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Religion and Child Abuse: Perfect Together*

DONALD CAPPS†

As I look back on the presidential addresses presented during the years of my active membership in the SSSR, my sense is that a number of them have been truly influential, since they alerted our members to issues which many were than inspired to examine in subsequent years. One presidential address that particularly stands out in my mind is Bill D'Antonio's given in 1979 on "Family and Religion," subsequently published in the *JSSR* (D'Antonio 1980:89-104).

As *JSSR* editor from 1982-88, I know that Bill's address on family and religion was both timely and influential. In the December 1984 issue, I reported that there were more submissions on the topic of "religion and the family" than on any other single topic, including new religious movements and the New Christian Right. A year later, in the December 1985 issue, I reported that this topic had dropped to second place, behind Catholicism. (Maybe authors were picking up on the subtext of Bill's address, which focused on recent changes in Catholic family structures and values.) During the next two years, "religion and the family" placed fourth and tied for fifth in number of submissions. Its heady years at or near the top were over, but as a topic, it had gained a secure place in our professional journal, and in the society's annual program.

In his address, Bill discussed the relationship of love and autonomy in the family. He said that we should pay more attention to the role that love plays in the family, especially in enabling individual family members to experience the personal autonomy which was so strongly emphasized in earlier studies of religion and the family by Gerhard Lenski in the 1950s. Bill concluded his address with this invitation:

Social scientists interested in the family and religion have an opportunity now to carry out research which will help us understand the nature of the relationship between love and autonomy as these are manifested with and derived from the family and religion in our time. I hope some of you will want to join me in exploring the possibilities (103).

Clearly, many responded to this invitation to explore the relationship of religion and family; but for the most part, the specific theme of love, and its relationship to autonomy, has not been examined by those engaged in the study of religion and the

**The Presidential Address presented at the annual meetings of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in November, 1991, at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*

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family. However, in an article by Janet Jacobs (1984:155-171) on the deconversion of women from religious movements, published in the *JSSR* in 1984, the theme of love resurfaced, and this time, it was suggested that personal autonomy and love are inversely related in certain religious contexts. Here emerged a darker, more threatening scenario than Bill had painted. In a section headed "Love and the Emotional Economy," Janet described how a woman's commitment to a religious movement is an expression of her love, and showed that such love is regularly betrayed, exploited, and abused by the leader and his male cohorts.

Her article was personally arresting for me, not primarily because it challenged more benign views of new religious movements, but because it drew attention to the fact that religion so often betrays and cruelly exploits our desires to love and to be loved in return. While Janet's article focused on new religious movements, and Bill's address took particular interest in Catholicism, it was the larger issue of the relationship between love and religion, mediated by family structures and values, that caught my attention. Now, seven years later, I have chosen to explore that issue in this address. More specifically, this address directs our attention to another group whose desire to love and be loved has been betrayed, exploited, and abused in the name of religion, namely, children.

While Janet's article about women was written by a woman, and reflected the same kind of empathy for her subjects with which we commonly identify love itself, I, being an adult, cannot claim to have the same empathy for the subjects of this address. After all, I am no longer a child. However, in reflecting on what I wanted to say here, I have tried to look at the issue of religion and child abuse from the perspective of the primary victim. I am painfully aware that such an effort at empathic understanding and involvement is an ideal only imperfectly realized. Yet, as David Popenoe (1988:viii) has said in his preface to *Disturbing the Nest: Family Change and Decline in Modern Societies*: "If this book has any special, underlying perspective, it is that I have tried to consider the changing family and its effects, to the extent that I am able, with what I perceive to be the child's viewpoint particularly in mind." This claim to be speaking from the child's viewpoint can be a disingenuous pretense, and can appear to sanction the abandonment of the usual criteria and standards of scientific objectivity. However, an effort to assume the child's point of view is an important methodological strategy for anyone engaged in the study of religion and child abuse. I have found that studying this issue requires a willingness to recover one's own forgotten or suppressed childhood, and to listen to the voice of the child within oneself, allowing it as much authority (or more) as one's adult voice. For adults, listening to the previously submerged voice of the child inside is a painful experience. It can also, however, be a liberating experience, and one way that it has been so for me is that it has enabled me to speak openly and critically about certain Christian beliefs which I have silently questioned since my college days. More on this later.

