

transforming efficacy of the crucified Christ as being the Other on which the 'me' depends. Anything else is the old 'me'.

The new 'me' can only be formed in freedom, which means the service of the new Other—God and our brothers and sisters, completely set free from the contamination of mimetic rivalry which leads us to bite and devour each other (5:15). The new 'me' overcomes the patterns of behaviour and attitudes that depended on the old 'me'—the 'me' formed from mimetic rivalry and the mechanism of expelling the surrogate victim.

Once again Paul's understanding of Law, Righteousness, and Life in the Spirit reveals an implicit understanding of the human condition which is either identical with that offered by Girard and Oughourlian, or so near to it as to make little difference. All the main Pauline themes can be seen to be translatable into the idiom of what Oughourlian calls an 'interindividual' psychology (in other words, a psychology no longer based on the subject but on the relationship between human lives), while in no way being reduced by this psychology. In fact, a number of passages which are incomprehensible within the framework of our longstanding dichotomies between the individual and the social, the material and the spiritual, the psychological and the religious, at last come to make a unified sense. It would seem no longer correct to say that many central Pauline themes strictly only make sense within the context of a vanished thought-world. The hermeneutic offered by Girard and Oughourlian has a great deal to offer in enriching our understanding of the Pauline texts.

## **Singular Iniquities: Josephine Butler and Marietta Higgs**

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A little over a century ago Josephine Butler was beginning to learn, with reluctance and dismay, the extent of organised child prostitution in Britain. When she tried to convey what she had learned she was often reviled as dirty-minded, corrupting and unwomanly. Her work did much to erect legal protection for children, but the possibility and practice of child sexual exploitation continued, as shown in the case notes of bodies such as the NSPCC<sup>1</sup>. In 1987 a tide of hostility was unleashed against another woman, paediatrician Marietta Higgs, who had in the normal course of her work discovered signs of sexual abuse in a small and statistically unsurprising proportion of the children she cared for.

Why is it so often women—supposedly the weaker sex, less tough-minded than men—who seem to be left to face up to the most cruel and sordid social practices, and even vicariously to bear the blame for them? And why, a century after Josephine Butler's work, is society still so ill-equipped to deal with child sexual abuse?

Josephine Butler's involvement with girls and women forced into poverty and prostitution began in 1865 in Liverpool, when she visited the city's vast workhouse and met some of its 5000 inhabitants<sup>2</sup>. Though frightened and horrified at the conditions, and doubtful of her welcome, she sat down on the floor and began to pick oakum with the women and talk to them about their lives. Shortly afterwards she took into her house a girl called Marion who had been seduced at fifteen and abandoned, and was dying of consumption. Others followed and Josephine set up a 'House of Rest' for incurably ill women.

Her social work might have remained on this acceptable level had it not been for the effects of the Contagious Diseases Acts. Passed in 1864, these were designed to limit the disastrous spread of VD in the armed forces by providing for compulsory health checks on prostitutes in garrison towns. In theory this seemed reasonable, but in practice it constituted a terrible and arbitrary weapon against any woman, prostitute or not, since any could be hauled off the streets and subjected to a rough, humiliating and unhygienic examination. Women undergoing such an ordeal frequently lost their reputations as a result, so the Acts had the effect of turning them to prostitution by barring respectable ways of life to them.

The Acts, with their hidden double standard and supposedly healthy intention, were supported by most of the medical profession, the clergy and even radical politicians. Gladstone opposed them but felt he could not carry his colleagues with him; also he felt that the whole question was too unseemly for public discussion. Opposition to them came from working-class women—vulnerable to persecution under them any time they left their houses—but not from upper-class women, who would have their own transport and protection in the streets.

Josephine Butler, a middle-class wife and mother, married to a clergyman, was an important focus and voice for the campaign to abolish the Acts. She worked, wrote and spoke against them tirelessly, and frequently became the target of vilification and personal violence as a result. In 1870 the abolitionists put up an Independent Liberal candidate in the Colchester by-election against the official government candidate, who supported the Acts enthusiastically. The hotel where Josephine was to speak was besieged by a mob and she had to hide in the attic. Only the belated arrival of the police prevented it from being burned to the ground.

