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Taking care of children - a Christian Scientist's perspective: Rich Evans

Updated Jan 05, 2019; Posted Apr 20, 2017

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CHRISTIAN SCIENCE CHURCH.jpg

By Rich Evans

Children are society's tenderest concern. They're dear not only to their parents and families but to all good people everywhere.

The laws relating to their care matter enormously. It's often said, rightly, that the character of a society is judged by its care for children and others unable to care for themselves.

This is the perspective Christian Scientists bring to the recent news reports on the death of a child in a religious group noted for faith healing and opposition to medicine.

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The care of our children comes first for us. It isn't a second priority somewhere below "religious beliefs." I say this as a father and grandfather as well as a Christian Scientist. And I say it simply as a human being.

Christian Scientists have raised many hundreds of thousands of children over the century-plus since the church's founding.

We're a diverse group, but most of us, at least, aren't unyielding or unthinking people. Deeply as we value religious freedom, we recognize that it isn't absolute, but needs to be balanced with what's best for society as a whole.

Readers may be asking, "But aren't Christian Scientists 'noted for faith healing and opposition to medical care'?"

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Actually, we've always resisted the "faith healing" label. It presents such a narrow and dogmatic stereotype. The practice of prayer and spiritual healing, from our perspective, involves so much more than merely trying to "have enough faith" or accepting a fatalistic outcome as God's will.

The cornerstone of our healing practice and prayer is our conviction of God's unchanging love for every individual regardless of their status or faith, and our duty to express that love as fully as we can.

We certainly don't oppose the humanitarian efforts of doctors and nurses to care for all who seek their help. Our commitment to spiritual healing doesn't stem from a "church edict" or any fear that use of medical services or technology is somehow to be considered a sin. It comes from the actual healing we've

experienced in a vast number of cases, and the very different view this has given us of the deepest sources of wholeness and healing in human life.

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This experience - the actual healings that have taken place in so many people's lives - is the larger picture behind the laws pertaining to religious healing.

These laws weren't passed in a vacuum. They weren't the result of undue political influence. The two Christian Scientists in the Nixon White House often mentioned in this connection, John Ehrlichman and H.R. Haldeman, were embroiled in the Watergate scandal when the federal regulations relating to religious healing in the child protection laws were issued in 1974. Many states already had similar provisions well before that time.

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Whatever our mistakes, the great majority of Christian Scientists take the issues of law and responsibility very seriously.

We don't wish to see laws that have been passed to make room for responsible religious practice be used to shield neglect or abuse.

This was why our denomination did not support the current wording of the religious exemption in the Pennsylvania child protection statutes when it was passed in 1994. We were concerned that this wording, while intended to be supportive of religious families, might lead to the kind of tragedies and criminal prosecutions now at issue.

This is also why we haven't opposed efforts to change similar laws in other states. As I wrote to a church member who inquired about this last year: "...because of the evidence that children were not being rightly protected" under these laws, "we felt it would not be morally right at this time to oppose a change in the older accommodation."

On the other hand, the continuing history of healing in Christian Scientists' families, including healings of children when medical treatment has not been successful, should also be part of the moral equation reflected in the law.

"When anybody dies it affects a lot of people and it's painful," a Christian Scientist mother in Minnesota testified to her state legislature a quarter century ago. She had lost a child and been prosecuted. "As his primary protector," she stated, "I have my own special pain."

This mother wanted her neighbors to know the background behind her decisions. The child's uncle had been healed of degenerative deafness as a boy after a doctor had advised putting him in an institution for the deaf. The child's step-grandmother, a college professor, had been more recently healed of blindness after an accident caused what specialists considered irreparable damage to both eyes. The specialists had said she would never see again.

The mother herself, a Christian Scientist since childhood, had experienced many healings through this conscientious spiritual practice. "It was this lifetime of experience," she said, "that made it natural" for her to turn in the same direction for the care of her family.

Christian Scientists today are very aware of how much we have to learn in this healing practice. We're mindful of, and grateful for, the long traditions of pluralism and respect in Pennsylvania through which people of good will from all backgrounds work out democratically what's best for society - for the children, most of all.

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