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LOSS AND BEREAVEMENT IN CHILDREN

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Abstract

This thesis argues that loss and bereavement have a profound effect upon children and that although children are generally valued by society, their innermost needs are often overlooked.

Secular and Christian interpretations of the reasons for having children are deployed to identify the value of ritual and the place of the family and of God, suggesting that having children is a vocation and that children should be regarded as gifts rather than givens.

This proposal is further developed by examining spirituality and the process of faith and spiritual growth in children according to their life's experience and environment. The argument continues with an examination of the essentially Christian problem of evil and suffering, suggesting that the virtue of patience is a significant resource. Through a progressive exploration of a variety of theodicies, a general identification with the experience of life is made.

By identifying the process of grieving and attendant reactions to both death and significant loss, particularly in children, a means of hope and guidance is offered through the Christian hope of resurrection to eternal life.

The objective of this thesis is to expose the basic needs of human nature when confronted with loss and bereavement, and to suggest the resources available to enable children to communicate and address their needs, with the aim of providing a sense of hope through suffering, so guiding them towards healing and wholeness.

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INTRODUCTION

No-one is immune to loss or bereavement. They are facts of life. People react differently to them depending upon their experience, personality and their communication skills. To experience loss or bereavement is to commence the process of grieving. How we work through our grief may determine how we react to loss or bereavement in the future. The process of grief normally evokes a multitude of emotions. It is important to have opportunities to express those emotions if the person grieving is to emerge from the process with a healthy attitude towards life, loss and death.

Children are often overlooked in situations of loss and bereavement for a variety of reasons. For example, they may be considered to be too young to understand, and adults may be embarrassed to reveal their own grief to children, or believe that they must protect children from such experiences.

In this thesis I explore the importance of valuing and respecting children within society, whether or not they are members of nuclear families. I suggest that children do possess and develop spirituality, looking at how this helps them to relate to others and to their belief systems, whether they are religious or not. Children learn from both their own experiences and from what they observe in others, very often from significant people in their lives, such as their parents and those closest to them. I therefore examine some theories of theodicy in an attempt to show that despite the experiences of suffering and

pain, and the confusion and doubt that arise through them concerning the omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience of God, there is still hope for the future and that there is life beyond suffering. I consider the practice of patience, being one of the Christian virtues, introducing it to the arena of theodicy as an important part of the process towards a spirituality of loss.

Children have many experiences of loss and bereavement, both minor and major. I present some of the experiences and demonstrations of resulting grief reactions in children, suggesting how we may approach some of the variety of situations which may arise, in order to enable children to both express themselves effectively and to progress through their grief to a healthy conclusion. This may include helping them towards an understanding not only of suffering and pain, but also of the Christian resurrection hope. The language used, together with any other means of communication with children, is therefore vital if they are to gain even the simplest understanding of what Christians believe concerning life after death.

It is my belief that children should be valued and respected as unique individuals for their own sake, and also because their childhood experiences may play a large part in their formation as adults, thereby affecting future society and society's behaviour and reactions to loss and bereavement.

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WHY CHILDREN MATTER

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CHAPTER 1

1.1. WHY DO CHILDREN MATTER?

It is an interesting exercise to enquire why it is that having children matters to us so much. The results of such an enquiry reveal a variety of different responses, and some of these will be detailed later. However, few, if any, of the responses seem to adequately explain why it is so important to us to have children. Further questions are prompted: What is the place of children within the family? Of what value is the family? What is the Christian response to the question of children and family values?

By exploring these further questions, I hope that it will be possible to have a better understanding of any links which may exist between the place of children within the family, with the wider community in which the family is set, and any relation between loss and behaviour both in the home and in the community.

Children are often overlooked when a family experiences bereavement or loss, be it through death, prolonged illness or disability, sexual or physical abuse, parental separation and divorce, or the effects of a geographical relocation. The needs and feelings of the children may be overlooked because the grieving adults are so involved with their own feelings of loss. Children are amazingly adaptable and resilient, and such factors too often lead parents and others to believe that the children are not being affected by the loss. It seems to be a common thought that children simply are not able to understand about death or loss.

Adults very often find it difficult to acknowledge that children need to be allowed to grieve and to express their grief in a way appropriate to their age. It is, however, vitally important for the healthy development of children that they be given the opportunity to express their grief and to have their feelings and emotions taken seriously. The way

death and loss is treated in childhood may have a profound affect on how it is dealt with in adulthood.

The problem of how to approach death and loss with children seems to begin with the difficulty of not knowing quite what to say to them. How do we explain what has happened in terms which they will be able to understand? How do we help them to express their feelings in a safe and appropriate way? The easy option is to say nothing, avoid the subject altogether and pretend that the children are not involved. Another way is to tell the children unconvincing stories. If we tell a child that Granny has gone away and will not be coming back, what are they to think: was it their fault that Granny went away? Was it something they said? Perhaps it was their bad behaviour that made Granny go away? The truth is often painful but is far preferable to telling stories which will only have to be corrected in later years.

It seems to be a common adult reaction that we have to protect children from the idea of death. During the planning of the building of a new church in a town centre, close to a residential area, local residents objected on the grounds that their children should not have to witness the funeral procession. They did not want them to have to see the hearse and the coffin, or to see people in a distressed state. In effect, the adults were trying to shield the children from the realities of life, so helping them to grow up with false perceptions and heightened fears about life and death.

Children form an integral part of society and relationships. They are bound to be affected by loss of any description. How they deal with that loss will depend partly on their level of understanding and upon what they have been taught by word and experience. Bereavement from any cause is a process to be gone through, it is not a momentary event and applies as much to children as it does to adults. For Christians it can include the added dimension of trying to understand the loss in terms of a loving

God who seems at worst to have abandoned us, or at best seems not to care that we are suffering.

Life and relationships lead us to the belief that children are essential. We have a duty to care for them, to teach them and to love them in the best possible way. It should be our concern to let the children know that they do matter.

1.1.1. Why Do We Have Children?

This question would seem to imply the involvement of morality. It seems that the majority of young adults are passionate about their desire to have children, yet are unable to adequately articulate the reason why or justify the significance of their strong yearning to have children. Typical explanations for having children are[1]:

Children help us to be less lonely.
Children give meaning or completeness to life.
It is an experience we do not want to miss out on.
They are our hope for the future.
Children are fun.
Children continue the family name.
Children are the expression of a couple's love.
Children keep a marriage together.
Family and society expect children.
We ought to have children.
Children are something we naturally want.

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[1] Similar lists may be found in S. Hauerwas Truthfulness and Tragedy, Notre Dame, UNDP, (1977), p.150, and Suffering Presence, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, (1986), p.145, and Resident Aliens, Abingdon, Nashville, (1989), p.60.

There appears to be a general attitude which assumes that when these comments are made, they speak for the majority - "Having children is just something we do". This would seem to imply that there is little or no element of choice in the matter, that it is the 'normal' thing to do, it is natural, we need children to perpetuate the human race. The implication would therefore seem to lead to the recognition of a social pressure to have children, almost an obligation. Accordingly, the logical response to any who do not submit to this social pressure, for whatever reason, are considered to be unusual. It is the normal thing for young adults to have children, so those who do not are not considered as normal, and can often find themselves isolated by family and social reactions to their childlessness which may result in them applying to adopt children.

Society, it seems, expects people to have children, and so those who do are 'normal', and those who do not are 'not normal', and may even be described as 'unnatural'. These words 'normal' and 'natural' are associated with an ethic based on objectivity, facts and principles. The use of these words implies a universal law of behaviour. Those who use these words may claim them to be descriptive, but they very quickly become prescriptive. Hence, those who do not comply with 'normality' become 'unnatural' and so become in danger of either being forced to amend their ways, or of being made to feel odd and peculiar. People who choose not to have children, or who are unable to have children, become labelled as 'unnatural'.

