

A New Voice for an Old Problem

by Pamela Whissel

JANET HEIMLICH

BREAKING THEIR WILL

SHEDDING LIGHT ON
RELIGIOUS CHILD
MALTREATMENT



Although religiously motivated child abuse and neglect has been around as long as religion has, it didn't have a name until Janet Heimlich began the research for her book *Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment*. Hers is one of the very few books to look at this problem in a comprehensive way.

Raised in a family where religion was almost entirely absent, Heimlich did not become interested in children's issues until she became a mother at age 41. When she enrolled her daughter in a Montessori school in 2006, she was struck by how compassionately the teachers interacted with their students. She began talking to friends and colleagues about their upbringings and was surprised to learn that not only had many of them been raised in very religious households, but the experiences of those who had been raised in the most pious homes were, for the most part, negative.

As an independent journalist and former freelance reporter for National Public Radio, Heimlich was used to keeping an ear out for news stories that were relevant to a particular topic. But, she says, tracking stories that dealt with

cases of abuse that involved religion became overwhelming. "It took hours each day to read up on these cases," she said. After coming across a particularly sad case, in which a toddler was starved to death by a cult in Baltimore because the boy did not say "amen" at mealtimes, Heimlich decided she would write a book on how certain religious beliefs and cultures in the United States are harming children. She narrowed her focus to the three Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, and called the problem "religious child maltreatment."

Breaking Their Will is not a diatribe against all faith, or any one religion in particular. Rather, it

legislation should we be pushing for?

Number one for me is mandating that clergy report child abuse. Many states don't require that. Others do, but their laws have loopholes that allow clergy and religious institutions to get around reporting abuse. To a great extent, these abuses are still being kept just within the walls of places of worship—if they're discussed at all. I would like there to be an opening up where places of worship not only talk about religious child maltreatment but are proactive in setting up prevention policies, which include the reporting of abuse to outside authorities.

Is there any other way someone can contribute to the solution, even if they

on the issue at hand. Theological discussions have their place, but in this context, they will only get in the way of progress.

Are you working with religious leaders?

I've formed some very good connections with faith leaders who strongly reject what's going on in their conservative cultures. I'm working with a rabbi named Gary Moskowitz, who used to be a police officer in New York City. He travels around the country talking about problems in Orthodox Jewish communities, where powerful rabbis tell their congregations to not report child abuse to police and instead tell them to report to their



warns that children living in certain kinds of religious cultures—ones Heimlich notes are authoritarian—are at an especially high risk for religious maltreatment. What's especially problematic about these cultures is perpetrators are often convinced that their abusive acts are righteous expressions of piety.

Heimlich's book is receiving national attention and praise, and she continues to report on religious child maltreatment in the blog on her website, breakingtheirwill.com. She recently talked with *American Atheist* about her work.

You believe the biggest push to end religious child maltreatment needs to be legislative, and Atheists can certainly be involved at that level. What specific

don't belong to a religious faith?

The ultimate solution lies with the religious leaders themselves. They are the ones who can take the message to the people who need to hear it. People of faith will pay attention to someone they consider an authority. So I urge all those who are concerned about this problem to link up with local religious leaders, to find a common ground, and put aside theological discussions or arguments. People of faith often get defensive if they feel that their religion—which can be their entire identity, everything they were brought up with—is under attack. If Atheists want to raise awareness of religious child maltreatment, the discussion has to be very focused

rabbis. [Moskowitz blogs at <http://theunorthodoxjew.blogspot.com>]

Ever since I began my research, I've been talking with an Austin, Texas, Presbyterian pastor named Keith Wright. I highly recommend his book, *Religious Abuse*, which has a chapter on child maltreatment. Keith's mother, a Christian Scientist, died when he was a boy. She became very ill and went to a hospital, but the people in her church community convinced her to leave the hospital and just seek faith healing, which she did, and she died. That really affected him emotionally and in terms of his spirituality.

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