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### **Book chapter :**

Ennew, J., Miles, G. & Stephenson, P. (2017). *Children, Spirituality, Human Rights and Spiritual Abuse*. Children out of Place and Human Rights,

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## **Children's spirituality, Human Rights and spiritual abuse.**

**Glenn Miles and Paul Stephenson**

### Abstract

In this chapter, Glenn Miles and Paul Stephenson introduce one of the last, if not the final, texts written by Judith Ennew that is reproduced here as it was written, unedited or abridged. It focuses on spirituality and human rights, reflecting on the actions of some faith based NGOs who violated the rights of the child. It presents an important point of entry in a controversial and difficult issue. It also presents a way of proceeding very characteristic of Judith Ennew's work. In her somewhat systematic way, the questioning includes scrutiny of the way the problem of evangelism is handled; examination of ideas and belief that make children vulnerable to abuse and, in this case, forced conversion; reviews relevant human rights instruments, thus is an analysis of what spirituality means for children and practical ways forward to address practices that violate the rights of children. The chapter addresses spirituality and the spiritual rights of children, proposes a way of defining spiritual abuse and emphasises the right children have to have their own form of spirituality or spiritual imagination respected and nurtured. The corollary of this is 'that the spiritual lives of children must be neither abused nor distorted through power relationships, particularly in key relationships between adults and children'.

## **Introduction: Struck by Lightning**

**Glenn Miles with Paul Stephenson**

In legends of old, if someone did something to incur the wrath of God then they would be struck by lightning! Well, her closest friends will concur with me that Judith was struck by lightning on more than one occasion! Was this a sign from God of his displeasure? Whilst she was not averse to the occasional cigarette, partial to a strong gin and tonic and quite prepared to use ‘colourful’ language to get her point across, Judith would describe herself as a Christian, but true to her nature, Judith did not conform to any Christian stereotype. In addition, I don’t think many of her academic friends and peers knew just how deep a faith she had.

When I asked Paul Stephenson Senior Director Child Development and Programme Effectiveness at World Vision International about what he knew of her faith he said, “I can’t speak for her personal faith and interaction with God- she alone was the curator of that tumultuous relationship but it infused everything she did - even though at times she was rough edged and pissed a lot of people off. She didn’t suffer fools gladly. She had this duality, which was hard for people either side of the faith divide to reconcile: a true enigma, but someone who spoke her mind even though at times it did not conform to what we would normally associate with Christian behaviour. But her frustration and outspokenness on issues of social justice, fuelled by her faith, was more in tune with the rather contentious prophets of old!”

Judith was a very active member of the Christchurch international Anglican Church congregation in Bangkok and led some challenging Bible studies. She told me when she moved to Kuala Lumpur that she would not be attending church anymore. But when she got there she found a community church that valued her maternal encouragement and wise input, thus found herself once more in a Christian community.

She understood that the church is the largest social welfare institution in the world and that it had tremendous potential for good. Judith was able to make significant inputs in

conferences and seminars held by influential international faith based NGOs and networks including World Vision International, Tearfund and Viva Network. Many faith based practitioners/advocates/researchers and I have benefited from Judith's lead that it is good to use your head as well as your heart.

Everyone knew that Judith was passionate about the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) but not all Christian organisations shared her view. Judith herself had concerns but overall saw the huge advantages of organisations including those that are faith-based embracing and using it in all the countries of the world that had ratified it (and even those which had not!).

In 2003 Paul Stephenson and Judith decided to hold a workshop in Cambridge to examine the intersection between children's rights, Christianity and development. The resulting book – 'Questioning the Basis of Our Work – Child Rights, Christianity and Development' (2004) was published through Black on White, a publishing arm of Knowing Children – a children's rights NGO she established to further understanding and good practice on ethical research with children.

Paul said, "When we started working together it was, as she told me, finally an opportunity to combine her faith and academic work. I never really got to the bottom of how she came to faith, but she embraced the opportunity to explore this element of her life through our collaboration together".

Judith understood the value of NGOs doing empirical research even if they didn't have PhDs. Judith and Paul joined forces a few years later to publish 'The Right to be Properly Researched: How to do Rights-based Scientific Research with Children' (2009) which captured much of what she'd learned about ethical research with children.

