

# Child Abuse and the Reality of Sin

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Cruelty to children is not new, though no doubt we are an inventive enough species to come up with some new forms. It could be that some of us may be more disposed to it than others, but it seems safer to assume that we all share a capacity for cruelty. Such a capacity does not have to be exercised: cruelty can be understandable without being right. Some societies and some social situations may increase the likelihood of its occurring, but they neither excuse it nor explain it away.

But if cruelty itself is not new, new in our own time is its categorisation. When we talk of 'child abuse', we are putting forward views on both cruelty and children which in some ways *are* new, or at least newly accepted, and which incorporate our contemporary notions of how human beings should conduct themselves. This categorisation is crucial to any discussion, since it provides us with the basic forms which it must take, but it does incline us to treat the phenomenon of cruelty to children as especially characteristic of our own time. The broad range of cruelty from deprivation through violation to murder is fully evident, in England at least, from a succession of court cases and official inquiries, yet it still cannot be asserted with any certainty that child abuse is more common now than in the past. Evidence from the past is lacking precisely because our forebears did not share our categorisations (or our interest in statistics). We cannot be sure that it is not our *awareness* of 'abuse' that leads to its detection. Our categories allow us to see what may not have been seen in the same way before. What would once have been identified as 'cruelty', or not even identified at all, now becomes a class of our new category of 'abuse'. Having developed more refined notions of what constitutes abuse, we are equipped to discover abuse in all its refinements.

A result of this has been an increase in the data available to the investigator of child abuse. It is not just that we 'invent' what will count as abuse, but also that we see the hard facts in a new way. Think, for example, of a bruise. Although children have always bruised often and easily, the awareness of abuse prompts us to look more carefully at the facts. Was the bruise likely to have been accidental? Could it have been inflicted by someone else? Is it in an unusual position on the child's body, etc? We have changed our ways of classifying these facts. This affects our attitude to these facts (they have now at least always to be noted) and this obviously alters our practice.

We operate now with a concept which is also a commitment to having

a negative view of one area of human behaviour—the private relationships between adults (parents in particular) and children. It is a *moral* commitment: we use the word ‘abuse’, as it can only be used, in a pejorative and condemnatory sense. Such commitment is, in practice, becoming mandatory and unchallengeable. As a result, it gets harder to see the facts (the bruises, etc.) as indications of anything but abuse. It is harder still when the ‘facts’ are not physical but psychological, or where signs of abuse are almost wholly a matter of interpretation. The recent child abuse crisis in Cleveland in England<sup>1</sup> drew attention to two examples of this: the ‘failure to thrive’ as a sign of abuse, and the diagnostic technique known as anal dilatation. In both these instances, an *indicator* which may suggest any number of possible explanations is taken to have only one. The temptation to settle for the ‘abuse’ explanation may be more the result of this moral commitment than the result of genuine investigation.

The moral bias built into our notion of abuse is always operative both in our discussions of general policy and our assessment and handling of individual cases. It thus affects the difficult task of formulating an effective social policy and directly influences its implementation. Since it is impossible by definition to find instances of good abuse, what we may predispose ourselves to find is always going to be bad. This can make a difference, for example, in one of the crucial professional tasks: the accurate description of the problem.

Much of our apparent unanimity on this question of child abuse arises from the special place we have given to ‘childhood’ in our society. If, as many recent theorists<sup>2</sup> would have it, we have largely invented the notion of childhood, then it is not difficult to pick out its characteristics. For us the child is uniquely passive, ‘innocent’, and unburdened with ‘adult’ concerns, above all sexuality (this, in spite of Freud). We, in the West at least, even go so far as to surround childhood with its own manufactured world: the fantasy world of toys and play, quite deliberately kept free of those adult realities. Intrusion into the innocent world of childhood is itself, then, a sort of abuse. Perhaps the increasingly painful and protracted stage of adolescence—the breaking in, as it were, of the harsh adult realities into the world of the child—may give us some hint of this?