RELIGION AND THE PHYSICAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN

As I have said, my address is entitled "Religion and Child Abuse: Perfect Together." I have borrowed the phrase "perfect together" from the former governor of New Jersey,

Thomas Kean, who concluded his television commercials extolling the business and recreational opportunities in New Jersey with the declaration, "New Jersey and You: Perfect Together." Given New Jersey's reputation for being somewhat less "livable" than, say, Oregon or Colorado, it isn't surprising that some New Jerseyans took offense at the idea that they and "New Jersey" made a perfect couple. Yet a little self-examination also confronted these same protesters with the unhappy truth that, being who we are, we deserve this identification with New Jersey. The title of my address, "Religion and Child Abuse: Perfect Together," might offend, but this does not mean it isn't so.

The association of religion and child abuse is the subject of a recent book written, appropriately enough, by a New Jerseyan. He is Philip Greven (1991), a Rutgers University historian, and author of *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse*. Greven explores the religious legitimations that support parents' and other adults' physical abuse of children, focusing especially on the widely held religious conviction that the child enters this world with a distorted or wayward will. It is therefore the responsibility of parents to break, or at the least, so successfully to challenge and frustrate the child's natural will that he or she will then be able to respond to parental guidance and live in conformity with the superior will of God. Weak or permissive parents who fail to carry out this responsibility are abdicating their God-given obligations and are cheating their children of the deep personal satisfactions that come from knowing that God loves them and is proud to be their heavenly father.

However, Greven shows through quotations from biographies and autobiographies of well-known religious personalities, as well as from religious books on child discipline, that the very idea of "breaking the child's will" is an instance of what Alice Miller (1983) has called "poisonous pedagogy." Parents have taken this injunction to break the child's will as a mandate to inflict severe physical punishment, usually with a leather belt or a hickory stick, and sometimes before the child is even able to crawl. Here is a typical quotation taken from Marshall Frady's (1979:49) biography of Billy Graham:

His father would sometimes withdraw a wide leather belt to apply to him, once when he was discovered with a plug of chewing tobacco bulging in his cheek, another time snatching him up from a church pew where Billy had been fretfully squirming, shoving him on out into the vestibule and there strapping him thoroughly. Over all the years since then, Billy maintains, what he still remembers most about his father is the feel of his hands against him: "They were like rawhide, bony, rough. He had such hard hands." In one instance, after Billy had gained some size, his father stood over him flailing away with the belt as Billy was lying on his back, and "I broke two of his ribs, kicking with my legs."

Note that, in one of these instances, little Billy was punished for "fretfully squirming" in church, indicating that religion was as much the cause as it was the putative cure for his sinful temperament.

Unlike his physical struggles against his father, Graham recalls that, while he was "occasionally whistled with a long hickory stick by his mother . . . 'I never fought back with her.'" In turn, she reflects back on the whippings inflicted on Billy and the other children:

Mr. Graham was right stern, I suppose. Perhaps we were both a little too strict, perhaps we whipped them more than we should have. But it was just that we had to work so hard then, we had little time for anything else, we had too little patience. We thought that little disobediences, you know, were terrible things (Frady 1979:49).

As Greven points out, a central part of parents' infliction of physical punishment is the belief that they are doing it for the child's own good and are not acting out of personal malice or vindictiveness, or even on the basis of their own personal emotions or response to the child's misbehavior. The crucial thing is that the parent is unemotional, acting in a detached, objective manner. Greven cites the following statement by J. Richard Fugate (1980:145), author of *What the Bible Says About . . . Child Training*:

Chastisement is the *controlled* use of force. It should never be administered by an angry or emotional parent. If a parent cannot control himself, he should send the child to his room to wait for his whipping. This action provides the parent time to "cool down," and it allows the child time to anticipate the coming consequences of his action.

On the other hand, the same authors who advocate the avoidance of negative emotions by the parents stress that after the punishment is inflicted there typically occurs a moment in which parent and child affirm their love for one another. As James Dobson has pointed out in a section of his book *Dare to Discipline* entitled "The Best Opportunity to Communicate Often Occurs After Punishment":

Nothing brings a parent and child closer together than for the mother or father to win decisively after being defiantly challenged. This is particularly true if the child was "asking for it," knowing full well that he deserved what he got. The parent's demonstration of his authority builds respect like no other process, and the child will often reveal his affection when the emotion has passed. For this reason, the parent should not dread or shrink back from these confrontations with the child. These occasions should be anticipated as important events, because they provide the opportunity to say something to the child that cannot be said at other times. It is not necessary to beat the child into submission; a little bit of pain goes a long way for a young child. However, the spanking should be of sufficient magnitude to cause the child to cry genuinely. After the emotional ventilation, the child will often want to crumple to the breast of his parent, and he should be welcomed with open, warm, loving arms. At that moment you can talk heart to heart. You can tell him how much you love him, and how important he is to you. You can explain why he was punished and how he can avoid the difficulty next time. This kind of communication is not made possible by other disciplinary measures, including standing the child in the corner or taking away his fire truck (Dobson 1970:23).

