

Friday Night Theology, 14th November 2008.

Blame

Isn't it clear, isn't it absolutely blindingly obvious that somebody was culpable? A child at the end of this perfect paper trail, a child died, and that's it, isn't it? Somebody was responsible because a child died. Had to be?

So said John Humphry's on this morning's [Today programme](#) as he interviewed a social work official regarding the death of [Baby P](#). At first sight, John's point seems entirely reasonable, and we are grateful that he takes to task those who might otherwise try to avoid responsibility. Yet, as I listened to the exchange, another thought came to me. Surely, the people who were responsible for this baby's death were the parents and guardians who had failed to care for him. Notwithstanding the fact that communities raise children, not individuals, it remains the case that the primary responsibility belonged to his carers.

Now having said that, because we know that people fail, or that some people will deliberately harm children, we have, as a society, put in an extra level of protection: our child protection services. And of course, it's perfectly possible that one of our professionals did fail, or that some system was inadequate. I have no idea whether or not that is the case. My disagreement with John is that he assumes that because a child died, that someone beyond that child's primary carers is to blame. I have worked in child protection services and child protection regulation, and the reality is that no matter how good our systems, and how competent and diligent the staff, bad things will still happen to some children.

We live in a far from perfect world and however much all of us would like to live in a society where these things don't happen, that is not the real world. It is simply impossible to create a society that is perfectly safe for every child all of the time. Maybe someone, somewhere did fail, but I want to challenge John Humphry's assumption that this is always the case, that someone other than the child's carers is always to blame.

I also wonder if the kind of assumption that John makes lies behind our desire to blame God when things go wrong in our life. Somehow, like John, we assume that a perfect world is possible with imperfect people, and therefore move rapidly to blame God when we encounter pain. Perhaps the reason that in Africa, despite their suffering, they're not so quick to point the finger is precisely because they don't assume that a perfect world is possible with imperfect people. And perhaps the reason for that is because they haven't bought into the lie that freedom from suffering is possible in this life. Yet because we have swallowed this deception, whenever we do experience hardship and distress, we immediately go looking for someone to blame, or someone to scapegoat. Maybe what we need is to rediscover that long-forgotten doctrine of the fall, and recognise that our world just is imperfect. One day, God is going to bring about his radical re-creation, but until then the reality for all of us is a life of trouble.

It strikes me that our African brothers and sisters know this, and that our problem in the West is that we've forgotten it. Now, none of this means we shouldn't strain every sinew of our body to change this world, to make it a better and safe place for our children. But precisely because we want it to be different, maybe our energies should be directed more towards its transformation than to apportioning blame – whether to social workers or to God.

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