simplistic truisms allows no room for independent affirmation (as this would also open the door for contradiction or disavowal), it can only renew its validity when it is taught to, and embraced by, new members, and only at the level of childish mysticism are these tautological explanations of morality sufficient; thus the immaturity of the adults, when reflected onto the children, can reaffirm their orthodoxy.

The parents renew their faith vicariously through their children, even as they are instilled with the imperative of indoctrinating them to perpetuate the religious hierarchy. After all, even as they prepare for their real life in Heaven, it is the duty of the God-fearing to multiply, and continue their dominion on earth.

## **The Problem with Unschooling**

*Kathleen Nicole O'Neal*

The ideas expressed in this post have been germinating in my mind for perhaps a little over a year now. In this post, I aim to provide a constructive critique of many of the assumptions that I see guiding many members of the unschooling community and how I feel that some of these assumptions are problematic not so much for reasons frequently found in the mainstream of education policy and parenting discourse but from a solidly and radically youth rights perspective as well. It is within this spirit that I ask the reader to engage with this post. In other words,

the things I find problematic about the ideology of much of the unschooling movement I find problematic mostly on youth rights grounds. I do not find the elements of unschooling ideology I set out to critique problematic because I fear that they are too radically pro-youth liberation or for reasons of political expediency. In fact, in my experience most unschooling parents are far more conservative youth rights advocates, if they are youth rights advocates at all, than I try to be. Rather, I fear that elements of unschooling ideology stand to disempower or even endanger young people in ways that youth rights supporters by definition oppose.

First of all, the idea of unschooling gives parents tremendous control over their children's lives. For all of their problematic aspects, most traditional educational institutions allow young people something of a scope of autonomy (however limited) beyond the reach of their immediate families and they also provide youth with exposure to people of diverse backgrounds and belief systems of the sort whom their parents may not associate with. Unschooling gives parents far more power and control over their children than the traditional division between school and home allots to either parents or school personnel. Unschooling parents have far greater power to surveil their children than they would if the child was spending time away from the parent at school. Furthermore, it is difficult for a young person who spends virtually all of her time around her parents (or those people the parents both know and explicitly endorse the child associating with) to develop a strong sense of independence, identity, and autonomy. Most disturbingly of all, unschooling gives the most dangerous parents even more scope for abuse of their authority whether it involves indoctrinating their child into questionable political or religious beliefs or allowing sexual, emotional, or physical abuse to occur with impunity. With no adults in a child's life besides those handpicked by the parent, it's much easier for serious violations of young people's rights to occur at the hands of the parents themselves.

Secondly, it is important to note that some young people enjoy school and many more would enjoy it were the most oppressive aspects of the traditional K-12 schooling experience done away with. In the contemporary United States, very few young people have any choice in where they go to school and what they study there. Everything from talking without permission (even outside the classroom) to wearing certain items of clothing to using the restroom without permission to carrying necessary medications in one's purse to self-defense of one's person are prohibited for most youth and oftentimes these things result in harsh punishments with little due process. Even in a society in which young people were completely liberated, many youth would choose to attend school for the same reasons many adults pursue careers as scholars. By presenting a version of educational choices in which the options are either unschooling or schooling in its present form, unschooling advocates often demonstrate their inability to imagine a system in which school could be a far better and less oppressive place for the youth that did want to be there. This is concerning for philosophical reasons, but also for practical ones. Many individuals advocating for unschooling refuse to help work towards policies which would make schools more just.

Up until this point, most of my objections towards unschooling could not be said to apply to free schools. While these schools do not follow a set curriculum and simply allow young people to learn and play at their own pace, they provide a scope for youth autonomy outside the parental gaze and could be said to provide a third way between unschooling and traditional schooling. However, the final criticism of unschooling I about about to expound upon could be said to apply equally to free schools and unschooling. In a less direct but still extremely important way, it is a criticism grounded in youth rights concerns and the value of youth autonomy.

