

Amish Sexual Abuse: What Happens When Community is More Important than Children?

Garments of 13 sexually abused children were exhibited last month at a convention of “Plain” churches, which include Amish, Mennonite and Brethren communities.

As reported by the [Associated Press](#), the display included dresses and head coverings for four- and five-year-olds, and even a onesie,

Investigative reporting about [the Amish](#), [Southern Baptists](#) and the [Catholic Church](#) all describe communities that rally around perpetrators while shaming and shunning victims.

Common denominators are a patriarchic structure, autocratic leaders who disdain governmental limits on their authority, secrecy, and intense pressure to conform:

Their leaders’ message to internal critics is that if you go outside the community for help you will be expelled from it.

It can’t have been easy for the church members who organized this exhibit. They stood with courage to say that the needs of children sometimes outweigh the interests of communities.

Listen to our podcast which includes how Indian Boarding Schools and homeschooling follow similar patterns.

Narrative for blog on Amish sexual abuse of children

The Associated Press article referenced in this blog gives an inkling of the limits of community. A much longer investigative reporting article also linked in the blog is the result of a year-long 2020 investigation by Sara McClure for a project sponsored by Cosmopolitan magazine and a nonprofit called Type Investigations.

The kinds of brutal sexual assaults and other abuse of children that McClure documents in the Amish community are really not surprising. The issues that she uncovers map pretty directly onto other communities and institutions that separate from or are otherwise outside the mainstream society. This includes contemporary political ideologies on the far right and left, and other Christian religious communities that emphasize purity of doctrine. In addition there are some elements that apply to other settings, including Indian boarding schools, clan-based societies, and homeschoolers. The latter ones are somewhat different and I will talk about them more in a bit.

The religious organizations and institutions share certain common features and beliefs that are predictive of family violence, which is a category that includes domestic assault, cruelty towards animals, and child maltreatment. They include chiefly a common belief that mainstream society has gotten things terribly wrong, and that it is necessary either to withdraw from it as far as practicable, or, in the case of evangelical political ideologies, attempt to radically reform it.

A corollary of this perspective is that the laws, norms, expectations of mainstream society and government are not legitimate and that a member of one of these belief systems is free to or even obligated to ignore them. In the case of religious communities at least this leads to a high premium on strong leadership and internal unity so the group can withstand the pressures and temptations from mainstream culture. This easily justifies suppressing any individual who points out flaws in their leaders' strategies, or their treatment of others, or any moral shortcomings. For individuals who won't fall in line that leads to either being ignored or sometimes formally shunned for a period of time, then ultimately ostracized or expelled from fellowship in the community.

The blog provides links to investigative reporting on the Amish, the Southern Baptist Convention and the Roman Catholic Church, but getting more information about child sexual and physical abuse in these denominations is also easy to find on the internet if you want to learn more.

What I'd like to focus on with these kinds of societal formations is that they virtually never work out for children. Their inner workings are generally hidden from public view. Its members unite to prevent the intervention of authorities. Any internal critics are generally intimidated into silence not just by the leaders but by community members in general. In this atmosphere, even children's mothers often fail to step in and protect them against abuse, and other members of the community, rather than being concerned for the victim, rally around the perpetrator and pressure the victim into silence.

Let's start out with the dimensions of religious tyranny. I have a solid if slightly rusty background in Christian theology and church doctrine, and can share without being concerned that I will get too far out of my depth that the so-called Plain churches, which include the Amish, Mennonites, the Brethren, the Hutterites, and other descendants of the Anabaptist movement, share certain doctrinal beliefs that will be somewhat obscure to most people inside let alone outside the Christian tradition. These include a belief that infant baptism is not valid and that a believer must confess her or his faith in Christ as an adult. More accessibly, there is a strong belief in nonviolence, along with a belief that true believers are citizens of the kingdom of God and are ultimately not subject to human authorities. This is the source of the belief for example that one should not take an oath in court. There is also a strong strain of pacifism, and generally a feeling that one should not participate in civil government. While these may not be principles that many people agree with, I would guess that most would say that they are in their own way admirable and not necessarily harmful to the common good.

Many would also say the same about the principles and guiding doctrines of the Roman Catholic church and the Southern Baptist Convention, or other religious groups they do not belong to.

People in these churches have gotten bogged down for generations in disputes about doctrinal points around issues like infant baptism, where disputants have consigned each other to damnation over distinctions so fine as to be perplexing for outsiders. It's easy to get lost focusing on these historic theological battles and miss the fundamental issue that the critical dimension of these groups is not their doctrines but their belief that they are separate from or in some ways above civil society. I maintain that to the degree that they feel justified in making

their own laws and regulations, they open the door to tyranny. While our democratic society may be struggling today in a number of ways, it is helpful to remind ourselves that humans have fought for hundreds if not thousands of years to create political structures that are based on law and treating individuals equally. As difficult as these have been to get right, in my view they are far better than a closed autocratic society.

The justification for having strong autocratic leaders that enforce unity is that they are necessary and to keep the excesses of society at bay. But it turns out that this structure leads to excesses of its own. The need to survive in what is perceived as a hostile environment results in strong pressures to conform to the requirements of the ruling elite. And when that elite abuses children, time and again we have seen that under pressure even the most sympathetic members of the community will abandon their efforts to protect children and will side with the abuser.