1.1.2. Culture

The notions we have regarding children are dependent upon our culture. For example, for Orthodox Jews it is a religious requirement to have children. Being a Jewish parent usually entails the male parent's role as one acting as an officer of the community to initiate the child into the rites and practices of the community.

In modern western culture, parenthood is more problematic, since much of our ideology is focused on freedom, allowing individuals to be freed from particular expectations. The nature of the family has changed as a result of the withdrawal of education, healthcare and leisure from the family unit. In their place, parents tend to invest a great deal of emotion in their children, but this seems to leave little or no room for the exercise of parental control, which in the ideology of freedom may look like masked authoritarianism.

Our language is grounded in concrete expectations of the community, so "We just do" may be an acceptable response to the question "Why do we have children?". The response seems to be based upon expectations, not simply upon our views on children and what is involved in parenting, but also largely on what we expect the child to be like. For instance, the birth of a child with learning difficulties or physical difficulties, is regarded by some as unfair. Their child has not turned out as they had expected - but then how many children do? We cannot control the outcome of our children's lives.[2] The question is, then, much broader than how we receive the 'unexpected' child, or what we expect the child to be like. It leads to the question "Why do we have children?" and so "Why do children matter?".

1.2. SECULAR INTERPRETATIONS

Freud claimed that some psychological problems in adults stem from childhood. Since adults have the responsibility for our living structures in society, for politics, sociology etc., it is important that all people are helped to live in as healthy a way as possible, both mentally as well as physically. If some adult phobias and problems stem from bad childhood experiences, then it follows that both for the good of the children and for the

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[2] See S. Hauerwas Truthfulness and Tragedy, pp.153-154.

good of society in general, it is important that such childhood experiences are openly and sensitively faced, preferably at the time of the experience or very shortly afterwards.

The effects of relationships between adults and children, and between siblings, is becoming more noticed as being important in the development of children, for instance, in the area of bereavement, by recognising the opportunities to improve the life of a bereaved child. Bereavement care reduces both suffering and risk of damage into adulthood. The distinction between bereavement and grief should be made. Bereavement is a state of deprivation, whereas grief is a subjective emotional experience.

1.2.1. Rituals

Historically, in this country as in many other cultures, children were included in death rituals. Death was treated as an everyday occurrence and consequently was part of life. Death was not ignored, and children were not kept away from the experience of witnessing death and its associated rituals. The deceased was laid out and dressed by the family in their home, and children took part in this. The deceased would remain in the home for family and friends to visit and pay their last respects. Today, certainly in this country, technology has taken over all the practical care of dead bodies. The family are rarely involved in the practical tasks necessary immediately after death.

With the change in our practice of practical care for our deceased loved ones, it is possible that we are making our children more vulnerable to wild and fantasy notions concerning death and dying. Instead of seeing death first hand, they tend to be 'protected' from death, kept at a distance from it, and so very often their experience of death is restricted to such as video games, television and films, and their family pets. As a result, many children will compare what they perceive to be death from their own

observations. It is this, perhaps, which has led to present-day children becoming more and more unable to cope properly with grief. Having shielded children from all opportunities to witness death as part of this life, adults often fail to accept that children do grieve, and that they need to grieve. Children will, especially when given the opportunity and encouragement, create their own rituals through the use of photographs, or the personal possessions of the deceased. Mourning rituals are as helpful for children as they are for adults.

> Rituals mark transitions in our lives, confirming our identity within our social and cultural group and regulating human interaction. They are stable but not interchangeable: they represent our collective memory or inheritance, but are gradually transformed over time. The last decade has seen an increasing flexibility, with rituals spontaneously developing or being adapted to meet important social or emotional needs.[3]

Our rituals at such times as the death of a loved one serve as important religious, social and psychological functions, helping us to have a shared spiritual meaning for death which can be integrated into our belief system. Through rituals we can see the support and care which is so important to us at times of bereavement. Witnessing such care reminds us that should we have similar experiences we too may be helped in the same ways.

At times of loss and bereavement rituals give a sense of form and order to a chaotic situation, and so are especially helpful after a sudden death where there may be practical, social and emotional difficulties.

Children are at most risk of future damage from a bereavement if they have been previously vulnerable to bereavement; where there has been an experience of a non-natural death; if they have witnessed death; where there is lack of family support;

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[3] A. Dyregrov, "Children's participation in rituals", Bereavement Care 15:1 (1996), pp.2-4.

where the death causes multiple associated changes in their lives, such as moving house and changing schools.

It is important that children are enabled and encouraged to grieve. We can learn from other cultures, such as some African ones, where children actively participate in the death rituals. So often, the child's misconceptions concerning dying and death lead to distortions and fears in adult life. As a result, we have a society which is afraid even to speak of death, and so there is a general failure to accept that it is possible to prepare for death, and to die a good death. There exists poor education and training on death and grief with professionals such as nurses and doctors, counsellors and teachers. It is vital that we have a more efficient co-ordination and dissemination of knowledge, more support structures, and a greater awareness of the value and benefits of children, and hence later as adults and society in general.

In the same way that rituals aid adults in the grieving process, children, too, benefit from the security and form of ritual in bereavement. By participating in rites of passage children learn that they are not alone, and that they are supported by traditions and rituals which help to give understanding, comfort and some measure of meaning to their loss. Provided children are adequately prepared with information concerning what they might expect to see, they can best be helped by being given the choice of whether to participate in any or all of the rituals, and they will then approach their choice from an informed position. However good the preparation and support of the children, the viewing of a dead body in the Chapel of Rest may still be a strong experience for them. They may need time to be able to ask questions and to express their own feelings. Clearly, if the body has been badly damaged then it may not be wise to encourage to participate in such a ritual. When it is felt to be appropriate, children should be given the opportunity to take part in death rituals, since they have just as much right to be included as do adults. If they are excluded, then they are denied the opportunity of being part of one of the family's most important occasions. Rituals, and participation in

them, are significant throughout life, and so the inclusion of children in them is essential for their future healthy development.

1.2.2. Negative Reactions to Loss

Whilst there appear to be few statistics to support this, it is becoming more noticeable that young males in particular react aggressively to situations of loss in their lives. Many convicted abusers of children were themselves abused as children. Children who have no grief counselling are more likely to encounter difficulties in coping with stressful situations in adulthood. For example, it is interesting to note that Roosevelt, Napoleon, and Hitler all lost a parent when they were children.

Again, statistics are sparse, if not non-existent, but it would appear that male babies are more physically vulnerable than females. They tend to be more fragile and so need greater care and attention from their mothers for the first years of their lives - hence the phrase 'tied to mother's apron-strings'. The 'cutting' of the 'apron-strings' tends to occur towards the early teens, when the young male has become sufficiently strong and self-sufficient to no longer depend upon mother. Hence the embarrassment and reluctance of young males to give any public display of love and affection towards their mothers. This being so, it would be understandable that if the relationship between son and mother during the early formative years were prematurely ended, say by the son being sent away to boarding school, or by the death of the mother, or by the mother leaving to live elsewhere, the young male will have had his security and support removed. He will, perhaps, feel vulnerable and need to exert self-protection - and hence the 'stiff upper lip' attitude. It is also highly likely that he will be very angry at the loss of his mother's support and protection. If these reactions are not accepted for what they are, and if the youngster does not receive appropriate counselling help, then it stands to

reason that emotional and possible psychological disorders are likely to affect the boy into adolescence and adulthood.

