

Circumcision and other evils of religion

The Cranky Professor

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Mark Mercer

Department of Philosophy

Saint Mary's University

Halifax, NS B3H 3C3

(902) 420-5825

mark.mercer@smu.ca

Only about one in five sets of parents who have their baby circumcised does so for religious reasons, or at least that's what Danae Elon reports in her documentary "It's a boy."

This information counts as a bit of vindication for religious people against atheists. Atheists are fond of the saying "For a bad person to do wrong it doesn't take much; for a good person to do wrong it takes religion." It turns out that not just religious nonsense can bring a parent to cut off a piece of their child's penis. This is some evidence that religious people are right on at least one matter and we atheists are wrong.

The chief reasons parents give, according to Elon, are health, hygiene, and appearance.

Parents circumcise their boys, we're told, because circumcision lowers the risk of penile cancer and might lower the risk of contracting HIV or other sexually transmitted viruses or organisms, including, perhaps, the human papillomavirus, which can cause cervical cancer. But the effect of circumcision is minimal. Circumcision lowers the incidence of penile cancer only from three in a million to one in a million. Its effect on STDs is even smaller, if an effect exists at all. Circumcision is no substitute for a condom.

Circumcision appears also to reduce urinary tract infections in babies and toddlers, and this effect might be significant. But even greater is the effect of changing the child's diaper.

Parents circumcise their boys because they believe a cut penis is easier to keep clean and fresh than an uncut one. What matters here, though, is bathing. An unwashed boy is an unwashed boy, foreskin intact or not.

Finally, parents circumcise their boys because they prefer the look of a cut penis, or wish their child's penis to look like his father's penis or like the penises of the child's peers.

Against its potential, though rare, benefits, we must weigh the pain and harm circumcision can cause. Even a relatively safe surgical procedure brings risks of bleeding, infection, and damage. Indeed, the chance of bleeding, infection, and damage from circumcision greatly exceeds the reduced chance of penile cancer. In addition, circumcision might decrease sexual pleasure. It sometimes hurts the child. It at least separates a baby from his parents for a while.

All in all, it seems a cruel and stupid thing to do, to circumcise a baby, and it must seem so even to parents who have their baby circumcised, as all the reasons against circumcision were available to them. And yet lots of people who have no religious reason for doing this cruel and stupid thing are happy to do it.

Many atheists, and many theists as well, claim that most people have a natural inclination to treat others decently. Because they're inclined toward decency, most people will think twice before performing any deeds they know will cause pain or grief. They need a strong reason to do something that will hurt others, and they'll hurt others only regretfully. Religious belief, though, atheists maintain, thwarts this natural inclination to treat others decently. It removes people's inhibition against cruelty. But the fact that parents circumcise their children for all sorts of bad reasons shows that not only religion can work against our inclination to be decent, even granting we have such an inclination.

It's not to the point that religion is the worst of all the bad reasons, though it is. At least those who have their baby circumcised for health, hygiene, or appearance think they are benefiting their child, despite thinking this in face of contrary evidence. Now why would a religion demand circumcision? Whatever the religious rationale for mutilating a child's penis, it's a good bet that besides expressing a fear and loathing of sex, it's meant to put the child in his place before both adults and God.

The claim that religion is particularly good at making ordinary people act badly has always seemed dodgy. Examples meant to illustrate it—Rwanda, the Troubles, Israel-Palestine, the Balkans—have never been convincing, given the social, cultural, economic, and political factors involved in generating and sustaining these conflicts. Moreover, Stalinist Russia, Hitler's Germany, Cambodia during the Kymer Rouge, and Chile and Argentina in the 1970s and 80s provide clear examples of many ordinary people acting badly neither under duress nor out of religious conviction.

Religion can, certainly, be a force for evil, but, it seems, no more than just about anything else can. People have various allegiances and ideals, not all of which are religious, and in the name of their allegiances and ideals they can be willing to do harm to others, sometimes great harm. And that's not even to speak of selfishness, greed, or simple indifference to others.

What of the more modest claim some atheists make, that religion is not a force for good? Here the argument is stronger. Whether a religion or a religious community is a force for good depends on what the religion enjoins the faithful to pursue. If they are enjoined to pursue peace, equality, justice, and decency—well, then, great. But, the atheist will remind us, since the ground of their being enjoined to pursue these things lies in interpretations of holy books, or in dreams or inspirations or authority, the commitment the faithful have to them is shallow and unsteady (as well as disreputable). Better that people form their conception of justice and their commitment to it through investigation and argument than through indoctrination and faith.

There are many excellent arguments against religion. The contention that religion is singularly good at promoting evil isn't among them.