A noteworthy feature of these punishment scenarios is that the parent believes he or she is acting in God's behalf, while the child often appeals to God for deliverance. The evangelist, Aimee McPherson (1979:13), tells how she prayed to God that the anticipated punishment would somehow be averted:

Like all other restless youngsters, I was constantly getting into dilemmas and difficulties. After similar outrages to the dignity of my household, I would be banished to my room and told that in exactly one-half an hour I would be spanked. I was thoroughly familiar with those whippings. They were not gentle love pats, and my parents never stopped till I was a thoroughly chastised girl. The time of waiting for the footsteps on the stair, the opening of the door, and the descending palm was the worst of all. On one such occasion I stood looking wildly about for a way out of the dilemma. No earthly recourse was nigh. Taught as I was about heavenly intervention, I thought of prayer. Dropping to my knees on the side of my bed, I began to pray, loudly, earnestly. "Oh, God, don't let mama whip me! Oh, God, dear, kind, sweet God, don't let mama spank me!

Saint Augustine also turned to prayers for divine intervention when he was being beaten by his teachers for being “slow at learning” and his parents laughed when he showed them the stripes on his back. As he wrote in his *Confessions*, “I, little one, but with no little feeling, I prayed to you that I would not be beaten at school [but] you did not hear me” (Augustine 1960:52). As an adult, he admitted that he and his classmates were less than diligent in their classwork. Yet he remained somewhat defiant, noting that “the trivial concerns of adults are called business, while such things in children are punished by adults” (52).

Thus, many children who pray to God to spare them from physical punishment do not view the punishment scenario as parents intend. Instead of viewing their parents as the legitimate agents of God’s discipline, they see God as a potential savior, as the one who could stop the whole process if he wanted to. That God does not intervene in the child’s behalf might, of course, confirm the parents’ view of the matter, although neither McPherson nor Augustine, writing in later years, was wholly convinced that this is true.

Whereas some children seek protection through direct divine intervention, for David Wilkerson, the evangelist, the attempt to escape punishment took the form of physical flight. When he was in trouble and needed a refuge, he would go to the top of a small mountain near his home:

From Old Baldy, I could look down on our house and watch Mother and Dad and the other children running around the neighborhood trying to find me. Sometimes I would stay up there for the better part of a day, thinking through the problems a boy has to conquer. When I got back, I always got a licking, but Dad’s switch never kept me from making my journey again, because up there I found an aloofness and a detachment that I needed (Wilkerson 1963:83).

According to Ruth Harris, David’s sister, after punishment the children would be subjected to the even greater “humbling” of being expected to put their arms around their father’s neck and to say, “I love you, Daddy. Forgive me for disobeying.” Then Daddy would respond, “I love you too, but now we must ask God to help you overcome your stubbornness” (Harris 1969:96-97). Greven (1991:30) comments, “Love and pain, rebellion and submission, disobedience, punishment, and forgiveness thus were intertwined in a powerful mixture of opposing feelings and experiences.” Thus, it is through the experience of physical punishment that children learn to associate religion and love; in being reconciled to the punishing parent, the child learns what it means to be a loved child of God.

In their 1984 article on parents’ use of the threat that God will punish the misbehaving child, Hart M. Nelsen and Alice Kroliczak explored the relationship between parents’ use of this threat and children’s images of God. They found, as did Clyde Nunn (1964) before them, that children who believe God punishes them are more likely to believe in a personal than an impersonal God. For some children, God is apparently personalized through the threat, voiced by parents, that God will punish them for misbehavior. The Nelsen and Kroliczak study did not address the physical punishment of children but only parents’ use of the verbal threat that God will inflict punishment. Still, if the verbal threat of God’s punishment is significantly related to identification of God as personal, we may assume that parents’ actual use of physical punishment, especially when accompanied by an explicitly theological rationale for doing so (“God wants me to do

this because God loves and cares for you”), would be at least as effective in establishing the child’s view of God as personally concerned for the child. This means that proponents of the physical punishment of children might well be correct, if through such punishment, God is both personalized, and, in a very real (if perverted) sense, experienced as loving. Religion and child abuse: perfect together.