It is possible that if this theory is proved correct, then it could explain, at least partly, if not largely, the increase in violence, aggression, abuse and vandalism in today's society. For with ever-increasing incidences of loss in divorce and separation, with society's general attitude to 'protect' children from death, and with a more mobile population necessitating more house moves and school changes, children are increasingly vulnerable to loss and bereavement. Without appropriate help, their grief will manifest itself in ways unacceptable to society, particularly in anger.

The Probation Service has done some research in this area, and, with a broad definition of loss (akin to deprivation), can see links with numerous criminal offences. Specific forms of loss do tend to lead to specific forms of offending (as in sexual abuse). Research studies reported in 1993 concerning the social circumstances of young offenders revealed some interesting results:

> The sample in the study was consistent with a national demographic profile of offenders under supervision in terms of sex, racial origin and distribution between age groups. Women comprised 11% and racial ethnic minority groups 12% of the sample.
>
> Only 22% of the sample were living on their own. The other 78% were living in a range of family relationships, of which 20% were in their own nuclear family and the rest were living together in a family group or with friends. 78% of women had children living with them. This was true of only 41% of men. There was a high incidence of marriage/relationship breakdown. For example, this had been experienced by 36% of the 23 year olds in the sample.
>
> Although 46% of the sample were living with parents at the time, this figure masks much moving around, and links were found between homelessness and custody; 25% of the sample remanded in custody expected to be homeless or in bed and breakfast accommodation on release. The study reveals offenders leaving home at a very early age, the peak age being sixteen. 30% had left home when even younger.

> On leaving home 19% went into custody and 27% into care. Of those who had left home 40% had their first court appearance in either the same year, the year before or the year after. The circumstances of leaving home appeared to be associated with the onset of offending or becoming identified as an offender.[4]

Reasons for leaving home were almost entirely negative, revealing serious family conflict, including physical and sexual abuse by parent or step-parent; several partnerships of parent figures, overcrowding and financial problems. The picture is one of complex family relationships and personal circumstances generating stress and insecurity. There was also a considerable amount of ill-health including physical disability, chronic addictions, and also the stress of caring for a disabled person in the home.

> . . . . The study illustrates the chronic uncertainty in the background of young offenders, many of whom lack parental guidance at a particularly vulnerable time of their lives as they make the transition to adulthood.
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> . . . . . The transient nature of offenders' lifestyles emerged as being significant. The stressful pressured or destructive aspects of family life associate with a great deal of moving around and living temporarily.
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> . . . . . Key factors are family breakdown, poverty, oppression, addiction and local culture.[5]

This report clearly adds weight to the links being seen between loss in the lives of young people and unacceptable social behaviour.

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[4] G. Stewart and J. Stewart, Social Circumstances of Young Offenders under Supervision, Association of Chief Officers of Probation, (February 1993).

[5] G. Stewart and S. Stewart, Social Circumstances of Young Offenders under Supervision, pp.iii-iv.

1.3. CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATIONS

1.3.1. The Family of God

Peter Selby asks "Is the Church a family?" Within the Christian Church we make frequent reference to the 'church family', but is that a correct term? Clearly not in terms of blood-relatives and nuclear families. If we are considered to be the children of God, is there a sense that as siblings we are indeed members of the family of God? When we state that the purpose of the family is to enable people to come together to procreate and nurture, providing mutual support and loyalty, then clearly the local church congregation cannot be called a family, nor less the Church Universal.[6] Perhaps a more accurately descriptive term is 'community', which embraces large numbers of nuclear families, extended families and single parent families, producing to some extent its own cultural identification, and sometimes loyalty. When understood in this way, the 'Family of God' may be seen as the faith community within which these family groups may both receive and give support and teaching in all aspects of life, in much the same way that most nuclear families seek to do within their family unit. It is an arena where all people, both adults and children, are valued and respected and where they learn from each other and from God through the teaching of the Bible. Under such conditions the development of spirituality in children is going to be predominantly linked to religion, but we must not make the mistake of believing that religion has a monopoly on spirituality.

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[6] S.C. Barton, (editor) The Family in Theological Perspective, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, (1996), pp.151-168.

1.3.2. The Place and Value of the Family

It is possible for the family to become the means whereby we can escape from the harsh realities of our economic life. Whether or not that is so, it does seem, from previous observations made concerning the question about why we have children, that children have become the main rationale for families, and are seen as an end in themselves. This seems to add reinforcement to the idea that the family is the primary institution for sentiment and tenderness in society. If that is so, then the frequent breakdown in family life may partly explain why society has become so harsh, aggressive and disjointed.

Hauerwas[7] suggests that the family is the last haven of trust separating and protecting us from society, and as such is the primary means of our own self-identification, for example, the fast-fading notion of the father-figure in an heroic role as the breadwinner supporting his family. Hauerwas says that our family life is so significant because it is different from our community life. Family life seems to command loyalty in a way that community life does not.

Our notions of family seem to have changed recently, being, apparently, no longer the bearers of tradition, be it national, tradition, religious or family. Children in general seem no longer to be raised by the family to be worthy of maintaining and keeping alive the work of their ancestors. More attention is given to individuals being given the opportunity to make their own choices when they become adult, even such as to choose whether or not they are to be religious. If we try to impose our individual opinions on our children than we may be accused of violating our children's autonomy.

The moral ideal of society seems to have become the requirement for people to become autonomous, self-sufficient and free - meaning that we should not be dependent upon

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[7] S. Hauerwas, A Community of Character: toward a constructive Christian social ethic, Notre Dame, Indiana, (1986), pp.167-8.

the past or upon other people. Freedom implies having no ties and seems to be something which is reinforced by the demands of our economy. Many employers expect and need their employees to be increasingly more flexible and mobile. Such mobility can create enormous tensions and disruptions within family life, both for the immediate family, and for the extended family. Family interaction and traditions are put at risk and possibly damaged because of extended or permanent removal to another geographical location.

It may be for the family unit which is relocated away from the wider family that their thoughts about what the family is, and what family obligations exist, are challenged and changed. To be part of a family, in the past traditional sense, is to accept certain limitations which have been laid down, rather than having been chosen, such as family loyalty. Our sense of duty and commitment to our family, our parents, our brothers and sisters, is questioned and challenged. We might say that it is a limitation which we must accept, morally, since it might be claimed that we have benefited from it, and so in some way, perhaps, we owe them something.

It is difficult to hold to this argument because it cannot explain how or why we may have an obligation to our parents or other relatives, even when we do not consider them to be our friends. This argument does not help us to find the reason why we decide to become parents. It would, perhaps, be contradictory to have a child if our personal ethic is one of autonomy, since most people would consider it to be immoral to use another person for one's own self-satisfaction. It could also be considered irrational as the presence of a child may pose a threat to our autonomy.

We do not choose to be part of a family. We do not choose our relatives. They are relationships into which we are born. The family can be seen as a means to bind us to time, to identify us as historic beings.

There seems to be a general assumption that marriage and the family are necessary for our personal fulfilment, but surely this is not necessarily so? Marriage and family are, or should be, just as much vocation, as is the choice to remain unmarried and childless.

Most of us have the opportunity to have children, so it may be that we need to examine any moral significance attaching to our willingness to have them. We may choose to have children, or we may not. Our reasons can be multiple and complex or very simple.

Families may be thought of as small communities within the larger community we call society. Interaction between the two may necessitate the family being largely dependent upon the wider community for its continued existence and growth through such as employment, politics and law and order.