As a researcher I appreciated Judith's encouragement and support. I appreciated her emphasis that any research with children implicitly meant it being done ethically. She inspired me, and many others, that children are experts on their own reality. She encouraged me to accept that qualitative research was valid and affirmed my research using quotes from children, role plays and drawings. She was also well ahead of many

in supporting my particular concern for the invisibility of boys who are sexually exploited. She also held a deep frustration about organisations, Christian or otherwise, who commoditise exploited children and use questionable statistics to get money, believing the ends justify the means.

Judith lived out her convictions and always sided with the underdog. When she lived in Bangkok, she regularly visited a group of West Africans jailed in Bangkok for drug trafficking related offences. In keeping with her mantra, she believed that everyone should enjoy 'all rights, all the time'. She tried to ensure their human rights were being upheld without condoning their actions.

Stephen and Marion Gabbot from Christchurch in Bangkok told me another story of her time in Bangkok, "Judith came into contact with a man who had children from a mixed marriage. It was a complicated affair, but Judith persevered, sorting visa etc out, arranged schooling for the children, organised outings and birthday parties and invited the man and his children to Sunday school every week."

The Gabbots also sent me a poem Judith had written on the chaotic lives in Bangkok but her reflection of God's love for the people in this metropolis

### **City of Angels**

18 November 2001

The mouth of a great river silted up  
With soil washed from distant hills  
And sand deposited by tides of two thousand years.  
Palaces were built on this shifting base,  
Temples adorned with dragons and gold leaf.  
Barges plied the myriad waterways.  
Majesties were born and died, and people  
Scurried about their business,  
Worshipping with fragrant garlands and  
Fistfuls of incense sticks.

Some tides brought ships, burdened with ideas,  
Trading for silk, gold, diamonds and opiates.  
Channels were dug from the silt,  
Barges replaced by iron-keeled vessels.  
Sand and soil were smothered with tarmac,  
Towers constructed higher than Babel,

Reflecting the sky in walls of glass  
That balance on piling plunged into accretions of debris  
And crushed bones, stirred  
By ghosts of many kinds,  
So delicately that no instrument yet made can register  
The minute movements of demolition.  
Cacophonous traffic grinds this wreckage,  
Poisons the air and  
All but stifles the birds.

Inexorable tides wash up flotsam and jetsam,  
All colours and tongues of human kind  
Who crawl into towers, insinuate themselves  
Into municipal crevices,  
Lodge precariously in artificial worlds,  
Trade temples and palaces, currencies and people,  
Ignoring auguries of the catastrophic flood  
That will wash their world  
Into the ocean of mire and mud;  
Oblivious to impermanence.

Yet, You have a purpose.  
For that promise, sparrows  
Chatter Your praise  
In the assurance of each  
Newly delivered day  
And squabble over crumbs  
Scattered by love.

My experience of Judith is that she took people at face value. Sometimes people of faith are labelled as being intolerant, lacking imagination, interfering, thoughtless and unhelpfully single-minded and as such impossible to work with. Whilst this may be true in some cases, the majority are open to learning and pursuing justice. Judith preferred to see what people were doing and see for herself before judging them.

I don't know if she would appreciate being likened to St. Francis of Assisi but she deeply loved animals as well as children and when wondering what to do about our dog Bobby who had peed on the bed, she advised me to treat the dog like I would a child with encouragement and patience and certainly not using violence! It was surprisingly helpful and has stayed with me.

Like St. Francis she also gave much of her money away. When I visited her in Kuala Lumpur shortly before she died she told me that she had recently had to pawn some

jewellery to pay for things. She didn't seem bothered in the least about this. She said that she encouraged all her staff to keep a valuable piece of jewellery on them, in the event that they needed it in an emergency. Another example of her generosity was when I became ill with a condition that required a change of diet she offered to come from Kuala Lumpur to Phnom Penh to teach us how to cook delicious meals with restricted ingredients.

One of the things we discussed at that time was something dear to her heart, 'inexcusable harm prevention'. She was keen to see a consultation developed, 'to develop, and work towards implementing, rights-based standards for working with vulnerable children outside parental care with particular focus on ensuring protection against physical, sexual, spiritual and emotional violence for vulnerable children in civil society care in the Global South'. She had already gone some way to making this possible.

'Inexcusable harm' refers to

- The unpardonable breach of confidence committed by abusers to whom society entrusts its most vulnerable children;
- The broken trust of vulnerable children who surely deserve no further violations of their rights;
- The inexcusable indifference of adult duty bearers who do not, or will not, see and act upon information about child abuse in social care facilities.

