



Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment

Janet Heimlich

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This revealing, disturbing, and thoroughly researched book exposes a dark side of faith that most Americans do not know exists or have ignored for a long time—religious child maltreatment. After speaking with dozens of victims, perpetrators, and experts, and reviewing a myriad of court cases and studies, the author explains how religious child maltreatment happens. She then takes an in-depth look at the many forms of child maltreatment found in religious contexts, including biblically-prescribed corporal punishment and beliefs about the necessity of "breaking the wills" of children; scaring kids into faith and other types of emotional maltreatment such as spurning, isolating, and withholding love; pedophilic abuse by religious authorities and the failure of religious organizations to support the victims and punish the perpetrators; and religiously-motivated medical neglect in cases of serious health problems.

In a concluding chapter, Heimlich raises questions about children's rights and proposes changes in societal attitudes and improved legislation to protect children from harm.

While fully acknowledging that religion can be a source of great comfort, strength, and inspiration to many young people, Heimlich makes a compelling case that, regardless of one's religious or secular orientation, maltreatment of children under the cloak of religion can never be justified and should not be tolerated.

Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment Details

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From Reader Review Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment for online ebook

Rosa says

Sheds light on an important but controversial aspect of religious life. Some of the sources are questionable (like one referenced study published "on the Internet") and the writing sometimes reads like a book report but the key concept, that certain kinds of religious ideologies and practices facilitate child abuse, is worth it.

Carla JFCL says

This was really a fascinating book. It took me awhile to plow through it, mainly because - especially at first - it's a bit "research dense" but once it got more into telling some of the personal stories of the people interviewed by the author it moved quickly.

In addition to being fascinating, this book is also: shocking; maddening; eye-opening; incredibly sad; and just downright hard to believe. (I don't mean that the author's research is faulty; I mean that it's difficult to accept that the things she describes in this book happen on a regular basis.)

One thing that surprised me while reading this book was learning how much has been written on various aspects of this topic. This book is very well researched, and cites numerous sources. It kind of made me wonder how this kind of stuff can still be going on, given the fact that it's obviously not a secret that it's happening. Of course, there's also plenty written to support the views of the nut jobs who perform and/or condone these horrific acts against children, so I guess it balances out.

There was just one area where I thought the book was a bit deficient. The author describes many instances of children dying as a result of religious maltreatment (physical abuse, medical neglect, etc.) but there is very little mention made of how the parents felt after their children died (often due to their own abuse or neglect.) I would have liked a lot more information about whether any light bulbs went on after they saw their children actually dead, or whether it was just accepted as "God's will."

I have always believed that the most dangerous force operating in the modern world is religious fanaticism, and this book helped confirm that.

(FTC disclaimer: I reviewed a copy of this book that I won in the Goodreads Firstreads Giveaway contest.)

Adam Ross says

A great look into the risks and harm that fundamentalist religion of all stripes can pose to children. This harm can be physical, sexual, or emotional/psychological/spiritual.

Molly says

There is a difference between gathering and listing data in topical categories and writing a work of non-fiction. The latter requires that the author be a storyteller - not a research paper writer or a legal brief collator. Here is where this book fails.

The citations are obtrusive, often cluttering and interrupting the flow of the story. There is little control in moving from one example to another, and you often get only a taste of a story you'd really like to know more about. The choice to treat all religious groups at once also disrupts the flow of information. You'll go from reading an email from an ex-Hare Krishna to a scholarly paper about John Wesley's position on corporal punishment to a snippet from Dr. Dobson's website - the whiplash is pretty extreme. Although each chapter has a theme, the thematic material spills from section to section, creating confusion. It's good that the author has scrupulously chosen not to treat religions differently from one another, but there would be better narrative control if the author had used fewer examples discussed at greater length and ordered the chapters by related religious traditions. Parallels could be drawn in conclusions and transitions to keep everything focused.

Be that as it may, this read like an undergraduate paper with a large citation requirement.

Alice says

I'm refraining from giving this a rating because of my complicated relationship with the subject matter, but let me just say that I wish I was world overlord and could make everyone in the church read part 2. (As long as I'm world overlord, I think I'll also have them believe it. And then make appropriate changes.)