1.3.3. Vocation

Within any relationship there exists some element of power and control. That may not necessarily be a bad thing, but if misused, can lead to mistrust, violence and fear. From a Christian perspective, the world is seen in a particular way. Essentially, the world is seen as good, but tainted by sin. This is reflected in our relationships where we sometimes experience a lack of trust, which, as has been said, may lead to fear. A typical human reaction to fear is to believe that our security can be attained by controlling others around us. If we are not able to do that, then we perceive, rightly or wrongly, that our security is being threatened. In a world which assumes that control is in the hands of humankind, there will be evidence of distrust, fear, violence and untruthfulness.

Christians recognise that God's sovereignty is over all creation. Accordingly, security does not rest in being able to control others or the world. Christian lives are not based

upon fear, but upon love and trust. However, being fallible, Christians often get it wrong and are not immune to fear, distrust or even violence. Perhaps it is because Christians are fallible that there is a desire to escape imperfection, to step out of time and to speak of salvation in terms of other than historical. Any such discussion may bypass the human community that salvation creates. We must remember, however, that we are not saved from something, but saved to something. That 'something' is the eschatological community, the new people of God who live, not under the rule of humanity, but under the rule of God. Salvation may be a necessary part of community.

> Salvation does not extract humans from time but restores them in a new time.[8]

If, as has already been suggested, families bind us to time, then our children identify us with an historic time. Generations of our families are linked through history. Individuals and families, as well as wider communities, are part of history. Consequently, our ethics, our Christian ethics, must not be tempted to explore the subject of salvation as timeless, but apply it to history, to time, to people, and to the ordinary triviality of family life. The Christian understanding of having children is bound to history. In New Testament times, complete service to the Kingdom was required. Marriage and the family were not necessarily considered to be the norm for Christians. The Christian community was expected to grow as a result of evangelism, conversions and baptisms from without the community, rather than through marriage and child-bearing from within. Marriage and family may then be seen not as a natural or moral necessity, but a vocation, a sense of calling rather than of choice. Accordingly, it may be seen that the Christian community, that is the Church, and God's rule, transcends the family. Christian parents are agents of the Christian community and to that community's commitments, history and undertakings. They raise their children accordingly, but not simply to conform with what they as parents think is right.

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[8] S. M. B. Wells, 'How The Church Performs Jesus' Story: Improvising on the theological ethics of Stanley Hauerwas', Durham University Ph.D thesis, (1995), p.182.

Marriage and having children is, for Christians, largely a matter of identification with and being part of a community. Thus the Church has a protective role which is exercised not so much through the child's rights, but by appealing to the loyalty of both parents and child. The Christian community is responsible for their children and it is a corporate responsibility which surrounds and supports the parents' responsibility.

1.3.3.1. Children as Gifts

When considering children as 'gifts' it is important to distinguish 'gift' from 'given'. A 'given' is that which is necessary, a situation which cannot be changed. It is understood that this is the way things are and so must be accepted. When speaking of 'gift' we are referring more to the notion of vocation. With 'gift' there are more options. We may choose to receive or decline and the situation is not static. To receive a 'gift' gives us the option of working with it, alongside it, using and developing it, seeing the positive aspect of future possibilities rather than viewing it as something which will remain unchanged.

Our reasons for having children depend largely upon our perceptions of the need for children; how, or if, we see them as individuals and how we see our human role in the world. Having mentioned the idea that some people feel the need to be in control of others, this notion will now be followed through from the Christian perspective.

We have established that some Christians choose to have children and may do so out of a sense of vocation. It is also the aim of Christians not to control the world, since that is God's domain. We then arrive at the conclusion that we do not own or possess the world, but that it is a gift to us from God over which we have custody. In much the same way children are not our possessions, but our gifts.

It has been suggested earlier that however our children develop, they are rarely, if ever, what we have expected or perhaps hoped for. We are not able to control how our children will turn out. They may bring us happiness, but they may also bring us suffering and grief, all of which are outwith parental control. When seen as gifts rather than possessions, our children do not simply supply us with our needs and desires, but rather they create needs, they teach us how to be: they lead us to recognise the need to love each other. We are drawn to love our children even though they may not be as we would wish them to be.

Many parents make sacrifices for their children. That in itself is not wrong, but it can lead parents to make strong claims of ownership of their children. The children may be made to feel that they owe something to their parents because they appear to be products of their parents' choice. This can be seen when something goes wrong in the child's life and the parents feel they are to blame. In shouldering the blame for themselves, the parents are placing the child under their control. Whenever a situation appears to be out of our control, whether or not it is linked with our children, there is a temptation to bring the situation under our control by using force or violence, sometimes against our children. However, if we are able to understand our children as gifts then we can begin to discover the gift that is our own life.

In our attempt to understand why we have children, it is perhaps helpful to understand that within the world there are 'gifts' and there are 'givens', as described earlier. For Christians, the rule of God is a 'given' and all else is potentially a 'gift'. Christian ethics is largely about receiving as a 'gift' what might be presented by some as a 'given', for example, our lives in this world. There are those who might accept the world as a 'given' and simply work with that. Seeing the world as a 'gift' opens up new horizons. We learn to live our lives as our own and not as possessions of the world and so determined by other 'givens'. 'Givens' prompt acceptance whereas 'gifts' lead us to

respond in a creative way. Accordingly, the Christian view of having children is one of vocation, not as a 'given' necessity, and so children are seen as a gift.

1.3.3.2. Handicapped Children

Another question often posed is "Why does God permit us to have disabled children?" The thinking behind the question would seem to be that a disabled child is not what we had either hoped for or expected, and that they are in some way unacceptable to us. Depending upon the type of disability the child may not possess a sense of rationality or self-sufficiency that we might expect to see in what we would call a normal, healthy child. Whilst it could be argued that children in general are not rational or self-sufficient, both rationality and self-sufficiency are developing in the child. For example, a child learns to feed itself, although still dependent upon adults to provide the food.

Disabled, or differently abled, children seem to be full of 'givens', again exposing our desire to control our children's lives. It seems to be a need in many parents of differently abled children to see their children as being totally dependent upon them, that what they and their children have to work with is a 'given'. The child may be considered to be completely dependent upon their parents, family and to some extent the authorities under whose care they fall. This may be an error of judgement, based on the parental need to control the child's life, perhaps in some way to make amends for the situation their child is in through no fault of their own. It is often as a result of the parents' misguided sense of guilt and shame at bringing a differently abled child into the world.

Communication is often difficult, as with children with cerebral palsy, for instance. Yet we now know that many children with such a condition are highly intelligent, but lack

co-ordination and communication skills. Time and again we are shown examples of children so affected and how they have overcome their physical difficulties with a great deal of bravery and persistence. The assumption tends to be made that because a child, or adult for that matter, has some physical or mental disability, they are not normal, since the majority of people are not like that. The minority are therefore seen as abnormal and something that we have to keep under our control. There may be feelings of anger and injustice at the sense of loss experienced because the child born is not as had been expected. Siblings may also experience that sense of loss in terms of possibly not having a brother or sister with whom they can play as they had expected to be able to do. If the parents' response to the disabled child is one of disappointment, shock, horror, abnormality, and that their lives with the child are a 'given' to be worked around, or abandoned completely, as some would choose to do, then siblings are highly likely to respond in the same way, either consciously or subconsciously, following the pattern and example led by their parents. As the differently abled child grows and develops, they may develop a sense of abnormality and feel an acute sense of loss themselves, simply because that is how they have been received. Their handicap tends to be compounded by the feelings that most marginalised people experience of being excluded, worthless and unloved.