The struggle dragged on for years, with progress steady but painfully slow, delayed in 1874 by the election of a Tory government. At last in 1884 the end came in sight—the Acts were suspended, to be finally

repealed in 1886.

Meanwhile, Josephine had inevitably developed an increasingly comprehensive—and indignant—understanding of the sexual trade in young women and children; girls were tricked and kidnapped into prostitution at a very early age, and children sold into brothels by parents who could not feed them. She had condemned the Contagious Diseases Act as a ‘tyranny of the upper classes against the lower classes, an injustice practised by men upon women’, and she now began to realise that prostitution often began with those who were vulnerable not only by reason of poverty and gender but also because they were infants. She encountered paedophilia more and more often, and heard from the teenage girls she helped how their exploitation had begun in childhood.

At first she thought that the greatest problem was that of English girls being kidnapped for use in foreign brothels, but as she pursued her investigations she began to realise with horror the extent of child sexual exploitation—often sadistic, sometimes ending in mutilation or death—in London and throughout Britain. In 1884 she began a campaign with W.T. Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Stead, a tough newspaperman, more than once broke down in tears when he began to understand the fate of the children, especially after meeting a four-year-old who had been repeatedly raped and who believed herself possessed by the devil. He approached the Home Office and then Scotland Yard with his information, only to discover that the Home Secretary had instructed the police not to cooperate with him under any circumstances. (This finds echoes in 1987 when the Cleveland Police, relying on their own police surgeon’s opinion, which the Butler-Sloss Report later discredited<sup>3</sup>, decided not to investigate any child sexual abuse diagnosed by Marietta Higgs, however substantial the independent evidence.)

Stead then printed a series of articles called ‘The Maiden Tribute of the Modern Babylon’, describing the organisation of London brothels, the corruption of the police who turned a blind eye to them and the network of highly placed connections—in Parliament, the Church and the Bench—that ensured the brothel-keepers’ immunity (prominent brothel-keepers donated generously to police benevolent funds). These connections he threatened to list by name unless the Criminal Law Amendment Act was passed, raising the age of consent to sixteen and thus offering a little more legal protection to the brothel child-slaves. The Act was hastily passed.

Some of the press supported Stead and Butler but others condemned them for describing such horrors. ‘There will scarcely be a boy or girl in England whose ignorance will not be tainted by the disgusting pabulum with which they have been so plentifully supplied,’ raged *The Times*. The same attitude is still discernible in Cleveland; that to speak out about child abuse is the height of moral turpitude, possibly worse than the abuse itself.

A hundred years after Butler's campaign, when developed countries have exported the worst excesses of poverty and exploitation to a comfortable distance from our shores, the punter in search of a prepubescent child for his sexual use may have to find the price of a package tour to Bangkok. Such commodities are not readily available commercially in Britain. But the cheap and 'safe' alternative—sexual exploitation of children by their nearest and dearest—remains as a constant feature of our society. Why have we never come to grips with it?

It is a common pattern, in the process of liberation, that oppressed individuals gradually find a voice, find each other, build up their strength and at last demand justice, where normal social processes have denied it to them. For instance, women suffered domestic violence for generations, and indeed still do, but out of that experience of terrorism they have come up with their own initiatives—helplines and refuges—which have remained outside statutory provision and offer a source of strength to those who would otherwise feel helpless. Children are not in as good a position as adults to develop initiatives to escape violence, but physical violence—again, an age-old pattern—eventually prompted adults to intervene on their behalf. The Maria Colwell, Jasmine Beckford and similar inquiries were a traumatic way for society to learn about the facts of child-battering, but the learning took place and we all now accept that injuries to children will be carefully investigated. Caring parents are not offended at the implications of this; they appreciate it and understand the necessity for it.

But what happens when a powerless and unenfranchised group is victim to a form of abuse that leaves few or no marks, starts in babyhood and becomes the only way of life a child has ever known, is shrouded in the strictest secrecy and does devastating psychic damage that surfaces years later throughout adulthood, perpetuating abuse from generation to generation? The child victims of sexual abuse very rarely speak for themselves. Why do adults not speak for them?