Thorn MotherIssues says

The writing is weird, deliberately distanced from all the religious and parenting practices described in a way I found made for awfully slow going, but I think it would be good information for religious people even though I also think they'd be unlikely to slog through it.

David Anderson says

Heimlich's book is a well-researched and extremely fair and balanced presentation (IMHO) of the issue of religious child maltreatment in its various manifestations: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and medical neglect due to depending solely upon faith healing and prayer and withholding professional medical care. This is no anti-theist rant; Heimlich is very clear that she sees this as a problem specifically among certain conservative, authoritarian religious cultures and groups and she is careful to present many examples of critique of these approaches to child raising from more open-minded and liberal religious experts from a variety of religious traditions. I find most compelling and urgent the need to revoke these religious exemption statutes in effect in some states which protect parents from prosecution who allow their children to die from medical neglect. The true stories of religious child abuse she recounts will deeply disturb and anger you and bring tears to your eyes. A must read for people of all shades of belief.

Nikki Smith says

All churchgoers should read this book which explains why there is so much maltreatment of children within faith-based communities.

Hard to understand why abusers in churches get off with a slap on the hand, but the offended are judged harshly and are hurt even further.

Mindi Rosser says

How does religion provide opportunity for child abuse? I was one of those helpless children. Spankings, indoctrination, fear, dictatorships, and authoritarianism prove prevalent in fundamentalist Christian denominations. All cloaked beneath the guise of love.

Unwitting parents subject their children to the leadership of these "churches," without realizing the decades-long repercussions. Author Janet Heimlich spotlights this topic from her journalistic investigation.

Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment by Janet Heimlich

My video review: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uFGLI...>

Official Book Description:

"High-profile cases such as the child sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church and "faith healing" deaths in certain fundamentalist Christian congregations have made the public aware that religion can sometimes mask deviant and harmful behavior. But the extent of the problem is far greater than most people realize. In this revealing, disturbing, and thoroughly researched book, award-winning journalist Janet Heimlich exposes a dark side of faith that most Americans do not know exists or have ignored for a long time—religious child maltreatment.

After speaking with dozens of victims, perpetrators, and experts, and reviewing a myriad of court cases and studies, Heimlich explains how religious child maltreatment happens. She then takes an in-depth look at the many forms of child maltreatment found in religious contexts, including biblically-prescribed corporal punishment and beliefs about the necessity of "breaking the wills" of children; scaring kids into faith and other types of emotional maltreatment such as spurning, isolating, and exploiting; pedophilic abuse by religious authorities and the failure of religious organizations to support the victims and punish the perpetrators; and religiously-motivated medical neglect in cases of serious health problems.

In concluding chapters, Heimlich proposes changes in improved legislation and societal attitudes to protect children from harm and emphasizes the importance of respecting children's rights.

While fully acknowledging that religion can be a source of great comfort, strength, and inspiration to many young people, Heimlich makes a compelling case that, regardless of one's religious or secular orientation, maltreatment of children under the cloak of religion can never be justified and should not be tolerated."

I give this book a 4 of 5 stars.

Who should read this book?

- Those who have escaped their childhood religion and struggle with the consequences.
- Religious leaders
- Religious parents
- Psychologists specializing in abuse
- Friends and relatives of abused children

Readers: Have you ever read a book that tore at your heartstrings? Did the visceral aspects of the book inspire you to take action? If so, what did you do?

Thomas Edmund says

In *Breaking their Will* Janet Heimlich investigates, discusses and exposes the possible effect of religion on the mistreatment of children.

To do this Heimlich separates the issues into physical, emotional and sexual abuse, medical neglect and a final pair of essays on abuse through rituals and circumcision.

Despite the extreme topic and risk of controversy, Heimlich shows deft skill in addressing the idea without polemic or diatribe style. In fact the issue of whether religion is simply the medium by which perpetrators offend, or whether religion is a risk factor is considered first of all, by comparing not only the stats but the policies, publicity and exemplar legal cases of some serious abuse.