When seen as 'gifts', whether the child is differently abled or not, they are seen as something valuable, valid and worthwhile with something to offer. Viewed as 'gifts', disabled children are seen as 'differently abled', which is a positive rather than a negative response. Despite all the many difficulties which may face the handicapped child, there are triumphs too, both for the child and their family. A four year old boy who had never spoken became indignant when his grandmother tied an apron round him to keep him dry as he played at the kitchen sink. He was so incensed that he shouted "Take it off". The same boy in his teens mastered the art of tying his shoelaces. His mother thought that to be as great a triumph as her other children passing their GCSE's.

Having a differently abled child may cause the parents to have a negative rather than a positive feeling toward their child, particularly in the early years of the child's life. It is often not until several years into the life if the child that positive attributes are recognised. The child's personality and gifts may emerge slowly and can perhaps be evaluated in retrospect. A differently abled child brings out qualities in their families in a way that would not happen with other children. Parents, siblings and grandparents may all share the task of caring and attending to the child. Such co-operation between generations requires much patience and strength of character, understanding and humour. Some or all of these may not have developed had their situation been different, yet all, including the differently abled child, will benefit.

A distinguished Oxford don had a grandson with learning difficulties, a term which used to be referred to as mental handicap:

> . . . a crushing blow, you would think, for one who had moved all his life in circles where intellectual achievement counted for everything. Yet there grew up between the eminent scholar and the pathetic little boy a most rare and precious friendship: and the two of them would go off together hand in hand by bus or train to attend organ recitals and visit cathedrals. An oddly assorted pair, but both the richer for their companionship.[9]

When we see such children as special gifts, we are reminded why it is that we have children: not for them to be successful or beneficial for the good of others, but because we are all members of God's people who are called to live together in God's time and not in our own time, and that we all have something to offer. We do not choose to have differently abled children, but whether or not they take a place in our lives and society depends upon our response to them. The development and feelings of well-being among differently abled children are more likely to be positive if our response is to want to 'live with them' rather than to 'do for them'. That means creating and building relationships, a mutual interdependence and recognition of each other's gifts.

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[9] N. Collinson and D. Matthews (editors), Facing Illness, Epworth Press, London, (1986), p.48.

1.3.4. Children and Hope

Christian hope lies within our children who are seen as a gift and as a vocation within a community. The Christian belief is that of God as the creator of the world. It is through our children that we can have hope both for the present and future generations and so believe that life is indeed worth living.

Our lives seem to be dictated and ruled by time. It would appear that time is a 'given' valuable commodity which controls us: we spend it, we save it, we use it, we waste it, but ultimately, we can never succeed in our efforts to 'kill' it. Having children takes up a lot of time, time which could be spent doing other things, Many say that it is cruel to bring a child into such an unjust and violent world which seems beyond hope. Having children in these circumstances may be said to be self-indulgent and a form of admission of our failure in the world.

The Christian response is to repeat that we are saved within time, not from time. Salvation for the Christian people means that we live in a new time, what we call an eschatological time, a time which is seen as a gift. In much the same way that the Christian view of children is to see them as a vocation rather than a necessity, so the Christian view of time is one of 'gift' rather than 'given'. God is creator and ruler and so Christians can afford to spend time on the ordinary trivialities of daily life. Time does not control our Christian lives and neither does happiness or salvation depend upon the use of time. Christians can therefore seek to offer help to one person rather than to gain status by trying to help many. Time is spent in worship even though the time could have been put to different use. All the activities of Christians take place within this less pressured view of the use of time, all of which take place within the kingdom of God, and having children is one of those activities.

Procreation would seem to be under our control, but the irony is that it is not. Christians acknowledge that God is in control through the gifts of life, time and children. We have a certain amount of control, but ultimately the gift is there for the taking and is inbuilt into our psyche ready to be responded to. We can respond to these gifts creatively and joyfully, rather than treating them as 'givens' which must be tolerated and lived with, rather like a 'thorn in the flesh'.

Children who are handicapped in some way have much to offer to us and much to teach us. Many struggle against their disabilities in order to have some measure of achievement which they see being attained by others. some may be subjected to long and painful treatment, yet throughout remain cheerful. Those children with learning difficulties may display some of the qualities highlighted in the beatitudes,[10] revealing a true poverty and simplicity of spirit which remains uncluttered and uncorrupted by success, greed or anxiety. While working alongside people with learning difficulties, I have witnessed the surprise and warmth when others recognise qualities which are rarely seen in people who do not have such learning difficulties, with comments such as: "They are so polite and grateful, even for the smallest things. It is such a refreshing change from being on the receiving end of rude, quarrelsome, complaining and abusive people." Such comments as this may well lead us to ask who, in the eyes of God, really are the handicapped? It reminds us of the remark made by Jesus:

> But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.[11]

For the Christian, having children is a vocation for which God provides the time. As we respond to God's gifts joyfully, we sense the hope for our future which is symbolised in the gift of our children.

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[10] Matthew 5:1-12 and Luke 6:20-26.

[11] Matthew 19:30 (New Revised Standard Version).

1.4. SUMMARY

I have shown in this chapter how adult perceptions of the depth and breadth of understanding in children can seriously affect children's lives and behaviour. When we have a clearer understanding of the place of children in the family and the role of the family as a unit within society, we may then be better able to reflect upon the value of children as gifts which are to be nurtured both for the sake of the children and of future generations.

One way forward in our attempts to have a better understanding of children is to explore our understanding of spirituality and how it develops, as spirituality is fundamental to all human beings. I explore the place of spirituality in our lives in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 2
THE SPIRITUALITY OF CHILDREN
CONTENTS

CHAPTER 2

2.1. THE SPIRITUALITY OF CHILDREN

Understanding what is meant by spirituality with particular reference to children and the family may help lead to us to a deeper awareness of both our culture and how we make and develop, and break relationships. In the previous chapter I have explored reasons for having children, looking at both secular and Christian interpretations. The place of the child within the family leads us to assess the value of children. Here I discuss the development of spirituality in children, exploring the theories offered which define spirituality and putting them into the context of family relationships. By examining these areas in the life of children I show how loss and bereavement seriously affect children both in the development of their spirituality and in the way in which they express it.

2.1.1. The Mind of a Child

Children are generally sensitive, greatly swayed by instincts and are usually highly imaginative. It seems to be generally acknowledged that the child carried in the womb has some awareness of its mother's state of mind, such as anxiety, calmness etc., and so it is not surprising that even a newly born child can be sensitive to the atmosphere of relationships into which it has been born. The attitudes to life of those people with whom the child comes into contact will most likely have some effect on the child. It could be called a psychic atmosphere, the sensing of which by infants may be acute.

Dorothy Wilson[1] describes the effect of one mind upon another, particularly of an adult mind upon a child's. She writes of a son born to an atheist father and a religious mother.

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[1] D.F. Wilson, Child Psychology and Religious Education , SCM, London, (1928), p.38.

Mother both sang to and prayed aloud with the baby, speaking of an Invisible Friend. Clearly the baby's cognitive powers were not such that he could understand, yet as he grew older and experienced fear he recalled his mother's tone and attitude at such times, and felt peaceful and secure in the protection of this mysterious being. When the boy was aged eight years, his mother became seriously ill and again the child turned to his Invisible Friend for comfort and security. His mother recovered and thereafter the boy always believed in and prayed to God. Clearly the effect of the mother's audible prayers and songs had some impact on that infant which stayed with him and developed as his cognitive powers grew.

Objectors to this might say that this is nothing more than suggestion, but then perhaps some may say that many forms of prayer are just that. Suggestion or not, it is through experience of relationships with other people, especially parents or guardians, in which the spirituality of children develops.