Whilst this consultation may never happen I hope that her friends from all faith and non-faith backgrounds can honour and uphold its spirit. Recently there have been plenty of examples of where inexcusable harm has been perpetrated by members of the Catholic and Protestant churches, as well as by local and international faith based NGOs. A significant legacy would be for all Christian and secular NGOs to continue to do better screening of their staff, volunteers and board members thus develop and implement good child protection policies.

Judith shared my own experiences of working with a number of faith based organisations where abuse had occurred with me. She was not only keen for me to use these experiences to benefit the wider NGO community, but also to share for my own sake. She understood that whistleblowers can be threatened, disadvantaged and stigmatised. She understood that these negative experiences can be challenging and that emotional and spiritual nurture of advocates was important too.

When I asked Judith to write a chapter for a book we were putting together giving a Christian perspective on sexual exploitation and trafficking she was happy to oblige. The evangelical Christian community can be very monochrome, so I knew she would give a well thought through, colourful response and she certainly did that.

Christian groups reaching out to child victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking are often accused of forcing children from other faith traditions to convert to Christianity. Rather than skirting around this, Judith responded to this concern head on. In this paper Judith helps the Christian faith based community to develop an understanding of the often overlooked children's spiritual 'rights' as well as the challenges of preventing, the newly coined term, spiritual abuse.

The questions I asked her to answer were: "How do we respond to those who say that we are forcing children to believe things against their will? Should we provide opportunity for children to continue in a religion that they may already practice? How do we create an environment where all children feel accepted and not isolated due to their religious values or lack thereof? How do we avoid spiritual abuse of children?" As anticipated she answered these and a lot more questions that I hadn't even considered, but which were important.

On completion, Judith told me it was one of the most difficult papers that she had ever written. For someone who never shirked a tough assignment it seems an appropriate closure to her unfinished but very significant contribution to this book.

References:



Ennew J & Boyden J; eds 1997 *Children in Focus: A Manual for Participatory Research with Children*. Stockholm: Rädda Barnen/Save the Children.

**How do we respond to those who say that we are forcing children to believe things against their will? Should we provide opportunity for children to continue in a religion that they may already practice? How do we create an environment where all children feel accepted and not isolated due to their religious values or lack thereof? How do we avoid spiritual abuse of children?**

*Judith Ennew*

*Ignite Community Centre*

*South City, Serdang*

*Malaysia*

Condemnation of evangelism with children comes from three quite different directions; from secular humanism, other world religions and from within Christianity itself. All reach deep into the heart of faith, questioning what is meant by ‘spirituality’. Such criticisms lead to reflections that are fundamental to all Christians, whether or not they work with children: considerations of the nature of belief, the human right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the seldom discussed topic of spiritual rights, and the newly-coined notion of spiritual abuse.

### **Belief, baptism and the ‘Great Commission’**

My own (knee-jerk) response to accusations that Christians are forcing children to believe things against their will is ‘guilty as charged’. In Christian, child-welfare institutions, child beneficiaries are usually included in faith-based activities as a matter of course. Yet this tends to be viewed with suspicion by people of other faiths, as well as those of no faith. By its very nature, Christianity is evangelical - forbidding Christians to tell the good news is like telling a tree not to grow. This is not the case with all faiths. For Buddhists, proselytising is an unimportant, worldly activity, resulting neither in merit nor in improved karma. According to Islam, children born to Moslem parents (especially if this is under the rule of Sharia Law, are regarded as being lifelong Moslems, who must not be converted, indeed the evangelistic activities of other faiths may be illegal and offences subject to punishment. On the other hand,

if a father converts to Islam, even if his wife does not, there may be little or no legal support for her complaint if he also arranges for them to be formally converted to Islam.

