

From England

CHILDREN WHO KILL - HOW CAN WE FORGIVE THEM?

by Gwyneth Boswell

Violence and murder perpetrated by children and young people became high profile in the UK during the 1990s largely as a result of the murder, in February 1993, of two-year old James Bulger at the hands of two 10-year old boys. The blurred video image of this innocent toddler, hand in hand with his two young killers as they led him through a Liverpool shopping precinct to his ultimate death, is one which will probably remain in the minds of all who saw it for the rest of their lives. At that time little attempt was made to seek an explanation for the two 10 year-olds' behaviour. It seemed sufficient for the media to apply the label 'evil'. It also appeared acceptable for any hint of the welfare philosophy which applies to children under the age of 14 years in most other European countries to be firmly supplanted by the notions of punishment and retribution. It seemed uncontentious for the trial judge, when passing sentence, to threaten them by carrying into the Courtroom the black cap and white gloves- the traditional artefacts of the death penalty.

And so these two young children, publicly named and reportedly severely traumatised, came to be sentenced to detention during Her Majesty's Pleasure under Section 53 (1) of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 (now replaced by Section 90 of the Powers of the Criminal Courts [Sentencing] Act 2000) with, courtesy of the Home Secretary's executive powers at that time, a minimum of 15 years to serve, longer than the period they had yet lived. Understanding, reconciliation, forgiveness were the last words on anyone's lips. Any recognition of childhood and of children as separate, vulnerable beings with distinct needs appeared to have passed these young people by completely.

In the United States during 1999, a public outcry followed a multiple killing of their Colorado schoolmates by two 11 year old boys. No serious questioning of their behaviour was to be found in the media either in this country or, reportedly, in America. In the same year, in South Africa, petitions for the return of the death penalty (following Nelson Mandela's abolition of it, in the spirit of reconciliation after the brutal apartheid era) accompanied news of the (also brutal) gang-rape and stabbing to death of 14 year old Valentia Farmer, by a 15 year old boy together with four adults. In a study of child violence in South Africa, Wandile Zwane, a former Masters student at the University of East Anglia, observed that:

The tendency now is to emphasise the lurid details of the brutal acts committed by children. Glaringly missing from the media reports are the reasons behind this type of violent behaviour. (Zwane 2000)

I have thought and written about this reluctance to ask the question 'why?' for a long time, (Boswell 2000) and have come to the conclusion that it is the key to the apparent inability of so many people to forgive. It is a question which has the potential to yield answers that are too close for comfort. So what is the problem about asking this question 'why?'? I would suggest, firstly, that some of its roots lie in the wide-ranging sets of images of violence to which we as individuals and societies are exposed in our daily lives.

In parallel with images of violence perpetrated *by* children, which I have described, have developed other powerful media projections of violence perpetrated *upon* children in the form of child abuse - physical, sexual, emotional, organised or combinations thereof. These have impacted upon the populace as a consequence of public inquiry either because of child death within the family (well-known examples include Maria Colwell, Darren Clarke, Jasmine Beckford, Lauren Wright and Victoria Climbié) or the mismanagement of suspected child abuse (for example, Cleveland, Orkney, Nottingham, Rochdale); or abusive practices in children's homes (including East Belfast, Staffordshire, Leicestershire, Clwyd). According to the particular circumstances, those with professional responsibility, notably social services departments, have been criticised either for intervening too much or intervening too little. Public feeling

seemingly runs as high about the increase of state interference in domestic and family life as it does about that same state's failure to prevent the death or abuse of a child. Can this be because this highly emotive issue touches us all in some way? **We** have all been children, and many of us have children of our own. We have no training for parenthood other than the model provided by our own parents - a very hit and miss affair. We hope we are getting it right; it is very important to us not to be exposed when we get it wrong. Are we, perchance, collaborators in a collective subconscious cover-up which, fearing personal reprisal, looks the other way when it sees a suggestion of child abuse, and compensates by massive over-reaction and outrage when evidence of such abuse becomes unequivocal and public? Can there, to elaborate, be a connection between the baying for blood at the injury or murder of a child and our own reluctance to read important signs of risk and take preventive action? Does this help to explain the apparent inaction of 32 witnesses to the injury and distress of James Bulger as he walked the path to that infamous railway line?

The second set of images which are relevant to this issue are to be found in an examination of the cultural legitimacy given to violence across the world. As 'the global village' becomes more accessible, so it becomes increasingly apparent that violence, both physical and mental, is embedded in prevailing societal cultures. The study of history, in particular, reveals an almost universal culture of physical violence in the shape of militarism. As Charles Elliott, in his book 'Signs of our Times' says:

Children and nations have been brought up to believe that battles, and wars and military heroes, conquests, invasions, sieges and campaigns, constitute 'the history' of a people. (Elliott 1988: 125)

Likewise, regimes predicated upon political oppressions have both portrayed violence as a behavioural norm for children and engaged them in it. Child soldiers are the epitome of state sanctioned violence for the young. Conversely, the apartheid regime in South Africa prompted strikes and demonstrations by school children against 'Bantu Education' in 1976; the response of the authorities was to shoot them.