2.2. WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

Spirituality is not something which is easily defined. Traditionally it has been associated with religion, which has perhaps added to the difficulty in definition. Recognition of the importance of spiritual growth in children has grown in recent years especially in formal education, as evidenced by the 1988 Education Reform Act and its recognition of this sort of development as one of the aims of school education in England and Wales, stating that the school curriculum should be one which

> promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, and prepares such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.[2]

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[2] Quotation taken from V. Clark "Bereavement and Moral and Spiritual Development: an Exploration of the Experiences of Children and Young People", SPES, 5, (November 1996), pp.37-40.

The National Curriculum Council (NCC, 1993) offers its opinion on what it believes spiritual and moral development is and OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) has been given the task of inspecting the provision being made for such development in schools. OFSTED makes it clear that those responsible for education in this country do not concur with the view that spirituality is the sole domain of religion, be it of Christian or any other faith.

> Spiritual development relates to that aspect of inner life through which pupils acquire insights into their personal existence which are of enduring worth. It is characterised by reflection, the attribution of meaning to experience, valuing a non-material dimension to life and intimations of an enduring reality. 'Spiritual' is not synonymous with 'religious'; all areas of the curriculum may contribute to pupil's spiritual development.[3]

It is necessary then to take a broader look at spirituality, not confining it to religious experience alone. Even the consideration of the possibility of spirituality in children is a relatively recent phenomenon, which has led to research into the stage in life when spiritual experiences occur. Devising a persuasive methodology has not been easy, according to R.J.L. Murphy,[4] who refers to the use of methods of studying adult spirituality as being inappropriate, and the difficulty of recognising spirituality in children with secular presuppositions and language, due to their upbringing. Klingberg[5] carried out research on the experiences of 630 Swedish children in relation to their thoughts about God. The result showed that four types of situation were described, and

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3 OFSTED (1994) Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development, p.8.

4 R.J.L. Murphy, "A new approach to the study of the development of religious thinking in children", Education Studies, 4: 1, (1978b), pp.19-22.

5 G. Klingberg, "A study of religious experience in children from 9-13 years of age", Religious Education, 54, (1959), pp.211-216.

in order of frequency were: times of distress, experiences in nature, moral experiences, and formal worship experiences. Prayer experiences seemed to have deep emotional reactions. Three years later, in 1962, Elkind and Elkind repeated the research in the United States of America, and the order of frequency of the situations described was: church, solitude, anxiety, fear, worry, prayer and moral action. The reversal of the ranking of the Church may be noteworthy and perhaps indicative of changing attitudes towards religion, or it may be simply an observation of the different status of religious institutions between the two countries. However, in both research results there is a clear indication of spirituality in children.

There have been numerous attempts to try and prove spirituality in children[6] and various theories and critiques put forward to explain how spirituality develops in children[7], too numerous and long for the purposes of this paper. However, this does lead me to believe that a much broader interpretation of spirituality would be helpful, a more holistic model, such as that offered by John Bradford.

Bradford suggests that spirituality can be seen in three parts: human, devotional, and practical, all of which fit closely together and complement the whole. Bradford's approach is an holistic one:

> Spirituality, therefore, describes a healthy attitude towards and a positive pattern of engagement (i) with ourselves and our family; (ii) with our God and our faith community; and (iii) with our day to day activities and our involvement with others in the wider world.

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6 E.g. E. Robinson, The Original Vision: A Study of the Religious Experience of Childhood , The Religious Experience Research Unit, Oxford, (1977), and R. Coles, The Spiritual Life of Children, Harper Collins, London, (1992).

7 E.g. M. Bindl, Das religiose Erleben im Spiegel der Bidgestaltung: Eine Entwicklunsgs - psychologie Untersuchung, Frielberg, Herder, (1965), and K. Tamminen, Religious Development in Childhood and Youth: an Empirical Study, Suomalainen Tiedakatemia, Helsinki, (1991).

> Spiritual needs refer to a child or young person's human-spiritual needs of being valued and nurtured in a rounded way by their parents and family; to their devotional- spiritual needs of being integrated in a balanced manner within their own faith community, and of being affirmed in their distinctively personal expression of reverence; and to their practical-spiritual needs of being prepared for and having the opportunity to engage creatively, caringly and thoughtfully in everyday life.[8]

Bradford's understanding of spiritual development is that it is an ongoing, and to some extent, a cyclical process which is established and grows in and through human relationships. Devotional-spirituality is influenced by sound tradition and is supported by membership of a faith community. All this is integrated within what he calls practical-spirituality, by which he means the daily human interaction in our everyday lives. Human spirituality could then be described as the well-being and inter-relatedness of the emotional, cognitive and intuitive self, including sensitivity to the transcendent. All this is developed through our life's experience, that is through love and affection, security, new experiences (e.g. external experiences such as play and exploration, and internal experiences which give opportunities for stillness and reflection, awe and wonder), praise and recognition, participation and responsibility.

Fundamentally, human spirituality is about our identity as social beings. It might be suggested that spirituality is the involvement of searching for purpose and meaning to life as our psyche works towards finding transcendental values, meaning and experience. Spirit is then described as that part of a person's soul which provides energy and power and which motivates the pursuit of virtues such as love, trust and wisdom. Religion may be regarded as a specific system of belief, worship, conduct, etc., which frequently involves ethics and philosophy, and a certain way of seeing and understanding the world.

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[8] J. Bradford, Caring for the Whole Child: a Holistic Approach to Spirituality, The Children's Society, London, (1995), p.35.

This approach is not so very different to Bradford's, although Bradford is referring specifically to children and the development of their spirituality. He says that a child or young person's spirituality describes their inter-personal relationships with each other, their family, their God and their faith community, as well as with their day-to-day activities with the wider world.

Human spirituality describes the child's need for love, security, praise and responsibility. The fulfilment of these needs ought to be met by society in general and by the schools. Devotional spirituality builds upon human spirituality. It is largely expressed through the language and culture of a particular religion and so the faith communities have a responsibility in this area. Practical spirituality is a combination of the other two and is expressed through the daily living which shapes and directs our lives. Our practical spirituality is revealed through our social concerns.

> . . . for a human being, especially a child or young person, to have a full quality of life, spirituality in all its aspects must be nurtured and affirmed. For children or young people who have been marginalised or who have suffered deprivation in any way, the need for nurture and affirmation in human spirituality is all the more pronounced.[9]

Valerie Clark agrees with Bradford's approach, saying:

> The human element includes such things as our ability to seek and give love, to care for other people, to inwardly reflect, and to express ourselves in creative forms. The devotional element uses religion to explore many of these issues, often finding particular meaning in the beliefs that humanity has upheld and the traditions and rituals it has created down the centuries. The practical element is often the concrete expression of the other two elements. It is that part of us that takes action on behalf of others, striving to improve, change, prevent or begin activities or projects so that other people and other living things are supported. It seemed likely to me that recently bereaved pupils might examine their own inner resources (human spirituality), redefine or even reject religion (devotional

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9 J. Bradford, Caring for the Whole Child: a Holistic Approach to Spirituality, p.72.

spirituality) and, perhaps, find expression for new forms of practical spirituality.[10]

Bradford is calling for what he sees as a new approach towards spirituality which begins by supporting a child's human spirituality, respecting and enabling their devotional spirituality, and encouraging and welcoming their practical spirituality - and which goes on to see the progressive and cyclical interconnection between these. I am not sure that Bradford's approach is entirely new, particularly when taking the OFSTED view of spirituality into account, but I do endorse and recommend these views as a helpful guide to our understanding in this field.

2.3. SPIRITUALITY AND THE FAMILY

2.3.1. Life Cycles

Just as the whole of life in all its forms may be seen as a cycle, so may the life of a family. Family in this context refers to those with whom we live, those to whom we are related either through parents or through marriage, and does not refer to the wider context given to the family by Christianity.