Thus, other faiths tend to perceive all Christian organisations as missionary organisations, which offer material benefits in exchange for conversions – a process that was labelled ‘Rice Christianity’ in nineteenth-century China. Likewise, from a human rights perspective, missionary activities directed at children – or even the practical aid provided by faith-based organisations - are viewed as violations of the fundamental right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

When I was researching child protection issues after the 2004 tsunami, my Thai Buddhist colleagues were adamant that children affected by the disaster were being forced to become Christians by faith based aid agencies, citing as evidence that, on a small island within the fieldwork area, one such organisation had built a school, even though this replaced buildings destroyed by the tidal wave, and was integrated with the national education system. Yet, in another research area, the perception that evangelism was taking place proved to be correct. Researchers asked children to provide a list of things they needed. One small boy drew a crucifix, explaining that, if he had one, he could receive more handouts from one of the Christian aid organisations (UNICEF Thailand, 2006). It was indeed the case that over-enthusiastic, possibly new, Thai Christians saw the tsunami as an opportunity for conversion as well as for relief activities. Around the same time, a colleague working for an international secular organisations operating in Thailand was clearly delighted to be able to tell me (as if this would refute my Christian belief) of a news item on CNN that ‘all’ Christian organisations engaged in post-tsunami reconstruction were involved in a goods-for-souls exchange. He regarded this as a violation of children’s freedom of choice in religion. Yet, like my Buddhist colleagues, he failed to understand that, although head-count conversions do take place due to the activities of some Christian organisations, many faith-based agencies (and individual Christians) do not engage in evangelism but prefer to think of their development work as ‘faith in action’ (James 2: 14-26).

Those who make a deliberate effort to share their faith usually justify their activities by referring to the 'Great Commission'. According to the concluding verses of the gospel of Matthew, before Jesus ascended to heaven he tasked his followers to 'make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you' (Matthew 28:19-20). A similar command is reported in Mark (16: 15-18), although not included in early manuscripts, while neither Luke nor John mentions this particular instruction.

The 'Great Commission' is almost routinely misinterpreted as a command to get as many souls in the conversion bag as possible. The history of Christianity is replete with examples of Christians who make new 'Christians' through counting baptisms alone, rather than by longer-term 'discipling' as exemplified by Jesus' gentle explanatory lessons to people who were frequently recorded as not understanding his teaching at the time. But problems in translating these verses of Matthew's gospel hinder understanding. In the first place, two English words are used to translate a single Greek verb. The Greek text contains no noun 'disciples'. Moreover, the verb translated as 'make disciples' is in the imperative case, while the other verbs in the Great Commission ('go', 'baptise', 'teach') are auxiliary participles, which might more literally be translated as 'going', 'baptising' and 'teaching'.

This is not just a scholar's quibble. It is important because the sentence in Matthew 28: 19 begins with an adverb of consequence - 'therefore'. The Great Commission verses follow from an extraordinary declaration that Matthew records Jesus making: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me' (Matthew 28:18). Jesus is not simply claiming a lot of authority, nor simply the authority to give the disciples some instructions, nor even the authority to be known beyond the confines of first-century Palestine. He is claiming no less than the totality of authority in the entirety of earthly and heavenly existence. Given the enormity of this assertion, it should not really have been necessary for Jesus to follow up with the instruction to baptise and disciple. If he genuinely possesses 'all' authority, then every creature on earth, including every human being, should submit to an authority inherent in his divinity. This is more vital than simply doing what he told us to do. What Jesus intended was that his followers should communicate to others all the authority he commands,

including sacrificial, other-person-centred respect and love. There is no suggestion that we should use coercion; we are not told to take prisoners.

A further problem for other faiths lies in the command make disciples ‘of all nations’. This is particularly threatening in a nation, such as Thailand, which consciously builds national identity on Buddhism and monarchy, so that evangelism threatens the very integrity of the state. English translations using ‘of’ compound the problem because this can be interpreted as ‘snatching souls *out of* the various nations’. But the Greek text does not include ‘of’, and ‘nation’ did not then bear the same meaning of a territory enclosed by policed borders. Jesus’ words were closer to the idea of enabling all peoples to learn from him, of speaking his truth and demonstrating his love, his practical compassion and his justice. In view of the understanding that salvation is a gracious gift from God, the focus of the Great Commission should not be to compel the conversion of others, but rather to (re)present Jesus.

Translation and theology apart, the main fallacy involved in the perception that missionaries ‘force children to believe things against their will’ is that it runs counter to psychology. Human beings, especially children, can be compelled (or induced by related benefits) to follow rituals and obey dietary and other religious practices. But it is unlikely that anyone can be forced to *believe* something against their own wishes.