I once knew a man who had attended a traditional private school until dropping out and attending a free school in his late teens. While he greatly enjoyed the experience, he once related to me the tale of a young man he had known in his free schooling days who had attended the school from early childhood on. While the man I knew raved about his free schooling experience he told me that his friend felt less positively towards the free schooling philosophy because he could not read until he was twelve years old despite having no learning disabilities or other circumstances which would possibly delay a young person in another sort of schooling environment in acquiring literacy skills. While some might reply “But this young man learned to read eventually!” and be satisfied with that, I myself continue to be concerned about this aspect of unschooling and free schooling.

As a supporter of youth liberation I, like all of us committed to this philosophy, want to create a world in which young people are more free than they currently are to manage their own affairs and participate in important community decision-making. If we are serious about young people having a greater scope of autonomy in voting, making medical decisions, managing their own finances, practicing a religion of their choice (or not), advocating for their rights within the legal system, and participating in other things which a youth liberationist perspective stipulates that young people should be participating in, how are they going to be empowered to do so if many of them are not basically literate or numerate? Traditionally women, people of color, ethnic minorities, poor people, rural people, immigrants, and people with disabilities have sought greater access to educational institutions because they realized that learning to read, write, add, and subtract would make them less powerless vis a vis more powerful groups and individuals in their lives. Why do we think that not accessing these same institutions and the knowledge they have to offer is going to make an already disempowered group more able to represent their own interests individually and collectively?

I would like to close this piece by saying that I do oppose compulsory education and I believe that unschooling, home schooling, and free schooling are the right choice for many youth. I also believe that these options have both advantages and disadvantages vis a vis the more traditional schooling framework in its contemporary form. However, I think that this is an issue we all need to be thinking and speaking more critically about. When unschooling and free schools are discussed in youth rights circles, they are almost always presented as the paradigmatic educational options that radical youth rights supporters need to rally around. I have even heard of youth who desire to attend more traditional schools spoken of by people in the movement as if they are suffering from some sort of false consciousness or as if, by wanting to learn in a traditional environment, they are somehow consenting to the most abusive and oppressive aspects of traditional K-12 schooling, even though these aspects of schooling usually have very little if anything to do with schools’ pedagogic mission. (In most cases I would argue that these oppressive and abusive practices in fact undermine and even subvert schools’ pedagogic mission.) I hope that this post starts a dialogue on these important issues within the youth rights movement itself. Young people, like adults, deserve a variety of educational options which respect their dignity and autonomy as well as their unique individual strengths, weaknesses, goals, and desires.

## Children of Color in White Circles

### *Victoria Law*

Siu Loong means “Little Dragon” in Cantonese. But Siu Loong herself isn’t Cantonese. She isn’t even one hundred percent Chinese. Through me, she can claim to be Hakka, Suzhonese and Shanghainese. From her father, she can claim to be Finnish, Hungarian and Jewish. But she is also an American living among American anarchists, where none of this supposedly matters. Before motherhood became a consideration, I paid little attention to the lack of color in the New York City anarchist “scene.” So what if no one looked like me? Weren’t we all struggling for the same thing?

Pregnancy made me sit up and look around at the demographics of the anarchists around me. Yes, I had followed (but not participated) in the short-lived discussion on white privilege in Seattle’s protests against the WTO. Yes, I would confront my fellow anarchists about their internalized racism. But I never really went further and questioned why there were so few people of color—never mind people of color like me—in the anarchist movement. Motherhood forced me to open my eyes. Before the recommended six weeks of postpartum rest were up, I was up and about on my various projects. Virtually everyone was supportive of my new role as mother and on-call cow. However, I started noticing small things that bothered me about my (mostly white) activist circles. For starters, no one could pronounce my daughter’s name correctly. It was pronounced, “Sue Long,” “Siu Long,” “Sue La,” any which way except the way it was supposed to be pronounced. If people didn’t have trouble making a small circle with their lips to say the word “siu,” they couldn’t remember that “loong” had two “o”s. One person tried to shorten her name to Suzy. I very firmly put a stop to that.