However, these same proponents of physical punishment are wrong when they assure parents that such punishment will effect positive changes in the child’s behavior. This is not borne out by the biographical and autobiographical accounts that Greven cites, and the reasons are not difficult to see. Since it is through physical punishment that children experience whatever parental and divine love they are likely to receive, it is not at all surprising that they would continue to commit the offenses that force the reenactment of the punishment scenario. How else will they fulfill their desire to love and be loved? Commenting on the fact that such abusive scenarios are instances of what Freud called the “compulsion to repeat,” Leonard Shengold (1989), in *Soul Murder: The Effects of Childhood Abuse and Deprivation*, has pointed out that children will provoke their own beatings to fulfill the imperative need for some parental attention (4), and to serve the largely delusive expectation that this time they will be unconditionally loved (28). As David Wilkerson put it, “When I got back, I always got a licking, but Dad’s switch never kept me from making my journey again.” He believed this was because of what he experienced on Old Baldy, the “aloofness” and “detachment” it afforded him. Maybe so, but it could also be because, after the switching had stopped, parent and child would declare their love for one another.

James Dobson’s experience of being physically punished is also illustrative of this compulsion to repeat. He reports that he persisted in the very behavior that caused his mother to attack him:

My own mother . . . was very tolerant of my childishness, and I found her reasonable on most issues. . . . But there was one matter on which she was absolutely rigid: she did not tolerate “sassiness.” She knew that backtalk and “lip” are the child’s most potent weapons of defiance and they must be discouraged. I learned very early that if I was going to launch a flippant attack on her, I had better be standing at least ten or twelve feet away. This distance was necessary to avoid being hit with whatever she should get in her hands. On one occasion she cracked me with a shoe; at other times she used a handy belt. The day I learned the importance of staying out of reach shines like a neon light in my head. I made the costly mistake of “sassing” her when I was about four feet away. She wheeled around to grab something with which to hit me, and her hand landed on a girdle. She drew back and swung that abominable garment in my direction, and I can still hear it whistling through the air. The intended blow caught me across the chest, followed by a multitude of straps and buckles, wrapping themselves around my midsection. She gave me an entire thrashing with one massive blow! From that day forward, I cautiously retreated a few steps before popping off (Dobson 1970:19).

Here, Dobson indicates that he knew full well what kind of misbehavior would stimulate an angry response from his mother, and that being punished for it did not cause him to stop. Perhaps the reason this particular episode “shines like a neon light” in his mind is not that it was physically more painful, but because, in throwing a woman’s undergarment at him (presumably her own), his mother injected a sexual element into the punishment scenario, one both stimulating and threatening, arousing and repulsive. As an adult, he writes about the incident in terms of tactics — how much physical distance to maintain between himself and his mother — but, as a child, the deeper issue

was surely that his flippant talk precipitated the transgression of previously safe emotional boundaries between mother and son. As Greven says, the punishment scenario creates “a powerful mixture of opposing feelings,” and Dobson makes clear that he had every intention of repeating the act for which he was punished.

Thus far, we have been considering the physical abuse of children and its implications for religion, focusing on the role played by physical punishment in the child’s internalization of a God who is both loved and feared. However, if we were to limit our attention to *physical* abuse, as Greven does, there is a danger that adults who do not abuse their children physically for religious reasons will merely take comfort in this fact. Greven himself points out that religious moderates and liberals alike have traditionally advocated some form of physical punishment, but his book has generally been viewed as a critique particularly of Christian conservatives and fundamentalists, both because religious legitimization of the physical punishment of children is widely known to be a centerpiece of certain conservative and fundamentalist theologies, and because he argues that there is a psychodynamic connection between physical abuse and apocalypticism.

Thus, in the interests of making all Christians, including moderates and liberals, uncomfortable, I will now shift my focus from Greven’s concern with the religious roots of the physical abuse of children to the more direct role of religious ideas and beliefs in the traumatizing of children. If, as Greven has shown, a religious idea (i.e., the idea that children have a natural will which is opposed to the will of God) can legitimate the physical abuse of children, what about religious ideas that have a more direct, unmediated effect on children, ideas that children experience as inherently traumatizing?