By the same token, children raised in a Christian household could be described as ‘forced to believe’, although it can also be argued that faith cannot be taught but can be ‘caught’ in childhood, through non-coercive example and inclusive contact with a community of believers (see, for example: Brewster, 2005). Teaching belief is not the same as teaching geography. There is more to learn than scripture stories, how to sing hymns, or when and how to genuflect – even though, throughout history, wars have been fought for such ‘reasons’. In addition, faith – once caught - requires work by the believer; Christians are marked by a meaningful, evolving relationship with God, which can be symbolised by, but not reduced to, baptism.

### **The right to choose**

In view of widespread discomfort about children's right to freedom of religion, many faith-based organisations now focus on social action and social justice, rather than evangelism. From the perspective of secular critics, coercive instruction in Christianity violates the principle of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, which has been fundamental to human rights since the eighteenth century and integral to international legislation for over six decades (longer if one counts League of Nations human rights legislation). This freedom is a universal principle accepted by all member states of the United Nations in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948). Although always applying to children as human beings (and therefore subjects of rights) children's freedom of thought, conscience and religion was barely recognised until set out in article 14 of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Paragraph 1 affirms that 'States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion', although paragraph 2 recognises the 'rights and duties of the parents and, when applicable, legal guardians, to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child' (UN, 1989, article 14).

A more radical – and usually secular - interpretation of article 14 of the CRC would be that children should be able to choose their own religion (or none) and therefore should not be specifically taught any one set of beliefs and rituals. This would mean that parents of any faith who share their beliefs and practices with their offspring might be accused of violating their rights. Yet to be taught nothing would mean having no information, other than unconnected shards of ritual, or book and internet learning, as the basis of freedom of choice.

Likewise, far from being antagonistic to human rights, scripture emphasises identical core values of dignity, respect and love for all human beings, because they are made in the image of God (Genesis: 1. 27). In multi-faith contexts, human rights provide minimum standards for agreement between religious groups on childrearing issues (Marshall and Parvis, 2004: 361). In addition, as Glenn Miles has argued that Christians stress their responsibility to deliver rights to other people, rather than to claim their own rights as entitlements (Miles 2003: 94).

Nevertheless, article 14 of the CRC poses dilemmas for faith-based workers in practical contexts, especially with children who are not members of Christian families. There is also the question of age; children may have the freedom to chose their own religion, but perhaps it is not acceptable to teach children about God when they are not 'psychologically mature enough to make an informed decisions about Christ or to choose their own religion' (Brewster 2005: 137). Yet the counter argument, from the perspective of the 'Great Commission' is that Christians have a God-given duty to proclaim the gospel to all people, without exception. Thus, children as a group, including young children, must not be excluded.

This still begs the question of how Christians can or should foster spirituality in children of other faiths, including, in 'secular society', how to promote the spiritual rights of children to whom the entire concept may be alien. One response comes from interfaith dialogue, expressed for example in the 1996 Kathmandu Declaration on women and children's rights, which resulted from a meeting between Asian animists Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Moslems and Sikhs, who together found 'full support in our core teachings in letter and in spirit' for the CRC. This group resolved to deepen 'our understanding and sensitivities to the ethical, spiritual, emotional and developmental needs and rights of children'; to encourage children to 'express themselves freely'; and to commit to:

- Continue interfaith discussions;
- Disseminate the CRC with religious and other leaders;
- Identify core teachings in religion relative to CRC and 'Use these texts as the basis for advocacy, training, research and other initiatives in support of social change for human betterment, starting at local levels' (Arole 1998: xii-xiii)

### **Spiritual rights**

Most discussions of the human rights of children omit spiritual rights, which are barely mentioned in the CRC (Marshall and Parvis, 2004; Ennew and Stephenson, 2004). With the rise of 'science' as a dominant social paradigm, 'modern' cultures

now consider humans to be purely material beings, with only material needs. Science eliminates all but the body; mind becomes brain, everything becomes physical (Morris, 2001). Thus, the great themes of literature and philosophy that were formerly thought to be spiritual, such as passion and love, have become reduced to animals desires, or even to disorders such as ‘love addiction’. Inevitably, this has had spill-over effects on the way Christians think about, and experience, their spiritual lives, including the ways they raise, care for and interact with children.

