

Religious abuse of children

When I sat down in Secular Hall, with a couple of dozen others, to listen to visiting American speaker Janet Heimlich's talk about religious maltreatment of children on Sunday 17th March, I was anticipating a discussion on sexual abuse by clergy and genital mutilation of children based on their parents' religion.

Though these were mentioned, there was much wider recognition of what constitutes abuse within, or prompted by, religious beliefs.

The talk centred on the Abrahamic religions with a skew towards Christian beliefs - the US being a predominantly Christian country.

In an attempt to identify 'at risk' groups, Ms Heimlich pointed out that religious child maltreatment was most often found in highly authoritarian religious institutions - whether these be newer 'cults' or well-established religions. Where abuse (emotional, physical and/

or sexual) was most prevalent there tends to be: (i) a strict hierarchy, (ii) members are fearful and (iii) the denomination is highly separatist. The most powerful and abusive sects are often those where family bonds are deliberately broken as part of the regime. Whether Jesus actually said the words or not, the leader of an authoritarian sect may well claim the message in Matthew 10 vv. 34-7:

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.

For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law.

And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.

He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of

me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

(KJV)

Some of the stories of abuse were deeply distressing. One form of maltreatment which was highlighted was the occurrence of religious medical neglect. This involves cases of children with easily treatable conditions being



denied medical attention because prayer or faith healing was preferred by the parents. In some American states, parents whose children suffer or even die as a result of such negligence are exempt from prosecution. The dangers, says Ms Heimlich, are when the parental right to religious freedoms trump the rights of the child and/or when God's Law is considered above secular law.

Ms Heimlich pointed out that there are many passages in scripture that are good and that children can benefit from its teaching. However, the strict adherence to some of the more brutal passages has led to cruel, sometimes torturous and even deadly practices carried out in the name of piety. Many of the cases outlined found their source in Proverbs 13 v. 24 where love and discipline are so disastrously

combined, along with other scripture that justifies the use of extreme physical assault to exorcise 'evil' from a sick or unruly child.

In order to overcome these problems, Ms Heimlich pointed out the importance of identifying problem groups, talking to apostates and developing dialogue with religious leaders wherever possible. This is often difficult in light of the secretive nature of some of the groups and the tendency to close ranks owing to fear of 'outsiders'. This particular aspect was illustrated by a secretly filmed video of Rabbi Ephram Padwa (available on the internet) instructing a man who claimed he'd been sexually abused as a child not to go to the police with the allegation. The Rabbi claimed it was 'mesira', i.e. forbidden to report a Jew to non-Jewish authority.

The problem of overcoming denial that a devout member, or leader, of a religious community is capable of perpetrating and/or concealing gross abuse is one which also needs to be addressed if religious child maltreatment is to become a thing of the past. It may be that Janet Heimlich's book *Breaking Their Will* will go some way in overcoming these boundaries and highlighting what is currently a largely hidden problem.

I found the talk both fascinating and horrifying, almost in equal measure. However, all the way through, I was reminded of Steven Weinberg's famous quote: 'With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil - that takes religion.'

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