RELIGIOUS IDEAS AND THE TORMENTING OF CHILDREN

I suggest that many religious ideas which children are taught cause them emotional torment and are therefore inherently abusive. I further suggest that one reason children will internalize God via physical punishment is that they simultaneously experience religious ideas as inherently tormenting. Webster’s (1957:1537) *New World Dictionary* says that the word torment “implies harassment or persecution by the continued or repeated infliction of suffering or annoyance.” Torment differs from torture in that torture “implies the infliction of acute physical or mental pain, such as to cause agony.” In light of these distinctions, it is appropriate to claim that religious ideas are more tormenting than torturing, since they are unlikely to cause acute emotional pain — of the sort that occurs as the child awaits physical punishment — but are fully capable of harassment and persecution through repeated infliction of suffering or annoyance.

To test this theory, I asked the persons with whom I often have lunch to recall any experiences they might have had as children when a religious idea caused them such torment. Recollections of such experiences did not always come easily, but all were able to recall instances in which a religious idea, taught by a well-intentioned adult, caused unnecessary, even gratuitous suffering. One reported that, as a child, she believed that she had committed the unpardonable sin, but wasn’t sure that she had, because she didn’t know exactly what it was. Assurance that “if you are worried about having committed it, you haven’t committed it” were ineffectual. Another had a similar experience with the familiar injunction not to drink of Christ’s blood or eat of his body

“unworthily.” What constituted “unworthiness” in this instance was unclear to him. What these and many other examples had in common was the fact that the idea itself was inherently tormenting. It was not the manner in which they were presented that caused confusion or fear. Rather, the ideas themselves were inherently confusing and frightening. When asked whether they could recall similar experiences with tormenting ideas in their classes in public school, none of my lunch mates could recall a single idea that was threatening in this same fashion.

Of course, it could be argued that these recollections give a very skewed picture, that many of the religious ideas which children are taught are quite benign, if not positively reassuring. Yet our conversations elicited few recollections of this nature, since even religious ideas that are meant to be reassuring were not experienced as such. One individual recalled being assured by a church school teacher that if he had enough faith, his prayers would surely be answered. When he prayed for the recovery of his aunt who was afflicted with cancer, and she subsequently died, he was devastated, because he was certain that he had prayed with all the faith he had. As he put it, “The life went out of my faith at that point, and it has taken all these years to get this much of it back.” In concert with Carl Goldberg’s (1991:3) argument that shame always involves a sense of incompetence, I believe this boy’s inability to save his aunt through prayer was a shaming experience, the proof of his incompetence, and that shame, along with fear, are the most common experiences of torment caused by religious ideas.

These examples are, of course, anecdotal, and hardly qualify as serious, scientific research. However, they provide some support for a theory I now want to put forward, one that could be tested in a more rigorously scientific manner. This theory is that religious ideas might be as abusive as physical punishment for children. There is evidence for this in the fact that adults relate to religious ideas in much the same dissociative manner that adults who were subjected to physical and sexual abuse as children continue to relate to those abusive experiences. As Greven (1991:148) points out, one of the most common consequences of the experience of physical abuse is dissociation, which

is one of the most basic means of survival for many children, who learn early in life to distance themselves, or parts of themselves, from experiences too painful or frightening to bear. Traumas, both physical and emotional, are often coped with by denial and repression of the feelings they generate. The dissociative process is rooted, it appears, in the ability of so many children and adults to . . . render unconscious aspects of their feelings and experiences that, for whatever reasons, they find unbearable or unacceptable.

Greven goes on to discuss the various forms that dissociation make take. Those that have particular relevance for the traumatizing effects of religious ideas are 1) repression or amnesia regarding the experiences that were so traumatizing; 2) mind-splitting, where the threatening experience is cut off from the rest of one’s thinking processes and not incorporated into them (see also Shengold 1989:26-29); 3) withdrawal of feeling or affect, a blandness or roteness in thought processes associated with the threatening experience; and 4) the loss of confidence in the testimony of one’s own perceptions and senses regarding these and similar experiences — that is, when the subject is discussed, one tends to defer to others and to their perceptions and judgments.

In my conversations around the lunch table, I found a great deal of evidence for repression or amnesia from childhood experiences with traumatizing religious ideas. All

had partially or totally forgotten about these experiences. However, as more and more details emerged, my companions discovered that they had powerful feelings about the torment they had suffered, feelings of deep sorrow and pity for the child each once was, and rage at the person or persons who had promulgated the religious idea in question.

These conversations offered no direct evidence of the other forms of dissociation, but it would not be difficult to demonstrate that, for many persons, religious ideas are split off from the rest of their thought processes and are not incorporated into them. Furthermore, the same person who engages in complex and energized thinking about science, technology, or politics thinks in clichés, or in bland fashion, where religion is concerned. There is also a tendency for persons who are generally able to think independently, and to trust the testimony of their own perceptions in other areas, to become very deferential to other authorities where religious ideas are concerned, even in instances where they themselves have direct personal experience bearing on the issue in question.