We as a society know—from adult survivors—that child sexual abuse occurs, and how much damage it does. We know from teenagers who have at last managed to speak out about years of abuse that it commonly starts in babyhood. We know more and more about the signs of it in small children (it is no longer possible to assert, for instance, that a toddler with gonorrhoea caught it from a bedsheet). We know that tremendous damage is being done to these small children, that they are very unlikely to reveal what is happening to them and that even in the future only a small minority of them will speak about it. It would seem logical to use the information that we have to stop the abuse in at least some of these young children. But for the moment, we have placed a veto on attempts to stop sexual abuse of babies and toddlers.

The veto takes this form. From time to time child-care workers begin to speak more openly and boldly on behalf of sexually abused children, and to advocate a more comprehensive care system to detect

abuse, protect the child, support the rest of the family and help the abuser to solve his problem. Invariably this process is stopped in midstream, the extent of the problem downplayed, the facts about child abuse hushed up and a few professionals selected as scapegoats to provide an individualised, safe and cheap solution to the 'crisis'. Such crises happened in Jordan, Minnesota, in the early 1980s; in Cleveland, England, in 1987; in Holland in 1988; and there is every likelihood that they will continue to be produced, until all the child-care professionals are cowed into submission.

After watching this process in stunned dismay for some months<sup>4</sup>, several hundred ordinary people in Cleveland began to organise themselves early in 1989 to seek more positive alternatives for child protection. This led to the formation of a grassroots group called CAUSE (Cleveland Against Child Abuse). Within days a savage backlash was unleashed from the local media, and from the MP who had championed the 'accused fathers' in 1987. CAUSE was denounced as a hard-left, anti-family, militant feminist conspiracy, regardless of the fact that both its coordinators were happily married mothers of young children.

To begin the immense task of consciousness-raising, CAUSE had first of all to teach itself about child sexual abuse, how society reacts to it, and the truth of what had happened in Cleveland. As we learned more and more about it a pattern began to emerge. Popular theories or assumptions about the Cleveland crisis were not just slightly inaccurate or exaggerated or ignorant; they were based on perversions of the truth so thorough as to be a mirror-image of reality. Myths and rumours mischievously started had found ready acceptance. Many of these were summarily repudiated in the Butler-Sloss Report but remained current and popular (indeed the Butler-Sloss Report seemed to be largely totemic—very few people read it or even an accurate summary of it). Such myths include the belief that:

- 1) Marietta Higgs had screened all her patients for sexual abuse;
- 2) she had diagnosed abuse on the basis of one physical sign alone;
- 3) she had examined children so roughly that the examination was an abuse in itself. (This canard was repeated to the Inquiry by an eminent police surgeon, to whom Lord Justice Butler-Sloss had to point out that it was a complete fabrication. In fact a paediatrician cannot function well without gaining the trust of her young patients and treating them gently. Marietta Higgs was described by many witnesses as a kind and caring doctor.)<sup>5</sup>

The health authorities perceived the malicious rumours growing in strength, but were hesitant to take on the task of counteracting them and thus helping to develop public awareness about child sexual abuse. This policy of inertia made it easy for them to declare some months later that, although she was a competent and hardworking doctor, Marietta Higgs was now politically unacceptable in Cleveland. This was the chosen

solution to the crisis—one designed in practice to protect adult interests and safeguard adult relationships, as well as give a clear message to the professionals about the limits of their permission to help children.

There are interesting parallels between Marietta Higgs' experience and that of Josephine Butler, in that both were reviled for the disturbing and disruptive information they conveyed, and even held somehow responsible for the abuses they revealed—a case of 'shooting the messenger who brings the bad news.' In both cases society was called upon to recognise a brutal and widespread abuse of its smallest, most helpless and supposedly most protected members. The Victorians, with their new sensitivity to the vulnerability and innocent suffering of children, must have found it as hard as we do to accept that the popular image of children as cherished and protected overlays a far different reality.