Our family lives follow a sequence of events and are, of course, a result of the biological events of mating, giving birth to children, raising them and letting them go, and growing old. These events form the framework for the lives of many, though not all, people. For those unable or unwilling to produce or rear children, the cycle is clearly different.

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10 V. Clark, "Bereavement and Moral and Spiritual Development: an Exploration of the Experiences of Children and Young People", SPES, 5, (November 1996), p.38. Valerie Clark is a former editor of SPES, interested in the promotion of death education within the school curriculum. In April 1996 she completed her doctoral thesis entitled: 'Bereavement and Moral and Spiritual Development: An Exploration of the Experiences of Children and Young People', University of Plymouth.

The "traditional" family unit of biological parents and their children is becoming less common through the higher occurrence of divorce in recent years. Accordingly, the range of experiences within the family are changing. Whereas in the traditional family there is a lifetime of shared experiences which occur as children grow up and develop both mentally and physically, where the relationship between the biological parents breaks down, a whole range of different experiences are undergone by all the members of the family. Emotional conflicts may be more prevalent. The children may find themselves sharing their parents in what we call the "reconstituted family". Such a change in a family unit affects others in the wider family, such as grandparents, who themselves experience a difference in relationships. Other changes to the family unit may include children who live with parents in a male homosexual or female homosexual relationship, or children who live with grandparents, or single-parent families.

Experiences within families are changing and so inevitably we have to develop ways of living in such changed circumstances: how we communicate with each other; learning how to respond and live with each other through conflict and loss. Despite all the many changes, our lives are still framed by the basic cycle of birth and death, but it is because of the changes in the constitution of many families today that we can observe a change in attitudes towards birth and death. In the past, the family as a whole unit shared the experiences of birth and death within the family, as we have noted. It was very common, for instance, for the body of a recently deceased family member to be laid out and dressed by the family, and for the body to remain in the family home until the funeral, thereby raising the awareness of death and ritual not only for the adults but also for the children. There was much more awareness of death as part of the life cycle by all ages. Today, that has changed and very rarely do families become closely involved with the practicalities of the death of a family member. Consequently, there appears to be far more anxiety and even fear about death. Many parents and grandparents keep their children away from such experiences, thinking that they are protecting them, when in

fact they are fuelling their children's ignorance and fear of death, thus perpetuating the fear of death for future generations.

2.3.2. The Family System

Much of our lives and our thinking is influenced by cause and effect, through a linear progression and within a time sequence. Ross Mitchell [11] uses the example of dropping a stone into a pool of water. After the splash come concentric rings flowing from the centre outwards. Dropping the stone causes the splash which leads to the concentric circles. When we think in this linear way it helps us to understand the physical world, but it does not apply to our social world of complex interaction. A physical action may result in a third party becoming angry, making them feel that they want to retaliate. A different person may react totally differently. Although human behaviour has a tendency to reflect back upon itself, because we are not isolated beings and because we are so different and react differently to many things, reactions and retaliations are not assured in the same way as the ripples on the water result from the dropping of a stone. We interact within ever changing groupings, influenced by psychological and social controls. Thus a social systems theory developed which stated that people in regularly convened groups act on each other in mutual and reciprocal ways. If there are any changes within any one member of the group, they will be reflected throughout the group, influencing the other members in different ways. In the same way, if the behaviour of one member of the group changes, then there will be reciprocal changes in all the other members in that group. One such convened group is the human family.

When we consider the family as a system we see a very different pattern to the one given by the simple cause and effect example.

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[11] R. Mitchell, "Scripts and Dances - The Family System", The Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy, (June 1996), p.3.

> This way of thinking has profound effects on how we think about events in the family, and how creative change can be brought about when the family is in trouble.[12]

If a family experiences an argument as a result of differing opinions, when we use linear thinking we see an angry response being the result of some sort of provocation. When the systems theory is applied, we may see that the initial anger may be as a result of that person's upbringing and parental role model, while another person's angry response may be the result of feelings of jealousy or neglect. So rather than linear thinking, it is more circular thinking because we begin to examine how A's actions on B have an effect on C, whose response reflects back on the interaction between A and B.[13] Families build up their own idea of how that family should be and how each of the family members should relate to each other as well as to others outside the family group. By its own values and goals, derived from everyday experiences, the family draws up a code of conduct, probably consciously, but also likely to be subconsciously, which is important to that family unit. Each member of the family contributes to and owns the code, even if they are not fully conscious of it. Family identity becomes apparent and explicit when their prejudices, value systems and attitudes become more obvious, as in the giving of a common statement, e.g. "We call a spade a spade in this family".

Caplow [14] speaks of coalitions in triads, or triangles, showing that where three elements of a family system come together, there is a natural tendency for two elements to form a coalition which is seen in opposition to the third element. The triangle may be the two parents and their child. The parents' mode of interaction may become extreme,

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[12] R. Mitchell, "Scripts and Dances - The Family System".

[13] This interaction is complex. There is a temptation in such circumstances to pinpoint the behaviour of one family member as the cause, and describe this behaviour as some sort of social sickness or anti-social behaviour. To apply treatment would be to treat a symptom rather than a cause. Even to focus on the differences between two or three people in an argument, e.g. the parents of a teenager, would be wrong because it is important to consider how that relationship affects others in the group. It has been referred to as "The Family Dance".

[14] T. Caplow, Two against One: Coalitions in Triads, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, (1969).

threatening family stability. The child may unconsciously try to return the parental interaction to a more stable footing by employing "disturbing" behaviour, drawing the parents together in their joint concern for the child. The child does not decide to behave in this way, it is an unconscious action which has arisen out of the family system's need to maintain an equilibrium. Generally speaking, such behaviour by the child would be repeated. That guides us in distinguishing whether a child is in need of help themselves, or whether their behaviour is indicative of help being needed within the family. If the child is in need of help themselves then, generally speaking, the disruptive behaviour is not continually repeated.

2.4. SPIRITUAL POVERTY

The truly disturbed child experiences spiritual poverty. Having established that the problem lies with the child rather than within the family unit, if the child is part of a faith community then the involvement and understanding of that community is important. It is not always easy to identify such children as they may not immediately present symptoms of distress. The faith community should not be encouraged to pry into the child's family background, for any examination of that sort is the work of the Social Services. The faith community's initial responsibility should be to be aware of the basic marks of spiritual poverty:

1. Children who have been abused, demeaned, neglected or made to feel worthless may find it hard to trust or love anyone. They tend to isolate themselves. Bradford would suggest that they need understanding and support in their human spirituality.

2. Children having no contact with a religious faith, perhaps because it has been ridiculed at home, or if the child has prayed for abuse to stop and it has continued, then the child may well have difficulty in coming to terms with the meaning and truth of worship. A child's idea of God is not necessarily the same

as an adult's. We also have to consider the influence of hymns and the language used both in hymns and when speaking of God. Bradford would suggest these children need understanding and support in their devotional spirituality.

3. Where children have a problematic and dislocated background, they often have difficulty in building up a coherent and cohesive interpretation of life. Their thinking may tend to become dislocated and fragmented and present erratic behaviour, especially with their relationships. Understanding and support in their practical spirituality would be helpful, says Bradford.

