

Book Review

Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment

By Janet Heimlich (2011)

Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books

Reviewed by Jonathan Singer

A few weeks after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the satirical newspaper, *The Onion*, ran a story entitled, "God Angrily Clarifies 'Don't Kill' Rule" (2001). In the article, God holds a press conference during which he tells the world, "I don't care how holy somebody claims to be. If a person tells you it's My will that they kill someone, they're wrong. Got it? I don't care what religion you are, or who you think your enemy is, here it is one more time: No killing, in My name or anyone else's, ever again." The serious message behind this very satirical article is that anyone who would use religion to justify harming or killing someone has clearly misunderstood one of God's most basic messages. Yet, according to Janet Heimlich in her 2011 book, *Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment*, religion has been, and continues to be, used to justify the physical, sexual, emotional abuse and medical neglect of children. The purpose of *Breaking Their Will* is to "expose child abuse and neglect enabled by certain kinds of religious belief. By raising awareness of this issue, the book aims to initiate a discussion about religious child maltreatment in hopes of someday eradicating it" (Heimlich, 2011, p. 19). Although eradication of any social problem is unlikely, the clear and thoughtful writing, compelling case studies, and presentation of empirical evidence for the role of religion in child maltreatment will convince even the most skeptical reader that this is a problem that deserves greater consideration.

Heimlich walks readers through what, for most, will be an unfamiliar topic. In the first four chapters, Heimlich introduces and defines religious child maltreatment and discusses the role of religion in America as well as the role of authoritarian religion in child maltreatment. She organizes the next sixteen chapters into four parts, each with four chapters that first define and then explore the role of religion in physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and medical neglect, respectively. In the final four chapters, Heimlich addresses children's rights, child ritual abuse, and circumcision, then provides suggestions on what religious communities and child welfare agencies can do to address these issues.

The organization of the book works as well for the general public as for social service and child welfare professionals. Readers unfamiliar with child maltreatment will appreciate the primer on the different types of abuse and

neglect. Experts will be able to skip ahead to the parts where Heimlich illustrates the role of religion in child maltreatment. Organizing the book around the four basic types of child maltreatment makes it easy for Heimlich to cover each topic in depth and to present a variety of evidence (anecdotal, empirical, interviews, etc.) to support her assertions.

Heimlich's assertion that religion can be harmful to children is certainly controversial. She and her publisher are acutely aware of this controversy and have gone to great lengths to make sure readers know that her book is not a condemnation of religion: She starts her introduction by writing, "*Breaking Their Will* is not a diatribe against all faith or any particular religion" (Heimlich, 2011, p. 19); the first sentence of Chapter 1 reads, "A religious upbringing can be a wonderful experience for a child" (p. 23); and the book has endorsements by academics, child safety advocates, religious scholars and clergy. By pointing out the ways that religion can be a source of comfort, Heimlich helps her reader stay focused on the ways that religion—specifically authoritarian religious cultures—can be a source of harm. While discussing the religious arguments for corporal punishment, for example, Heimlich cites religious leaders who clearly state that corporal punishment is not consistent with fundamental religious teachings. By the end of the book, I no longer thought of the topic of religious child maltreatment as controversial. If anything, I thought that it was not nearly as controversial as it should be.

The role of religion in child maltreatment is not addressed in mainstream social work. Widely used social work texts (e.g., Hepworth et al., 2010; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2010) address the need for social workers to understand a client's religious and spiritual beliefs, and to respect differences in belief and faith, but do not address the role that religion can play in child maltreatment. Social workers will only find the topic discussed in specialty texts such as Furness and Gilligan's (2010) *Religion, Belief and Social Work*, and Huguen and Scales (2008) *Christianity and Social Work*. While these specialty texts might be more directly written for a social work or child welfare audience, they are no better researched or written than Heimlich's.

One of the strengths of the book is that Heimlich is an award winning journalist who knows how to write a

compelling narrative. She makes her point by integrating the stories of adult survivors of religious child maltreatment with scholarly research on the topic. Perhaps because of her training in journalism she intentionally avoids pejorative terms like “cult,” and seeks to provide a balance of perspectives. Because she is a journalist and not a social worker, she is able to address solutions with a simplicity and directness that is often missing from discussions within the social work profession. She argues, for example, that child abuse prevention should include child welfare agencies doing outreach to authoritarian religious communities. She also makes a convincing argument that statutes of limitation should be eliminated for child sexual abuse and that clergy should be mandated reporters.

One of the limitations of the book (for a social work audience) is that Heimlich did not write this book specifically for social workers. Her book sheds light on religious child maltreatment, but front-line child welfare workers for whom this problem has already been illuminated might read the book and say, “I know—now what?” Heimlich does not provide recommendations for assessment or intervention. The closest she comes is a set of questions that parents can ask themselves about their involvement in authoritarian religious communities; social workers could modify these for use in an assessment. Social workers will have to make up their own minds on how the information in *Breaking Their Will* could be used to resolve ethical dilemmas. Heimlich does not use the profession’s jargon to pose questions like, “Where does religious practice cease being a matter of ‘self-determination’ and begins to be child maltreatment?”

Heimlich has written a compelling, fair and balanced, accessible, and engaging primer on the topic of religious child maltreatment. The issue of religiously-justified child

maltreatment is one of which social service and child welfare professionals should be aware. It is appropriate for social work students taking classes in generalist practice, human behavior and the social environment, child abuse and neglect, child welfare, and religion or spirituality, and social work. Social workers who work with (or are not sure if they work with) parents who are part of authoritarian religious communities should read this book. Because *Breaking Their Will* is not written for social workers, educators can use the ideas in the book to stimulate conversation around social work concepts like self-determination, *parens patriae*, and culturally responsive services.

In the final analysis, *Breaking Their Will* is a thoughtful exploration of a topic that social workers should know more about—religious child maltreatment. In the years since the September 11 attacks and *The Onion* article, the profession of social work has become more responsive to the religious and spiritual lives of consumers of social services. Understanding how religion can be both a source of comfort and a source of harm will make social workers more well-rounded and better able to provide professional services.

References

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