

Richard Dawkins Under Fire for 'Mild Pedophilia' Remarks

Richard Dawkins, one of the world's best-known and outspoken atheists, has provoked outrage among child protection agencies and experts after suggesting that recent child abuse scandals have been overblown.

In an interview in *The Times* magazine on Saturday, Dawkins, 72, he said he was unable to condemn what he called "the mild pedophilia" he experienced at an English school when he was a child in the 1950s.

Referring to his early days at a boarding school in Salisbury, he recalled how one of the (unnamed) masters "pulled me on his knee and put his hand inside my shorts."

He said other children in his school peer group had been molested by the same teacher but concluded: "I don't think he did any of us lasting harm."

"I am very conscious that you can't condemn people of an earlier era by the standards of ours. Just as we don't look back at the 18th and 19th centuries and condemn people for racism in the same way as we would condemn a modern person for racism, I look back a few decades to my childhood and see things like caning, like mild pedophilia, and can't find it in me to condemn it by the same standards as I or anyone would today," he said.

He said the most notorious cases of pedophilia involve rape and even murder and should not be bracketed with what he called "just mild touching up."

Dawkins is an evolutionary biologist and the interview was released on the eve of the publication of his autobiography, *An Appetite for Wonder*, on Thursday.

Peter Watt, director of child protection at the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, called Dawkins' remarks "a terrible slight" on those who have been abused and suffered the effects for decades.

"Mr. Dawkins seems to think that because a crime was committed a long time ago we should judge it in a different way," Watt said. "But we know that the victims of sexual abuse suffer the same effects whether it was 50 years ago or yesterday."

Peter Saunders, founder of the National Association for People Abused in Childhood and himself a victim of abuse, told *The Times* that Dawkins' comments were worrying and unhelpful, adding: "Abuse in all its forms has always been wrong. Evil is evil and we have to challenge it whenever and wherever it occurs."

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