Literature on children’s spirituality is scattered, often speculative, and usually focuses on Western children who are assumed to be living in Christian contexts of homes or orphanages, which is not much help to faith-based workers in the Global South. Nevertheless, many of those who profess no religious belief tend to acknowledge that there is an inescapable spiritual dimension to human life, referring to ‘the meaning of life’, moral and ethical issues in relationships with other people and attitudes to social justice. Psychologist Richard Coles has described children as needing ‘a sense of purpose and direction in life, a set of values, grounded in moral introspection – a spiritual life that is given sanction by their parents and others in the adult world’ (Coles, 1997: 177). He suggested that spirituality looks ‘inward in search of meaning and purpose’ because ‘we must respectfully stand in awe of this existence granted to us so fatefully’ (ibid: 178).

Kathryn Copsey suggests that spirituality is less ‘mystical’ than experiential – consisting of every day gifts for living such as innocence, playfulness, joy and imagination (Copsey, 2005). According to George MacDonald, the nineteenth century theologian and writer of ever-popular children’s stories, imagination is the means through which children (and adults) explore possibilities, such as God or life after death (MacDonald, 1867). Imagination, creativity and playfulness are human characteristics that are particularly well developed in childhood. Imagination is the source of awe and wonder, making it possible for children to recognise and love an unseen God, as their initial step in obeying the first of the great commandments (Mark 12: 28-34). Imagination also facilitates relationships with others by making it possible to empathise with their experiences, leading to fulfilment of the second great commandment to love one’s neighbour. But all children are at risk of their imagination being closed down by ‘the process of induction into adult society’ as



children ‘assimilate popular culture’ (Hay 1998: 20-21). Likewise, Copsey argues that, from the day a child is born in the image of God, that image is progressively ‘marred’ by sin, ‘tarnished’ by the world, and ‘scratched’ by experiences (Copsey 2005):

We [adults] may simply be unaware of [children’s spirituality], we may fail to recognise it and therefore fail to nurture it. We may rubbish it, crush it, clutter it: we may allow it to be lost under the weight of a materialistic culture (Copsey 2003: 9).

During research with a small group of children in the United Kingdom, David Hay and Rebecca Nye encountered what they call ‘relational consciousness’, which they describe as the potential for spirituality in every human being – a modern version of what MacDonald called ‘imagination’. This sensitivity towards other people not only underpins all religious experience, they suggest, but is also vital for both individuals and communities to grow and thrive. It is a human universal that cannot be claimed by any one belief system. Hay states that the ‘task of nourishing spirituality is one of releasing, not constructing, children’s understanding and imagination.’ Thus, the nurture of spirituality should be the bedrock of all childrearing and education (Hay, in Hay and Nye 1998: 162-3).

Thus, the nurture of spirituality can be thought of as the foundation of *all* childrearing and education, not simply confined to saying grace before meals, or to a school curriculum component or to Sundays and feast days. Indeed, I would argue that, when children’s ministry is expressed as moral or Biblical tales, or even as intellectual propositions, it fails to nurture spirituality. Unfortunately, international (and national) plans for education, such as ‘Education for All’, do not include spiritual nurture, leaving a vast field of unmet needs. To put a right’s gloss on what Hay says, adults have four major responsibilities with respect to spiritual nurture, all of which can be applied to children of any faith or culture:

- To help children to keep an open mind;
- To explore with children different ways of perceiving the world;
- To encourage children’s awareness of their own spirituality and that of others;

- To become ‘personally aware of the social and political dimensions of spirituality’ (Hay, in Hay and Nye 1998: 163).

### **Spiritual abuse?**

Copsey’s description of the ‘closing down of children’s spirituality could be aligned with ‘spiritual abuse’, and also sounds like the everyday experience of almost all children. Nevertheless, this relatively new term is more likely to refer to conversion under duress or through brainwashing, or may be encountered in media reports of children being abused because they are identified as witches or as sources of evil (Dowden 2006, for example). Forced conversion (including conversion that offers material benefits) may lead to shallow ideas such as prayer as a hotline to God that will result in the granting of all requests and permanent ‘happiness’. When everyday living reveals this belief to be false, such conversions can lead to devastating loss of belief and emotional breakdown. They are, in a word, abusive.

Conversion of a child, however genuine, can be dangerous in other ways, leading to ostracism from the family and community of origin. The protection duty of adults is the key to this issue. Children must be protected from the isolation, abuse and stigma that can, and often does, result from being the sole member of a family to profess Christianity. The personal testimonies of East and Southeast Asian converts to Christianity has provided me with many examples, such as the 12 year old boy whose father waited outside the church to give him a beating every Sunday after his son had attended morning service, or the seriously ill young Christian woman whose Buddhist family refused her any form of help. In societies where religion is the foundation of both cultural and national identity, and family is the chief source of social, economic and psychological support, as well as the channel for access to community membership, conversion is best if it is a decision taken jointly by all family members (Brewster 2005).