In their 1967 *JSSR* article on committed and consensual religion, Russell O. Allen and Bernard Spilka identified a phenomenon which they called a “detached-neutralized” cognitive perspective. For those with this cognitive orientation, they write,

religion is considered thoroughly important, but is mainly severed from substantial individual experience or emotional commitment. Ideals remain abstracted from specific behavior and rarely realistically influence daily activities. . . . Religion is primarily an emotional “clinging” or over-dependence. [There is] a magical or encapsulated feeling tone which is not meaningfully related to daily activities. . . . The importance of religion is neutralized, reduced, or rendered ineffectual by other concerns or by lack of positive affect and identification. There may be an unrestrained admiration for religious ideals or ideas which are selectively neutralized or attenuated by use of exceptions or diffusions (Allen and Spilka 1967:200).

I am suggesting that many adults for whom religion is detached and neutralized in this fashion experienced religious ideas in childhood as traumatic. Apparently, subjects of Allen and Spilka who took a “detached-neutralized” approach to religion were not so detached and neutralized about other cognitive domains, indicating that dissociation was occurring. Such dissociation could be caused by other experiences, including physical punishment inflicted for explicitly religious reasons. However, I would guess that it might also have a more direct cause, that is, that religious ideas in childhood are intrinsically traumatic, and therefore, among adults, religious ideas continue to be accompanied by such dissociative features as repression, compartmentalization, withdrawal of affect, and lack of confidence in one’s own perceptions and judgments.

RELIGIOUS LEGITIMATION FOR ADULT DETACHMENT FROM THE TRAUMAS OF CHILDHOOD

In addition to religious ideas that cause dissociation similar to that caused by physical punishment, there are certain religious ideas that have the effect of legitimating or normalizing the dissociative process. These are ideas that contribute directly to the tendency of adults to view childhood traumas as detached and neutralized observers. I suggest that one such idea is the doctrine of the virginal conception of Jesus, an idea that is not only subscribed to by the vast majority of Christians, but also, and more

importantly, is a basic feature of the religious ethos of Christian churches. The possibility that it might not be true, and that Jesus might have had a human father, is rarely mentioned or discussed among Christian adults. While this idea might also be one that is inherently tormenting for children, I would rather draw attention to the fact that this idea legitimates adults' emotional detachment from the pain and distress that children experience; it encourages them to treat their own experiences of childhood trauma as insignificant or as never having happened.

Specifically, the idea of the virginal conception of Jesus stretches a veil of secrecy or denial over the actual circumstances of Jesus's conception, thus denying the childhood traumas that Jesus himself experienced, and therefore creating a religious ethos in which the traumas of children are not taken seriously. Also, because this concept insists that Jesus's conception was unique, fundamentally different from all other conceptions, it invites the compartmentalization of religion from other cognitive domains; not only those that, on biological grounds, question the physical possibility of a virginal conception, but also, and more importantly, those that, on psychological grounds, view such a story as an instance of the suppression of childhood trauma. This concept also contributes to the undermining of confidence in the testimony of our own perceptions and senses, as this is an "event" for which we have no corroborating personal experience. (Typically, when we encounter religious ideas that find no support in our own experiences and perceptions, we invoke the word "faith," with "faith" meaning to accept the truth of an idea precisely because no such support exists.) Thus, the idea of the virginal conception of Jesus invites various forms of dissociation. As this is an address on religion and child abuse, however, I am especially concerned here with the issue of the denial of the actual circumstances of Jesus's conception, and with how this denial creates a religious ethos in which the suffering of children is also ignored and denied.

In her book, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives*, Jane Schaberg (1987) has argued that there are strong historical grounds for believing that Jesus was illegitimately conceived, that Mary's pregnancy was by a man other than Joseph, and that, as Mary was probably only twelve years old, she was the victim of rape (and not a willing participant in the sex act). On the basis of textual analyses of the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke, Schaberg contends that these two gospel writers were responding to widespread allegations that Jesus was an illegitimate child, that he was not Joseph's son, allegations that seriously threatened the viability of the early Christian movement. In her view, Matthew and Luke did not try to refute such allegations, but tacitly accepted them as true, and had no intention whatsoever to suggest that the conception was not by natural insemination. Not only would their readers have rejected such a claim, but also it would not even have occurred to Matthew or Luke to make it. Rather, their argument is that God was able to take an irrefutably scandalous situation and transform it into a promise of hope for oppressed and marginalized individuals and groups.