Before Siu Loong could even remember her environment, I looked at the young children who made up the anarchist scene. Who would she be playing with when she grew old enough to interact with other kids? Most anarchists do not have children. Whether this is a political statement or a personal choice, the face remains that anarchist children are few and far between. On the Lower East Side, the anarchists who choose parenthood and had enough support to remain somewhat involved in the movement tend to be white.

It bothers me that Siu Loong’s companions are almost all white. I do not want her growing up in an all-white (or predominantly white) environment. I do not want her to wonder if she is somehow incorrect for not having blond hair and blue eyes as many of her peers do. When I have brought this up with other anarchist parents, they dismiss my concerns. Of course they do not have to worry about whether their child will feel as if she does not belong. Their children, even those who are of mixed parentage, have white skin. They do not have to worry that their child may feel as if she is not as good as her lighter-skinned, lighter-haired friends. They do not have to worry about the fact that our small community sometimes mirrors the racism and ethnocentrism found out in the larger world.

Sometimes I wonder if I obsess about race too much. I buy her books that emphasize her Chinese heritage and, more importantly, have characters that look like her. When she began Early Head Start, I was secretly thrilled that there were no white children in her class. When she entered Head Start seven months later, I was delighted that ten of the fifteen kids running around were Chinese and that all spoke Cantonese. No one mispronounced Siu Loong’s name, not even the non-Chinese teachers. However, the parents and caretakers of these children are



not ones with whom I share anything except an ancestral homeland. For the most part, we do not share the same language and thus cannot talk with each other. Some of them do not return my tentative or “Jou sahn” when we pass each other in the hall or wait for the elevator together. I do not know their politics and opinions. After seeing my punk rock babysitter, they may have guessed mine, although this did not prevent them from electing me the chairperson of both the Class Committee and the Settlement House’s Policy Committee. But because we have virtually nothing in common, we do not arrange for our children to see each other outside the classroom. Perhaps because their children are full-blooded Chinese, often raised in a community of other full-blooded Chinese, they do not see arranging play dates with the other Chinese children as a concern. Or perhaps they already do, but because my Cantonese is limited to ordering food and asking for prices, I am left out of the invitation loop.

In addition, despite my visible pleasure at Siu Loong being around children who share the more neglected half of her heritage, I feel as if I’m compromising some of my anti-authoritarian beliefs by placing her in a school-like atmosphere. She not only picks up the odd Cantonese phrase but also the seemingly senseless rules and regulations found in all classrooms. One evening, as I sat and talked with a friend, Siu Loong grabbed my legs. “Put your feet like this,” she commanded, attempting to bend my legs into a cross-legged position. Then she grabbed my hands. “Put your hands like this,” she demanded, intertwining my fingers and then folding my hands. This was not a comfortable position for a grown woman in a chair, so I promptly uncrossed my legs and unfolded my hands. Siu Loong tried to reposition me again. “This isn’t comfortable,” I protested. “It is comfortable,” she insisted, trying to bend my fingers. “You need to sit like that so I can read you a story,” she added.

That was when I realized that, for some unknown and probably nonsensical reason, Siu Loong’s teachers were having their charges sit for story time with folded hands and crossed legs. The logic of this escapes me. Isn’t it enough that the kids are seated and quiet? Why impose a needless rule? Especially one that she will parrot and annoy me with? Often, I feel as if my life is split. If I want to be around people who think as I do, who believe and are willing to fight for the same things, they will not look as I do. They will not share the same culture or upbringing. I will have to explain certain aspects of my life and sometimes have these aspects be misunderstood or distorted. If I choose to be with those who share my culture and collective history, I risk having my individuality misunderstood or ignored. During high school, I chose to be with other Chinese. We shared nothing except a common ancestry. In that circle of friends, my needs and wants as an individual and as an emerging anarchist were ignored. As an adult, I have been asked why I choose to be around so many white people, why I do not choose to be around “my own.” In this circle, my needs and wants as a woman of color are ignored.

