

offenders. It mostly only happens prior to court cases! Those who work with sex offenders know why.

Christian children and adults are taught (erroneously) to forgive without repentance from their transgressors. If they cannot, then *they* become the sinners. Once a child or adult says they've been abused they are immediately enjoined to forgive. It's the classic response. Why? Because the hearer cannot bear the subject, does not want to discuss it or bear it, so asks *the victim to do something to finish it all off*. Forgiveness is seen as the end. This will cause everything to be both forgotten and finished. The Church, the family, friends (particularly Christians) have decided this is the quickest, most guilt-ridden way of 'shutting the victim up'.

Two groups of survivors on retreat were asked their views about forgiveness. They answered 'fuck forgiveness'

Churches use this (forgiveness) to deny their own feelings by focusing in a negative way on the victim, so that the survivor is left to carry not only the abuser's 'shit' but also the shock, fear, denial, anger, etc., of others (Kennedy 1999). We all agree that 'healing' from child sexual abuse is a process, that it takes time. Churches, however, feel that forgiveness is the magic bullet - the 'pill' of cure. For many survivors, asking them to forgive is suggesting they have responsibility for clearing up the shit, for 'finishing' it off tidily. It doesn't work like this; indeed this 'quick fix' is dangerous, for it stifles healing, which is a long haul.

God will protect

Victims of abuse find it incredibly difficult to understand why it is that God/Jesus did not protect them. They blame God/Jesus for their abuse. It's quite something to feel betrayed by your human family, but really huge to feel betrayed by an all-powerful deity. We are told as children to pray to God for our needs and our protection, that God can do anything. Children and many Christian adults do not understand the 'powerlessness' of God. An understanding of Liberation theology, in which we believe Jesus suffers *with* his people, comes very much later. 'Free will', as a notion is forgotten about, or not fully thought through. This is a pity because the 'free will' notion would be helpful to survivors in understanding God's apparent inaction against their abuser. Here is how one survivor feels:

'God is the Father in heaven who does everything for His children because He loves them. That's what some people say. Well I'm going to tell you exactly what I think of Him. God gave me a mother who didn't want me. She always told me I ruined her life. God gave me a father who raped and abused me for 30 years. God gave me a husband who constantly abused my children and me. God gave my little girl a father who wanted to rape her when she was three and a half. Well thank you very much, God, that you wanted to give me all of this and that you loved me so very much. But God I need nothing more from you, do you hear me? I want absolutely nothing more from you – just leave me alone, please'. (Imbens & Jonker, 1992)

How do you explain free will to the survivor teenager or adult? Liberation theology? Do you say there must be a 'purpose'? Or fall back on 'carrying our cross'.

No, this is trite, crass, insulting. In time some survivors will eventually understand that God did not *cause* their abuse, a human being did. Many never get to this point and abandon faith & God completely. For survivors their suffering is therefore in two realms, the human and the spiritual:

| Human Experience | | Spiritual Experience |
|---|-------------|--|
| Mum will punish me, dad will punish me | Fear | I will go to hell Even God hates me |
| I'll never trust men/women again | Trust | I can't trust God - He'll let me down too |
| Why is this happening? Why me? | Anger | Where is God? Why does He not stop it? He has the, power to stop it |
| My abuser is stronger than me | Power | God is bigger - Divine - greater than me - He has control over my life, can do anything with/to me |
| Everyone thinks it was my Fault. I'm dirty/horrible | Stigma | I have "sinned" sexually - I must go to confession' |
| For 'allowing' abuse | Guilt | For feelings of anger, hatred, bitterness for not being able to forgive |
| They think I'm mad | Self Injury | The ultimate sin' |

The above diagram shows how feelings permeate both realms and make for a cocktail of trauma not seen in secular survivors. The Spiritual/theological dimension I argue makes the trauma infinitely more pervasive and intractable. One cannot have a conversation with God about these issues all that easily!

Survivors Speaking

I have spoken about elements of Christianity that pose great difficulties for survivors. Yes, they did think of themselves as God/Jesus' Children. Some felt comforted by their faith, some felt abandoned and betrayed. Here are some comments:

People in Church don't want to know, they blame me'.

I couldn't even trust God not to hurt me.

I figured God couldn't love me – I was going to go to hell no matter what I did, so it didn't matter whether I lived or died.

Father for me is the most frightening name for God I can think of.

I thought the devil had got me.

I felt the evil of abuse had made me evil and that there was no place for me in the Church, only children who were good and pure were loved by God.

I knew I had committed a terrible sin of some kind and that I was evil, I was going to go to hell.

I'd say to myself if I was good from now on God will stop him doing these things to me. So whenever he came into my room I knew I must have been bad.

When I was being abused I saw a crucifix on the bedroom wall – if I go into a Church and see a crucifix I'm right back in my bedroom.

I was taught that God was my father in heaven, and that my own father was like God on earth, I was terrified of God.

I was wondering where God was when I was being abused? I mean he totally ignored me when I was a child.

I prayed but nothing happened.

This was the guilt, the shame that I'd burn in hell. I thought that I must have deserved it. Why would God do this if I didn't deserve it? If there were a God he would have told the priests and nuns that what they were doing was wrong?

Over and over I went to confession, and each time I confessed that my brother and sister were touching me. The priest got angry and gave me a penance. I used to sit in Church and feel like the worst little girl in the world.

My Christianity didn't really help. At times I really wanted to die, but Catholic children then were taught what a terrible sin suicide was. I never felt part of the Church, or school, or anything else.

I was very angry with God, because I used to pray to him every day to help me. I felt abandoned and unloved by God.

I consciously try not to consider God chose this family for me because that would mean I have to consider too painful a reality. I want a God who doesn't do this.

Many children and adults gain strength and support in their faith. I have presented the difficulties. CSSA & MACSAS testify to the hundreds of survivors, both women and men, who struggle daily following abuse in a Christian home. We do need to consider these faith issues; it can be part of the suffering or part of the healing. For each person, it will be different.

There is a prayer, by Jim Cotter, we use a lot in our retreats. I want to read it because this prayer is very acceptable to survivors. Praying is difficult but this prayer relates well and powerfully to how many adult Christian Survivors feel, so it is a healing moment for many.

I cannot speak here about the Liturgical difficulties for survivors. I've written about that in my book but as you listen to this prayer, you can hear the non-threatening tone, and the lack of patriarchal language that helps the survivor listen and to be *with* the prayer:

Survivor, let the light of this candle be for you the light of God, as you meet the darkness in the deep place of your being.

See the hidden things, the creatures of your dreams, the storehouse of your forgotten memories, the gifts you never knew you had been given.

Touch the wellspring of your life, and hear your own true nature and your own true name.

Take the freedom to grow into that self, the seed of which was planted at your making.

Listen to the language of your wounds. Do not pine away in the pain of them, but seek to live from the depths of them.

Make the extent of your desolation the extent of your realm. Take into your arms your wounded, frightened child within.

Give her your adult caring strength, for your child has protected your gifts until the time they can be given and not be betrayed.

May your only wounds be these:

The wound we cannot avoid because we belong to one another and feel and hear the murmur of the world's pain,

The wound of a sense of compassion for others,

The wound of a sense of longing for God, the source of life and love deep within us and beyond us...

Thank You.

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