The parallels between events of the 1870s and those of the 1980s are limited, however, in that the challenge that faces doctors now is unavoidable. Josephine Butler felt a calling to speak out for young girls oppressed by poverty and sexual abuse, and to denounce the men—often eminent politicians and society leaders—who condemned vice but used child prostitutes. Marietta Higgs was no social reformer but a working paediatrician whose normal, mainstream clinical practice led to her victimisation. In the 1970s, when paediatricians began to recognise the phenomenon of the battered baby, they developed their role in diagnosing physical abuse. But sexual abuse was not felt to be the province of doctors; paediatricians used to hand over such difficult cases with relief to social workers. The gradual realisation that there was sometimes a medical contribution to be made in helping to reveal sexual abuse, and that such abuse fitted into the spectrum of child health problems in such a way that it was impossible for paediatricians to ignore it, was a heavy new burden but one which conscientious doctors could not refuse. Marietta Higgs became the principal recipient of male wrath at this perceived encroachment on the traditional privacy of the family and paternal authority.

In retrospect lives such as that of Josephine Butler seem filled with a serene certainty and buoyed up by their later vindication. In the middle of the turmoil, hate-mail, condemnation in the press and crowds baying for her blood no such comforting hindsight was available. I have been seeking for clues in Butler's life to Higgs' current function as a folk-devil in British society. It is such a cruel subject that her friends tend to avoid it or else joke about it (and it is indeed incongruous; she is perceived in the popular imagination as a loud, big aggressive woman, whereas in fact she is tiny and slender, with a soft, low voice, a direct but gentle manner; and an open, considering and perceptive mind).

What is the meaning of her persecution? Looking back on it years from now, will we see it as constructive or destructive? An isolated episode of revenge, or a necessary ordeal, first step in the process of a

community very reluctantly and belatedly deciding to withdraw permission to use children as sex objects? At present it seems merely stupid, perverted, vicious and sinister—transferring to a committed paediatrician the blame that should attach to those who sexually exploit children. But just as Butler drew onto herself the rage of those who considered it their right to have untrammelled sexual access to ten-year-old virgin children, and in enduring that rage defended the defenceless, so Higgs has had heaped upon her the kind of blind aggression that is directed at abused children. In—albeit unwittingly—bringing down this aggression upon herself she has begun to deflect it from its victims. At present she seems as helpless as they to defend herself against it; to speak and be believed; to stop the abuse. But if she can do nothing at present to stop children being abused, she is suffering in solidarity with them; and that is sometimes all that can be done, and the beginning of the long road to liberation.

A difficult question remains to be addressed here: where are the Christian churches in the child-abuse crisis? Probably where they were in Josephine Butler's time—confused, usually well-intentioned, often ill-informed and unfortunately not always committing themselves to a rigorous quest for truth. In recent decades the churches in England have striven to be relevant and in touch with contemporary society and its problems, but their good intentions have not always been matched by discernment and awareness. They tend, perhaps because of the mainly male hierarchies, to perceive social problems relating to men (such as male unemployment) more readily than those affecting women and children (such as domestic violence). In Cleveland there were well-meaning attempts to minister pastorally to the crying needs of all those involved—abused children, abusers, non-abusing carers, social workers—but sadly they were too often made from a perspective which limited their effectiveness, which saw offended parents but remained blind with society in general to the well-hidden hell of abused children.

- 1 See for instance Ferguson, H. 'Cleveland 1898: has anything changed in 90 years?' *The Guardian*, 3rd May 1989, p. 27.
- 2 Information about Josephine Butler is drawn from Petrie, G. *A Singular Iniquity: the Campaigns of Josephine Butler*. Macmillan, 1971.
- 3 Butler-Sloss, E. *Report of the Inquiry into Child Abuse in Cleveland, 1987*. HMSO, 1988, pp. 99–107.
- 4 A vivid description of the atmosphere of intimidation and silencing of the community in Cleveland can be found in Campbell, Bea, *Unofficial Secrets: Child Sexual Abuse—the Cleveland Case*. Virago, 1988, pp. 194–203.
- 5 Butler-Sloss, *ibid.*, pp. 164–166, 201.