This combination of factors applies to any institution or community that sees itself as separate from and above the law. We have had many conversations for example with Hmong millennials who are deeply concerned about abuse within their community. As you may know, the Hmong are a clan-based society led by 17 clan leaders. The landscape that our millennial friends describe is one in which a child who is being mistreated or badly neglected is brought to the attention of one of the 17 Hmong clan leaders. The child's fate is in his hands. Often the parents are given a lecture and told not to continue their behavior. Of course, good luck with that. The alternative, which is to report child abuse to secular authorities, has a very high price. As it was told to me, persons who break ranks and report abuse to authorities are told, you have chosen the solution of the mainstream culture rather than the Hmong way, therefore you no longer are part of this community and you can no longer receive its benefits for continue enjoying relationships with people in it.

I think there are some obvious similarities in many of these problems, whether religious or community based, to the all-too-recent history of Indian boarding schools. They too are generally patriarchal. They were characterized by an evangelical zeal to make everyone conform to certain values and beliefs, and in the case of the boarding schools much of that zeal was based on religion. There was also secrecy and an ability to hide children from public view. As we all know the consequences for children were horrible abuses that sometimes ended in their deaths.

Sadly, contemporary political ideologies on both the left and right end of the political spectrum also have some features of these closed societies. There is a strong pressure to conform to a very specific doctrine. As with religious sects or cults it is necessary to hew to a detailed political doctrine and to express one's opinion in exactly the correct terminology or one is, to use the religious term, condemned to hell.

One the conservative end of the spectrum, there are some similarities but not complete with the homeschooling movement. Certainly the distrust and perhaps even disrespect for government that many homeschoolers express is a strong common theme in this group. I acknowledge that their concerns about the way the children are educated may in many cases be legitimate or at least understandable. But that has been used to justify not having government regulation on

their activities. In some states parents do not even have to notify schools that they are withdrawing the children. There is often no oversight on the curriculum or testing to ensure that children are actually learning. If you want to know more about that look up our [blog of July 6, 2021](#) describing last year's conference on homeschooling at Harvard Law School, you can look it up on our website under blogs and I have put a link to it in the written script for this podcast, which is available on this blog for May 13, 2022. You can also visit a thorough analysis of this by the Child Welfare Monitor at [simply childwelfaremonitor.org](http://simplychildwelfaremonitor.org), and also check out Homeschooling's Invisible Children at <https://hsinvisiblechildren.org>.

As with closed religious communities, children are made to be virtually invisible to the outside world. It is a perfect situation for someone who wishes to abuse them or is a predator. Of course not all homeschoolers abuse their children, and given that these children are hidden from society there is no way to know whether the rate of child maltreatment in these homes is different from the society overall. A 2018 study by the Connecticut Office of The Child Advocate shows that 36% of parents who withdrew their children from public school over a three-year period had a current or recent accepted child protection case. So while not all homeschoolers abuse their children, if one is a parent who does abuse the child homeschooling is a perfect way to avoid oversight by authorities. So again, the ability of adults to hide children from society as a whole allows them the opportunity to abuse children without any constraints. To me it's clear that homeschoolers either need to effectively police their ranks themselves, or allow government to play that role for them.

On the left, there is intense political pressure to support family preservation, which are the child welfare policies and practices designed to keep families intact almost no matter what the impact on children. Parents get chance after chance to address their abuse or drug dependency or whatever is making it difficult for them to parent effectively until the child's brain is damaged and their life prospects are seriously diminished, or the child is dead. All of this comes out of a deep political belief that virtually any interference by child protection into BIPOC families is unwarranted.

I think there are some similarities in many of these situations to the all-too-recent history of child abuse in Indian boarding schools. These institutions too are generally patriarchal. They were characterized by an evangelical zeal to make everyone conform to certain values and beliefs, and much of that zeal was based on religion. And there was secrecy and an ability to hide children from public view. As we all know the consequences for children were horrible abuses that sometimes ended in their deaths.

In all of the contemporary institutions, cultures and ideologies, the net result of these pressures, is that children can be freely abused, sex trafficked, sexually assaulted, and otherwise perped upon, with the narrow political or theological doctrines or community norms as a cover.

We suspect that it took an extraordinary amount of courage and determination for the church members at the Plain church convention to assemble and display the dresses of children who had been sexually assaulted in the Amish community. Similarly, it will take courage and determination to confront the political and cultural barriers that have been so strongly assembled to protect the adults in those communities, at the expense always of the children.

Looking at these various communities and institutions overall raises the question for me of why we can be generally in agreement that it is appalling and shameful that we as a society countenanced Indian boarding schools, while at the same time we are not very vigilant about what is happening to children who are being homeschooled or who are being killed by extreme family preservation policies and practices. I think in part this is because the politics of it all are confounding. We try to not be judgmental about belief systems that we ourselves do not hold, and to allow people to live in ways that not appeal to us. But this mindset, which is liberal not in the political sense but the philosophical sense, can make it possible to miss the obvious.

How can ensure that the interests of children are given appropriate consideration in communities and institutions that are, perhaps unwittingly, enabling perpetrators of child abuse?

I think it helps to acknowledge first that, in my experience at least, overwhelmingly people do want to protect children from extreme harm, I'm talking about the kind of harm that most individuals even those I talk with on the political fringes, would agree make it is necessary to remove children to a safe place. Given that there is this common ground, I suggest we simply make a habit of looking at political ideologies like family preservation, interest groups like homeschoolers, and any communities that separate themselves from the mainstream with a child-centric lens. By that I mean just to persistently ask questions about how a particular structure or institution or set of political principles or social policies and procedures work from the child's point of view? This may seem overly simplistic, but I believe consistently asking questions from a child's point of view whenever discussing public policy or practices in child welfare, or the rights and responsibilities of various institutions and communities, will in itself go a long way towards restoring an appropriate balance between the interests of communities and those of children.

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