The key findings of the effects of religion are:

Children are more at risk of physical abuse, through parents, and other authorities believing that strong corporal punishment is needed to maintain behaviour in line with their beliefs

That strong fear based religious teachings can constitute emotional abuse through isolating and terrorizing children.

The sexual abuse of children through religious authority figures is discussed in depth. Heimlich's conclusions are that religious groups may place loyalty and maintaining their group's reputation above addressing sexual abuse.

Medical mistreatment is an interesting area, that tends to be more of a problem for extremist groups, however the consequences are equally as extreme.

The final chapters on ritual and circumcision, are quite shocking and a must read for most parents in the U.S. (I'll leave it to you to read Heimlich's findings)

While the writing is at times clunky and a little dry, I found if anything this book is a thought provoker - I had to take my time as I spent as much time thinking about the issues as reading Heimlich's thoughts.

As a book focused on American culture, I think this is a must read for all its citizens (especially if Heimlich's stat that 80% of U.S. citizens have some level of religiosity) for those outside the state's borders, this is still an important book about where raising children can go wrong.

For a final word, this book in no way slams religion, suggests atheism, science or secular practice is the proper way of doing things. In fact the book espouses as many positives of religion especially for children. It is simply an objective look at the potential negative effects of religion on child care.

Sabrina Jennings says

Don't have time to write a full review.

Quotes:

When people talk about the dangers of corporal punishment, they frequently focus on the physical harm. But, as any recipient of the treatment will say, the emotional toll is often the most detrimental. (92)

Larry Christenson in *The Christian Family*: "If the punishment is of the right kind, it not only takes effect physically but through physical terror and pain. It awakens and sharpens the consciousness that there is a moral power over us, a righteous judge, and a law which cannot be broken." (93) (Minneapolis; Bethany House, 1970. pg 100)

Taking Owen's (Louise Anne Owens)lead, I have attempted to provide detail within each category from a religious viewpoint:

1. Spurning: rejecting or degrading the child by making him or her feel unworthy of God's love, bound for eternal damnation, or sinful, wicked, or evil
2. Terrorizing: threatening the child with sever punishment for violating the religious rules; threatening the child with harm due to supernatural forces, such as an angry god, the devil, or demons
3. Isolating: preventing the child from interacting with people based on their religious affiliation; denying the child access to media that does not reflect a particular religious viewpoint
4. Exploiting or corrupting: inculcating or indoctrinating the child into a faith at the expense of a well-rounded education; having the child work for a faith or place of worship, such as through proselytizing
5. Denying emotional responsiveness: failing to express affection and love, in keeping with the child-rearing norms of a religious community or faith group
6. Neglecting mental health, medical, and educational needs: denying children mental health or medical services or education as a way to conform to the norms of a religious community or faith group (134-135)

The reason why spurning hurts is due to the fact that perpetrators are castigating not simply victims' actions but who they are as people. (140)

One harsh effect of isolating and exploiting is a breaking down of, or failure to develop, critical thinking skills. Children can be emotionally and intellectually stunted through what some call "brainwashing." Essentially, children are denied opportunities to ask questions, express their creativity, and explore. (160)

Pierre A Renaud says

"What Heimlich does offer are some important insights into the conditions that allow such abuses to happen in the first place. Her principal conclusion is that children are most at risk in religious cultures that are dangerously authoritarian. She describes "a perfect storm" of characteristics that signal danger. First, the group displays a strict social hierarchy. Second, its culture is fear-filled. And third, it's separatist. The

supporting evidence offered in the book is easily sufficient and relevant to justify the author's conclusions.

The book ends on a hopeful note with suggestions of ways to prevent future abuse by religious people. They are as obvious as they are difficult to implement: 1) Repeal religious exemptions specific to faith healing; 2) Require clergy to report child abuse and neglect; 3) Extend or eliminate child sexual abuse statutes of limitation; and 4) Have secular agencies reach out to religious groups, become familiar with their beliefs, and educate them about their legal responsibilities."