Sometimes I wonder if Siu Loong feels the split as acutely as I do. I wonder if she notices that, around white people, virtually anything is okay. She can run and climb and laugh and shout. She can even take all of her clothes off. No one will chastise her. The most that will happen is that the grown-ups will laugh. However, among those who look more like she does, whether they be schoolmates or relatives, such behavior is not only not laughed at, but actively discouraged and chastised.

When I try to talk with my anarchist friends about this split in my life and hers, they don’t get it. Why is it important that I send Siu Loong to “school”? Why am I subjecting Siu Loong to regiment and restrictions at such an early age? Can’t I find an alternative source of childcare for her-one that does not reinforce models of hierarchy and oppression? And why am I so hung up

on race? One anarchist described my concerns about race and ethnicity as “nationalistic bullshit.” How can I raise a baby anarchist of color if my choices lay between a white, color-blind movement or a gathering of those who can identify with her looks and heritage, but little else?

I’m still struggling to find some sort of balance between these two extremes. It’s hard to think of solutions when those around me—both my peers and the parents of Siu Loong’s peers—do not acknowledge that there is a problem. This reflects a larger issue—white anarchists’ refusal to discuss race, racism and exclusivity in the movement. Knowing this doesn’t make it any easier. I am still struggling alone with this concern.

## **End Youth Imprisonment**

*Ryan Calhoun*

Last week president Obama put an end to the use of solitary confinement on youth locked up in the federal prison system. In an op-ed announcing a series of executive actions the president cited the particular psychological harms that young inmates face when being placed in solitary confinement. He rightly points out that a life in blossom under such conditions is robbed of its future potential. Obama’s op-ed and his executive actions, which also put restrictions on adult solitary confinement, are no doubt laudable and a terrific step in the right direction.

However, his appeals to the severity of conditions for youth within solitary, at the federal level, apply also to juvenile detention generally. Right now there are well over 70,000 juveniles incarcerated in the United States. Fueled by an endless call for law-and-order and tough-on-crime policies, more children are being tried as adults and are being met with more severe sentences as a result. Juveniles are being arrested more and find themselves behind bars longer, and the consequences of their time spent in correctional facilities are disastrous.

First, children are not at all exempt from the sexual predation that pervades America’s correctional facilities. The particularly disastrous effects of exposure to such predation at a young age is well documented and rightly universally condemned. However our cultural stereotype of pedophilic assault seems to never take place in incarceration, and the perpetrator is never cast as a detention center employee. Yet that is who incarcerated youth are most likely to be sexually victimized by. Shockingly, children are even less safe in juvenile detention centers than in normal jails and prisons, where the rate of sexual assault is nearly twice what adult inmates face. 7.7 percent of inmates in juvenile facilities report sexual contact with staff members. With such uniquely horrendous conditions it is no wonder that 1/3rd of incarcerated youth diagnosed with depression track the onset of those conditions to when they were first incarcerated. The ordeal of being imprisoned does not teach youth to be peaceful, but fosters the mental characteristics of a lifelong offender.

Let us remember that juveniles are encumbered by criminal offenses unique to them. Children can find themselves in the custody of the criminal justice system for consuming alcohol, purchasing cigarettes, consensual sexual interactions with fellow teenagers, refusing to go to school, and even persistent disobedience to their parents or legal guardians. When youths do show up to school they are often met with zero tolerance policies which start them on the path of the well-researched school-to-prison pipeline. Children are brought up in institutions often meant to mimic the atmosphere of prisons and jails, with the threat ever looming that misbehavior may land them in the real deal.

Youth are stigmatized in our culture, with perceptions of criminality among minors increasing as rates of actual criminality decrease. We need to stop denying young people their agency while simultaneously exposing them to more severe treatment than many adults face. President Obama's policies do not go nearly far enough. Nothing less than a halt to the incarceration of children, the elimination of all laws that uniquely target and harm them, and the active opposition to a media and culture that criminalizes them will suffice. If we wish to see a world which has done away with mass incarceration and focuses on peaceful alternatives we cannot afford to tolerate a system that makes so many people into convicts before they even possess the right to vote. End our prison-centric culture where it starts. Free all children now.

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