Could it be that our ‘unchallengeable unanimity’, our moral commitment, is unchallengeable and unanimous because it does not bear examination? Certainly it seems as if our unanimity is much more directed to some notional innocent child than to any actual child of flesh and bones. Western attitudes to children are far more ambiguous than the image of innocence might suggest. As Germaine Greer has argued, ‘Historically, human societies have been pro-child; modern society is unique in that it is profoundly hostile to children.’<sup>3</sup> But at least one recent study has suggested that our ambiguity towards childhood may have a rather longer history: that it is not so much a characteristic of modern

society, as of Western society. There has long been a tension in Western thought on the old question of nature and grace. As regards childhood, this may express itself in two apparently contradictory views. On the one hand, the child is innocent because nature is good and so up to the point where the child enters human society as an adult the child is in a 'state of nature' and therefore innocent. On the other view, the child is also in a 'state of nature', but since, without grace, nature is sinful, the child is incapable of good. We are left with two competing pictures of the child—familiar enough to us—of the child as a 'little angel' or a 'little devil'. The tension remains unresolved—displayed even in the survival of innocence from its Freudian underminers—and still forms part of the background to the ambiguity of our own day. If such ambiguity has come to be written into our ideas of childhood, it may be hard for us to press that ambiguity into the open.

Social workers and other professionals entrusted with the task of implementing our social policy ignore this confusing ambiguity at their peril. They already have to work within two contradictory demands. The first is visible enough, for example, in those tragic cases where abuse results in death. The social worker is perceived as having failed to prevent the tragedy, even when what has taken place would in any other circumstances be perceived as *criminal*. Secondly, the families whose children are taken into care by social workers are likely to see themselves, and be seen by others, as the victims of arbitrary state intervention. Society both demands intervention and resents it.

Of course, this is merely the tension of social work—one of the inherent tensions of a sometimes difficult job—and has to be tolerated as such by those who practise social work. But, when an Inquiry, for example, decides that a social worker has been at fault in a particular case, it often seems as though there is little recognition of the fact that if a child has been abused, then the guilty party is the abuser. The myth—fostered no doubt by social workers themselves to some extent—that all abuse is preventable, is only true in some utopian sense. What the social worker comes up against is what Christian theology would call 'sin'. Social work betrays Christian roots but it is not underpinned by sound doctrine. It is only in the Kingdom that abuse will cease to be a feature of human behaviour. The Kingdom has still to be struggled for, it is not yet achieved. This is a recurrent dilemma of social work. The recognition of the reality of sin in human life is an essential pre-condition of a realistic approach to the social work task. (This, I believe, is true even if the individual social worker rejects the theological notion of sin: some account of this reality will have to feature in their theory—the reality is the same, the account we give of it may not be.)

The raw material, the object, so to speak, on which social work is practised, is not morally neutral. It would be impossible to engage in social

work at all without moral commitment. (Being moral is not, of course, the same thing as being judgemental). In the case of child abuse this is especially true. The emphasis on the unique status of childhood unites with a certain *emotional* force and produces outrage. But it is not always clear to us whether the moral outrage produces the emotional response, or the strong emotions produce moral outrage. Whichever may be the case (and they need not necessarily be separated at all, of course), the social worker ought to be in no doubt as to the explosive force of the connection. It amounts to an enormous pressure on the individual social worker. For, however much the social worker may be part of a team, he or she will have to stand, in the end, alone with a decision which depends to an unusual degree on insight and experience, and will include moral judgement on individuals.

If such pressure exerts itself across the whole spectrum of child abuse, it becomes especially concentrated when the issue of child *sexual* abuse arises. There is perhaps no single issue that can evoke so vehement a reaction. In recent years, however, attention has switched from sexual abuse by the stranger to sexual abuse within the family itself. We are now aware that children are more likely to be molested by a friend or a member of the family than by some shadowy stranger. The spotlight has been turned inwards to include us all, in such a way that even ordinary displays of affection can start to look suspicious and even dangerous. Such is the power of the mere accusation of sexual abuse that, once made, it is unlikely to be successfully dispelled—with all the awful consequences for both victim and accused. Here too social workers are in the front line. (The more familial a problem becomes, the less other agencies like the police are likely to get involved in the first instance.)

The idea of sexual abuse evokes strong reactions to which even social workers can hardly be expected to be immune. It is not surprising that, in the period during which social workers are being expected to become aware of the problem, some may react too strongly. The reactions of some social workers to their first course on child sexual abuse can be to see it everywhere. The suspicion of sexual abuse can seem a surprisingly all-embracing solution to what looks like a hopelessly incomprehensible family situation. It yields what can look like an easy answer to what may be complex problems of a completely different kind. But, in any case, the discovery of sexual abuse is not the end of the problem, but the beginning of a most difficult phase. The trauma of disclosure sets the problem on a new route, as it were, and the destination is by no means sure. Sexual abuse damages, but so does disclosure: any intervention that is not deeply sensitive to the victim risks being little more than a new form of abuse.