<http://thehumanist.org/march-april-20...>

Tucker says

Heimlich says that child abuse tends to happen in religious groups that have authoritarian cultures and do not recognize that children have rights. She provides many examples of such abuse in the United States, along with psychological analysis of how people behave during and after these situations.

I wished there had been more analysis on the "gray area" of moderately authoritarian groups, or, if the term is permitted, "moderately abusive" groups. It is obvious why it's bad to join a cult, and it becomes more obvious in hindsight after a child gets starved to death. It's less obvious to identify a breakpoint at which good religion becomes bad, or at which non-authoritarian religion becomes authoritarian. It is difficult – although potentially very useful – to have some predictive capacity to identify the environments in which a child might someday soon be starved to death, and fix the culture before that happens. I can imagine a reader saying, "The kind of abuse detailed in this book happened to me growing up," or "I am a participant in one of the religious groups specifically named in this book," but I can't imagine someone saying, "My religious group has some philosophical overlap with some of the 'problem groups' described in this book, and maybe that is a problem for me. I should work to push the group toward light and away from darkness, or else I should leave altogether." The information wasn't pitched that way.

Heimlich has extended sections about circumcision of female and male infants. I think she has got it correct that, if there is a right not to be circumcised in infancy, then the rights of the child should apply equally regardless of gender. However, when she presents anecdotes about a few babies – out of millions – who had severe complications from male circumcision, this does not in itself succeed in making the case against circumcision, especially if the pro-circumcision side is correct in saying that circumcision is generally a public health benefit in reducing the risk of HIV and cancer. This chapter also did not seem fully connected to the chapters on physical and sexual abuse. The links could have been made more explicit.

Baal Of says

This was a tough book to read, since I have been first-hand witness to some of the milder forms of religious child abuse. There were people in my parents church who definitely crossed the line into abuse with their authoritarian style of Christianity, and I also saw it with my ex-wife's relatives, one couple in particular who adopted a young boy, and that mother was an absolute tyrant. My own mother once confessed to my ex-wife that some of her disciplinary methods would be considered abuse now days, not that I consider myself to have been abused in any serious kind of way. For me it was the problem of being sheltered from the world that caused me to be emotionally and developmentally behind a lot of other kids, and I had a huge amount of catching up to do when I went to college. That is nothing compared to the serious abuse experienced by other children. My sister's family are extreme right-wing home-schooling anti-government conspiracy-minded and

they have gone perhaps even farther into the realm of brain washing their kids - but there is no physical abuse or medical neglect. All of that is to explain my particular viewpoint towards religion in general, and also specifically to this subject, which is highly negative, so I'm not inclined to give any leeway. Heimlich is not like me. She bends over backwards to speak kindly of religion, to even call it a good thing, all the while documenting the horrible things that have been done in it's name, and the horrible people who have been sheltered by those same religions. The same religions that claim to set the standards for moral behavior, over and over create situations in which horrible abuse occurs, and worse, when the abuse is exposed, the practitioners of these religions deny, bury evidence, blame the victims, protect the perpetrators, and worry about reputations instead of confronting the problems head on. And the problems run through all levels, from the lay members, to the staff, to the pastors and priests, and the top level authorities. I don't know if Heimlich's gentle approach works to get this message to those who really need to hear it. I would hope that it does. She does describe several religious organizations that have come down on the correct side of this issue, granting that children should have some basic human rights, so at least that was encouraging. As much as I would like to see people make good, ethical decisions without resorting to the authority or interpretation of so-called holy books, I know that just isn't the way the world works, and we need people on all sides coming together to work out these problems. So kudos for Heimlich for writing this book, even if I did have some quibbles with some of her more conciliatory passages.

Sara Sharick says

A bit apologist in places, but otherwise a fantastic layout of the ways faith can cross the line into abuse of children, physically, emotionally, medically, and ritually. Some descriptions had me shaking in rage that people could treat children this way and think it justified. Few things are so enraging as the privileging of unverifiable faith over the verifiable suffering of children.

The final chapters on male and female circumcision and the rights of children were particularly good and informative. The focus of the book is on practices in the United States and children have just as much right to freedom of religion under the 1st Amendment as their parents.