The contemporary primacy of violence is also demonstrated across the world in military and religious architecture, statues, art, music, press and television coverage of more than 300 wars since the end of World War II. Further, it is enshrined in the response of a range of justice systems to criminalised anti-social behaviour - that is to say torture and other forms of physical retribution, and capital punishment - all of which, in some countries, may be applied to children, despite wide ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly 1989). Similarly, reports from the Bureau of International Labor Affairs (1996, 1998) remind us that mental and physical violence to victims of child prostitution and child labour is to be seen not only in Asia, the Far East, Central and South America, as popularly imagined, but also in parts of the 'developed' world - Europe, North America and Australia. As Gelles and Straus (1998) have noted, physical violence between family members is frequently seen as normal for many societies. As an example, early in the new Millennium, the British Government took the decision not to make the disciplining of children by physical chastisement - that is, smacking - illegal.

At national and international levels, then, it can be argued that the cultural legitimacy of violence is reinforced to successive generations of children. This results in confusing models and messages for a young person moving through developmental stages and trying to gain a sense of identity and morality, against a complexity of interacting sociological, cultural, psychological and other influences. Studies of violent young people in a range of countries have shown how the oppressed may evolve into the oppressor and the victim and the offender become located in one single, damaged young person (for example, Widom 1989 in the United States; Boswell 1995, 1996 . In the UK: Wedge, Boswell and Dissel, 2000 in South Africa) Although there are clearly differences which relate to cultural and political variables, these studies show remarkably similar retrospective patterns. The following paragraphs describe one of them.

In England and Wales, I undertook a survey of the prevalence of abuse and loss in the lives of one -third of the population of offenders detained under Sections 53 (1) and (2) of the Children and Young

Persons Act 1933. Children in the Section 53(1) group were, like Robert Thompson and Jon Venables detained for murder; those in the Section 53 (2) group were detained for other grave crimes, such as attempted murder, manslaughter, arson and rape; all were sentenced between the ages of 10-17 inclusive (Boswell 1995,1996). A total of 72 per cent of respondents was found to have experienced abuse, divided as follows: emotional (28.5 per cent); sexual (29 per cent); physical (40 per cent); organised/ritual (1.5 per cent); combinations of abuses (27 per cent). A total of 57 per cent had experienced significant loss via bereavement (21 per cent) or cessation of contact, usually with a parent (43 per cent) and, in a small number of cases, both. In only 18 out of 200 cases studied were there no personally reported evidences of abuse and/or loss. In other words, the total number of Section 53 offenders who had experienced one or both phenomena was 91 per cent.

The total number who had experienced *both* abuse *and* loss was 35 per cent, suggesting that the presence of a double childhood trauma may be a potent factor in the lives of violent young offenders. Indeed there seems little doubt that child abuse and childhood experience of loss, when no effective opportunity is provided for the child to make sense of these experiences, constitutes unresolved trauma which is likely to manifest itself in some way at a later date. Many children become depressed, disturbed, violent or all three.

Not untypical of this group is Darren, now aged 32 who has so far served 15 years, 11 of them in adult prisons, for grievous bodily harm and attempted rape, and recounts a childhood which included the loss of his father when he was 3, regular beatings from that time by his mother, sexual abuse by his mother's lover, being locked in a dark cellar with rats, and sexual abuse followed by suicide attempts after he was placed in a children's home. George, now aged 23, was sentenced to be detained at Her Majesty's Pleasure for the physical and sexual assault of a woman belonging to a religious group he had joined for support, causing serious and lasting injury. He has served eight years so far, the last two in an adult prison. His father died when he was 5, and his stepfather subsequently physically and sexually abused him. It is not unusual, either, that the early abusive and otherwise traumatic backgrounds of these young men had not come

to light before their very serious offences, despite professional involvement with their families, in one case of a long-standing nature. Had abuse been recognised and the child and his family managed accordingly, it is possible that the long-term outcome for these young men might have been different. This is not to suggest that child abuse is the only potential cause of violent offending, or that every abused child becomes an offender, rather that abuse is sufficiently prevalent among such offenders to be regarded as a key factor which responsible professionals should have in mind as they engage with children and young people, along the dichotomous welfare/justice continuum.

A critique of issues and findings relating to childhood abuse points out that 'one reason why professionals did not believe that children were subject to physical or sexual abuse, or suffered from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) was simply that they never asked them!' (Yule, 1993:165). This was a trend our research team also observed from interviews and scrutiny of files for the Section 53 study.

In conclusion, I would suggest that an understanding of complex phenomena like violence and murder, as described in the foregoing account, can lead to forgiveness and reconciliation. The remorse of the perpetrators is also a vital ingredient but my own experience of interviewing children and adolescents in secure accommodation is that they are very frequently highly remorseful, a point they have usually been brought to with extremely skilled professional help.

It is, thus, incumbent upon researchers and professionals to ensure that serious information is made available about the factors which interact to increase the potential for violence involving children, as well as those which prevent children from becoming violent. It is also incumbent upon the media to publish salient rather than salacious material which explains rather than inflames. Society, further, has to take its part of the collective responsibility for the violence that goes on in its midst. The Church is an opinion leader whose voice is rarely heard in these matters. What can it do, indeed what does it wish to do about its founder's unerring example to forgive sinners even in the darkest corners of society?

There is here, I think, a huge and challenging message for all members of society about the need for knowledge, intervention, and compassionate understanding in the right place at the right time, for these violent youngsters who frequently constitute offender and victim in one single, damaged young person.

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The author has researched the backgrounds and treatment of children and adolescents who kill and commit other grave crimes over the last 12 years. Only through engaging with both the facts and their wider implications, she believes, can we begin to see what the Church's role in reconciliation might be.