Is there a specifically Catholic insight that could be brought to bear on all this? The apparent unanimity of moral agreement seems to present no problem to the Church, though it may be worthwhile pursuing the

sources of that agreement, however illusory, and seeking ways of making them explicit. There is certainly a rich tradition of Catholic social work on which to draw. There is also a danger, however. There is a strand of Catholic thought which would seize on the rise in reported cases of child sexual abuse as evidence of a more general moral decay. The interest here seems to be more in the fact that the abuse is *sexual* than that it is abuse. Catholics may have to take their share of the blame for the secrecy that has surrounded our sexuality: it is that secrecy which has up till now done most to shield the abuser and trap the victim of sexual abuse. Secrecy is an insufficiently explored feature of the Catholic approach to sex.

The present growth in attention to child abuse seems to emanate from countries which are predominantly protestant in ethos (the United States leads the field, of course). The same countries are also the most industrialised, or post-industrial, and the wealthiest. These facts are not unconnected. It is in these countries that we see the most breakdown in traditional family organisation. It is easy for Catholics to ignore these contemporary facts, by employing a model of 'family' which no longer exists in these countries. The extended Catholic peasant family in which each finds a place is either disappearing or has already gone. A simple re-assertion of 'family values' looks naive without the necessary context. (What, for example, was the function of secrecy in the overall Catholic approach to sexuality? Did it perhaps find its place in a context which was relatively open about sexuality?) The denunciation of the erosion of a set of values does not stop the erosion, or face the problem that new contexts can alter the meaning of our model. We can rarely simply turn back the clock. Perhaps the most sinister aspect of the call for a return to so-called 'traditional family values' is that it often seems merely to call for the return of the sexual guilt which forces secrecy upon our children and leaves them vulnerable to the very abuse we all claim to abhor.

What if anything might be concluded from all this? Above all, I would want to draw attention to the sheer complexity of the topic. It should make all of us wary of accepting simple solutions. Precisely because it is so hard for us to think through calmly and rationally, we need to exercise great caution. Against this, many of those directly involved in child abuse work have pleaded the moral urgency of their task. But one does not need to doubt the importance of helping the abused child, one does not need to be less vigilant, in order to see that calm rationality is also called for.

This article began by pointing to the categorisation of child abuse as a subspecies of *cruelty*. This seems a less emotive and more illuminating moral characterisation. In particular, it can help to remove some of the moral clutter, so to speak, with the purpose of allowing us to face child abuse with some critical power and with some realism. Such it seems to me is necessary if we are also to exercise some compassion to victim and

perpetrator, and their families. The ambiguity in our approach to our children can amount to a blind-spot—the sort of blind-spot found more often in avenging rabbles than in supposedly civilized societies. This recognition of the unpalatable truth of human cruelty is a necessary starting point for a realistic approach to child abuse. At least for Catholics this seemingly hard-headed approach is not fatalistic: it must be balanced by our hope, which is based on the belief that human cruelty can be redeemed and can be forgiven. Such balance may not be easy to maintain, but is essential if we are to hold in check the extremes of indifference at one end, and, at the other end, the morality of the lynch mob.

- 1 See Stuart Bell M.P. *When Salem Came to the Boro: The True Story of the Cleveland Child Abuse Crisis* (London, Pan Books, 1988). Also *The Report of the Inquiry into Child Abuse in Cleveland* (London, H.M.S.O., 1988)
- 2 The best known of the many works on this subject is still Philippe Ariès *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (London, Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1962).
- 3 Germaine Greer *Sex and Destiny: The Politics of Human Fertility* (London, Secker & Warburg, 1984) p.2.
- 4 Donald Weinstein & Rudolph M. Bell *Saints & Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom 1000 — 1700* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1982).

## **Religion, Culture and Anarchy: the attack on the Arnoldian vision**

**John Milbank**

The Department of Religious Studies at Newcastle University not long ago ran into controversy, because of its acceptance of a bequest which endows a post in theology on condition that its holder be a practising Christian. To some commentators this case appears as an ominous harbinger of what is to come: university departments, starved of public funds, will be increasingly forced to turn to private means, sometimes under conditions which threaten the upholding of academic objectivity. There is, however, a possibly irony in the Newcastle case, an irony which should cause us to ponder more deeply the pros and cons involved: the professorial research fellow at Newcastle has a brief to reflect,