While Schaberg remains neutral on the question of whether early Jewish writers were correct when they alleged that Jesus's natural father was a Roman soldier, this would in fact lend support to her contention that Mary was the victim of rape, as it is consistent with the universal human experience of soldiers' sexual abuse of the women who live in the towns they control militarily; it also explains why Joseph did not have

the courage to pursue the matter in a Jewish court of law. In Schaberg's judgment, the theory of a virginal conception is a later interpretation imposed on these two narratives, arising out of an ascetic ethos quite foreign to that of Matthew and Luke, one in which debate centered on the question of how Jesus might be understood to be simultaneously human and divine.

As a feminist, Schaberg is concerned with Mary and the issue of sexual abuse, and she does not discuss what the fact of his illegitimacy meant for the child Jesus. However, the implications are clear. At some point in his childhood, Jesus surely became aware of the fact of his illegitimacy and began to suffer its consequences on an everyday basis. Illegitimacy carried an extremely heavy social stigma in Jesus's day. In spite of Joseph's adoption of him, Jesus was a "marked" child, one who knew that he was condemned by the circumstances of his birth to live out his life as one who was deeply stigmatized, as having what Erving Goffman (1963) termed a "spoiled identity."

In another essay, entitled "The Desire to Be Another Man's Son: The Child Jesus as Endangered Self," I have explored the link between the child Jesus's knowledge of his illegitimacy and his understanding of God as his personal father, and I have suggested that his experience of God as his true father afforded him an alternative identity to that of the illegitimate and the adopted son (Capps 1992). What I want to emphasize here is the fact that secrecy over the circumstances of his conception inhibits us from even raising, much less exploring, the issue of what Jesus experienced as a child, especially in the way of childhood trauma. It is impossible to know whether his illegitimacy ever provoked physical abuse from his mother or adoptive father, but there is no doubt that his childhood was profoundly affected by the fact of his illegitimacy, and that, in spite of the fact that Joseph adopted him as his own son, his life in Joseph's family and in the town of Nazareth was deeply influenced by his and others' awareness of his illegitimacy. Imagine his inner struggles with shame and rage.¹

Tragically, the idea of the virginal conception places a veil of secrecy over these experiences, telling us that they did not happen. For children who are the victims of abuse, and adults who were abused as children, this concept effectively eliminates Jesus as a sympathetic figure, a sufferer in common, since the fact of his own victimization by a parent (that is, his natural father) is swept aside and categorically denied. For adults, abused or not, who continue to accept this idea as true, or who, while doubting it, continue to take a tolerant attitude toward it, viewing it as a benign or even beautiful idea, this view of Jesus's conception is an invitation to ignore childhood trauma, to treat it as something that simply does not happen. Since Mary was only twelve years old, this applies to her traumatization as well. Thus, in much the same way that Alice Miller (1990), in her book *Banished Knowledge*, has argued that Freud's oedipal theory throws a protective shield over abusive parents by viewing the child as the instigator of aggression and sexual perversity, so does the virginal conception of Jesus spare adults

1. An alternative theory to that presented by Schaberg claims that Jesus's natural father was Joseph. This theory is based on the supposition that, in their desire to present Jesus as conceived of a virgin, the gospel writers needed to relegate Joseph to the status of adoptive father. This view has been assumed by Miller (1987) who, in centering on the probable death of Joseph as the decisive event in Jesus's early life, has located Jesus's psychological struggles in adolescence and early adulthood, as he came to terms with the absence of paternal guidance. However, Schaberg (1987:3; also fn. 4 on pp. 202-202) has argued that this theory fails to "take seriously the claim of both evangelists that Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus."

from having to consider the fact that the child Jesus (and the child Mary) suffered terribly due to the irresponsible actions of an adult. Thus, if these childhood sufferings can be so easily wished away, why expect that adults' attitudes toward the victimization of children today would be any different? The idea of the virginal conception of Jesus desensitizes adults so that they fail to hear the cries of children in their own midst, and the crying child within. If we choose to believe this idea, we should at least be aware that the child Jesus surely did not.