A further concern of secular critics is abuse of children within Christianity. Religious recognition of what the CRC calls the ‘evolving capacities’ of children may lead to the decision that ‘We should not try to make adult Christians out of our immature

youngsters' (Brewster 2005: 99). Yet this consideration should not lead to patronising or dominating attitudes by adults in ministry to children. Trivialisation of children's spirituality by providing cosy stories, rather than confronting emotional and social injustices within children's lives, not only diminishes the image of God but also risks either a total rejection of faith in adolescence, or a lifetime of sentimental Christmases and chocolate Easters in which the growth of a personal relationship with God is stunted. Similarly, generations of Irish writers have described how the inculcation of sin and fear, rather than grace and redemption, can result in persistent confusion and self-loathing. In this context, the recently-recognised sexual abuse by priests is seldom recognised as also being a form of spiritual abuse, which provides perhaps the ugliest and most erroneous image of God. In such contexts, the only response to denunciations from other faiths and from secularism may be 'No one should judge a god by the behaviour of his or her 'believers''.

### **Summing up**

Spirituality is not the prerogative of any one religion - or even of religion at all. But it is an important foundation for human individual development, for the evolution of the species and for the health of each and every community. Therefore, spiritual nurture, rather than conversion, must be the core of faith based activities, wherever they take place and whatever the religious (or antireligious) environment. One human right is not to have the existence of this spiritual dimension regarded as delusion or neurosis, as is the case, for example, in many secular perspectives. Whatever form children's spiritual imagination takes, it must be respected and never dismissed as 'wrong'. The corollary of this is that the spiritual lives of children must be neither abused nor distorted through power relationships, particularly in key relationships between adults and children. Children's humility and simplicity should be respected as a model for right living and right relationship with God (Luke 18: 16-17), not exploited so that their spirituality is tarnished, marred and scratched. It is important that every adult recognises this - abuse is ever present in any power relationships, even in relationships of love.

If we watch Jesus carefully through the windows of the four Gospels, we see him treating the vulnerable with respect and compassion. His severity is reserved for those who oppress the weak and mislead the ignorant. It follows that any action we take or words we use to present this Jesus to others must display these same qualities. If a gospel is presented by means of oppressive force, it is not the gospel of Jesus. If we use coercion to make people into disciples, then they are not disciples of Jesus. Children and adults of other faiths, and from secular cultures, unfortunately do encounter this false face of Jesus in the Christians they encounter. So we do well to remember the impression of Jesus each one of us leaves behind, perhaps of the only Christian someone ever encountered. At a personal level, we should, of course, strive to be genuinely 'Christlike' but also, at a practical level, to observe rules, based on experience, for working with children from other faiths and cultures:

- No religious teaching without the knowledge and consent of the parents/guardians;
- No disparagement of other cultures – Christianity is not a culture, it is compatible with all manifestations of human society;
- No rice evangelisms especially in orphanages, children's homes, day care centres, refugee camps and aid projects;
- No religious teaching that patronises children or acts in ignorance of painful experiences in their lives;
- Awareness of the potential negative consequences of conversion for children (adapted from Brewster, 2005).

Nurturing the spirituality of children from our own and other spiritual traditions should consist of offering frameworks for making sense of holistic spirituality, for combating the alienation of modern society with a holistic vision of the relationships between self and others, self and created environment and (ultimately) self and God. Finally the key to all work with children, from any perspective of faith, is that freedom of thought, conscience and religion, entails respect for each child as a unique human being, created by God for Kingdom purposes. It might have been easier if those who drafted the CRC had put aside the traditional ways of establishing religious

freedom, opting instead for the simplicity of Janusz Korczak's statement that 'The child has the right to commune with God' (CYC-ONLINE, 2004).

### **Acknowledgments**

While working on these issues I enjoyed – and benefited enormously from - Skype discussions with Andrew Dircks, particularly with respect to the translation and interpretation of the Greek text of Matthew 28: 18-20?. I must express my gratitude to him, while admitting that any errors in the article are entirely my responsibility.

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