RELIGION AND CHILD ABUSE: NO LOVE LOST

I realize that I have mounted a strong attack, perhaps bordering on tirade, against religion, and that in singling out the idea of the virginal conception of Jesus, I have gone farther than Greven has in my critique of fundamental Christian beliefs. Yet I do not want to be viewed as an opponent of Christianity, and surely my intent is not to reopen the rather messy debates that used to be waged, sometimes at meetings like this, between proponents of religion and proponents of science. So, allow me to conclude on a different note.

I first read Gordon Allport's (1964) brief essay, "Religion and Prejudice," when I was a graduate student. The very simplicity of his argument left a deep impression. His point was that religion has historically been a major *cause* of bigotry, but it has also been instrumental in *condemning* bigotry in all of its forms. The same simple point can be made regarding the relationship of religion and child abuse. I have argued here that religion and child abuse are "perfect together," that they seem made for one another, and are mutually attractive. However, there is another side to the matter, namely that religion has often been society's most vocal advocate for children against their adult abusers, and religion has often provided legitimation and motivation for some adults' active condemnation of child abuse. For them, child abuse cries out to heaven as an outrage that neither they nor their God can tolerate (Berger 1969:65-69).

In his book, *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament*, John Day (1989) tells an absorbing and distressing story about how children were sacrificed to Molech, one of the gods of the Canaanites. He quotes the following passage from a commentary on Leviticus 20 by a nineteenth-century Jewish scholar, in which the ritual sacrifice was described:

The children, as they expired, cried out loudly owing to the intensity of the fire. In order not to arouse the compassion of father and mother at the wailing and crying of their sons, the pagan priests sounded [their trumpets] to confuse the listeners and prevent the screams of the children from being heard (Day 1989:24-25).

Day points out, however, that there was a great outrage among the prophets of Israel concerning the ritual sacrifice of children, and that this was a major reason for their opposition to Baal worship. (See also Bakan 1966 and 1968, on Jewish rejection of infanticide.) So children were abused in the name of religion, but the abuse of children was also decried in the name of religion.

Jesus too took a protective approach to children, thus, in his own adult life, breaking the vicious cycle of child victimization. When parents brought their children to him he

instructed his disciples to let them do so, and he stretched out his hand — the same hand that other adults have used to strike their children — and blessed them instead (Matthew 19:13-15). Also, according to Matthew, he charged his disciples: “See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 18:10-11). As one who knew what it meant to be a “despised” little one, Jesus’s charge to his followers here is more than a moral injunction. It is a powerful act of *personal* self-affirmation, one that was the basis for his affirmation of the self-affirmations of others, self-affirmations which he called their “faith.” (For example, in the story of the woman — an alleged prostitute — who anointed his feet, he said to her, “Your faith has saved you.” [Luke 7:50])

So we have come back, full circle, to the issue of love and religion. One of my lunch mates — the one who recalled that his teacher had said his prayers would be answered if he had sufficient faith — told another story: It was about a teacher who read the children stories, and would allow them to take turns sitting on her lap as she read. As he told this story, his eyes filled with tears, because he knew that, in recalling this incident after these many years, something deep within him had been touched by her. If only we could forego the lofty pretensions of religion, those that cause us to torture and torment the children, and instead tell simple stories of human goodness, courage, resourcefulness, cooperation, compassion, and, above all, of loving and being loved. . . .

In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Kurt Vonnegut’s (1965:92-93) hero, Eliot Rosewater, has agreed to baptize Mary Moody’s twins because nobody else would do it. When challenged about his qualifications to perform this religious act, he totally agrees with this questioner. After all, he had already told Mary herself “that I wasn’t a religious person by any stretch of the imagination. I told her nothing I did would count in Heaven, but she insisted just the same.” Then, asked his questioner, “What will you say? What will you do?”

“Oh — I don’t know.” Eliot’s sorrow and exhaustion dropped away for a moment as he became enchanted by the problem. A little smile played over his lips. “Go over to her shack, I guess. Sprinkle some water on the babies, say, ‘Hello, babies. Welcome to earth. It’s hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It’s round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you’ve got about a hundred years here. There’s only one rule that I know of, babies — :

“God damn it, you’ve got to be kind’.”

One could, I suppose, point out that Eliot was addressing the wrong audience, since it is not children, but adults, who need this lesson in kindness. However, I assume his point is that it is never too early, nor, presumably, too late, to learn to be kind. As Billy Graham’s mother confessed, “We had too little patience,” and “We thought that little disobediences, you know, were terrible things.” Religion and love: These, too, are also “perfect together,” and sometimes it takes an Eliot Rosewater, who is convinced that nothing he does could possibly count in Heaven, to remind us of this, and to make it so.

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