Clearly, it is vital that the cause of the child's distress is known so that appropriate help can be given. If the child presents unacceptable behaviour as a result of problems within the family, there is little point in administering harsh discipline to the child. That would be to treat a symptom not a cause. Stott[15] cites the example of a boy who feels the urge to join the army, then a few weeks later the Merchant Navy, then a travelling fair. The boy expresses a dislike of his home town and finally commits a stupid offence with a strong likelihood of being caught. While he is waiting for trial he absconds from home, or breaks into premises. The individual incidents do not tell us very much, but when seen as a whole picture they tell us something quite helpful. His erratic and uncharacteristic behaviour and thinking may be indicative of an experience of some loss in his life, or difficulty in relationships at home, abuse, for example. In other words he may have experienced deprivation in his human and devotional spirituality which has led to erratic and unacceptable behaviour and a fragmented practical spirituality.

2.4.1. Unacceptable Behaviour

Feelings of resentment, loss of temper, being irritable or depressed, are examples of part of what it is to be a normal person, they are all part of human nature and are generally

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[15] D.H. Stott, Unsettled Families and their Children, University of London Press, London, (1956), p.42.

accepted as reasonably normal. How a child handles such emotions may reveal whether or not they are seriously disturbed. In normal behaviour patterns such expressions of mood may be infrequent and considered to be part of the learning process. However, if there is some underlying problem or difficulty for the child then behavioural problems are likely to be more or less constant. For example an unloved or neglected child may develop the habit of searching elsewhere for affection and attention. They may adopt another adult, such as a teacher or grandparent, as a substitute parent. Clearly under such situations the child becomes more vulnerable to other forms of abuse which may only deepen the psychological damage. Under such circumstances the child's behaviour tends to fluctuate between two patterns: the desire to be loved and the need to isolate themselves from all affection by behaving badly, which in turn promotes a vicious circle of events. If a child continues to live under such conditions they will become both physically and nervously exhausted, presenting symptoms such as hysteria, infections, epilepsy and nervous disorders which in turn may lead to asthma and eczema. When a child's behaviour becomes consistently hostile and uncooperative, removal of the child from any given situation may be the only answer both for the well-being of the child and for the rest of the group with whom the child is in contact. Removal, though, may only serve to compound the problem and the child's behaviour as they grow older becomes socially unacceptable through such behaviour as vandalism, theft and prostitution.

An alternative way of coping for a child who is unloved and neglected is for the child to try and live independently of love and affection, killing the desire to receive it. In turn this removes the desire for approval which leads to a failure to acknowledge general feelings of obligation or compunction about the rights of others. This pattern of behaviour may be seen in a child not wanting to be kissed or cuddled. In extreme cases the child may withdraw emotionally. This often seems to originate where the child has suffered cruelty or a painful illness of a parent in early childhood, both of which may be construed by the child as a lack of love. A long separation from a sick mother or the lack of a settled mother-figure usually has the same effect.

2.4.2. Loss and Bereavement as Transitional Experiences

Whether the loss or bereavement of a child is due to the death of someone close to them, or whether it is due to a perceived or actual absence of love and affection, there tend to be three phases of transition, but it must be understood that this is not a prescription of what will be experienced but rather an observation of what is likely to happen in a healthy situation. The three phases are detachment, transition and reintegration. Detachment usually begins with the immediate acknowledgement of the loss. The transition is the process of gradually coming to terms with the loss, and the reintegration occurs when the bereavement is largely resolved. How a person, adult or child, handles the transitional period will determine when or if they achieve reintegration. A severely disturbed child may never achieve reintegration.

This threefold transitional model is used by such theorists as Bowlby[16] and Worden[17] although they say different but complementary things. Bowlby tends to emphasis feelings while Worden stresses the phase of mourning. In the first stage, detachment, Bowlby describes the feeling of numbness while Worden speaks of the need to accept the loss. The second stage of transition is described by Bowlby as a time of yearning and searching, coupled with disorganisation and despair, while Worden stresses the importance of experiencing the pain of loss and of learning to adjust to that loss despite all the confusion. Bowlby uses the word reorganisation rather than reintegration for the final phase, while Worden refers to a reinvestment of the energy of loss and bereavement into the future.

Types of spirituality and models of loss are useful tools in our understanding of the process of loss and grief. Different agendas affect different grief processes. It may be

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16 J. Bowlby, Attachment and Loss: Sadness and Depression, Hogarth, London, (1980).

17 J W. Worden, Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy, Routledge, London, (1995).

helpful at this point to explore both the spiritual needs and the development of spirituality in children in the search for understanding the experience and needs of a child affected by loss or bereavement.

2.5. SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT IN CHILDREN

As with the suggested stages of grief, there are suggested stages of spiritual, or faith, development, but there is no agreement as to whether or not these stages are clearly definable or prescriptive. Faith is a complex phenomenon. It is not always religious in the cultural or institutional sense. Faith may be seen as a way of life, or an understanding of life whether traditionally religious or Christian or not. Faith is knowing, a way of being which arises out of a way of seeing and knowing resulting from interaction with other people and objects.

Fowler's[18] understanding of faith concurs with this view and with Caplow's notion of triads relating to faith, family systems and human relationships. One of the most significant aspects of faith for Fowler are trust and loyalty in and to someone or some object; in faith we are related in trust and loyalty both to individuals and groups, and also to the "gods" to whom individuals and groups are also related. However, Fowler describes six stages of faith development, preceded by a 'pre-stage':

1. Infancy and Undifferentiated Faith.

   Experiences of trust, courage, hope and love come together with threats of abandonment, inconsistencies and deprivations. At this stage, when thoughts and language development grow, it is possible to make use of symbols in speech and to use ritual play. These then lead naturally on to stage one.

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[18] J.W. Fowler, Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning, Harper Row, San Francisco, (1981).

2. Stage 1 - Intuitive-Projective Faith

3. Stage 2 - Mythical-Literal Faith.

4. Stage 3 - Synthetic-Conventional Faith.

5. Stage 4 - Individuative-Reflective Faith

6. Stage 5 - Conjunctive Faith

7. Stage 6 - Universalising Faith

Stages one to three apply to children of different age groups, whereas stages four to six apply only to adults, so for the purposes of this paper only the former are of specific interest.

2.5.1. Stage One - Intuitive-Projective Faith

This applies to children aged three to seven years, where the child can be strongly influenced by the examples, moods, actions and stories of the faith demonstrated by those adults most closely related to them. It is a stage of self-awareness, fantasy and imagination, with very real dangers of possible damage due to images of terror and destruction. As the child begins to develop the powers to differentiate between reality and fantasy, they begin to ask innumerable questions, which leads into the next stage.

2.5.2. Stage Two - Mythical-Literal Faith

Children aged seven to eleven tend to apply literal interpretations to their beliefs, moral attitudes and rules. Symbols tend to be one-dimensional and literal in their meaning. The imagination is curbed somewhat and becomes more ordered, with story becoming the major way of giving unity and value to experience. The narrative of the story provides a meaning which they can sometimes take literally rather than 'stepping out' of the story for reflection. As they encounter more stories, so stories begin to contradict and clash, again leading the child to ask many questions.

2.5.3. Stage Three - Synthetic-Literal Faith

Children going through puberty and adolescents usually represent this stage where their experiences reach beyond their immediate family to people who hold differing beliefs and values. Having had no cause to test these differing beliefs and values, the child tends to be ideological, having insufficient grasp of their own identity and autonomous judgement to develop and hold their own independent perspectives. Spiritual development is closely connected to physical and psychosocial development.

2.5.4. Stages of Development

Most cognitive psychologists would not subscribe to the stage theory as they tend to favour the notion that it is not age which leads to spiritual development, but experience. For example, children who are constantly nourished in the Christian faith through prayer and Bible teaching are more likely to be aware of an encounter with God and so develop a deep faith.

Erikson[19] offers an outline of spiritual development in stages determined by age, commencing with the prenatal period and ranging to age eighteen. Psalm 139:13-16 would also seem to indicate that spiritual development begins before birth, i.e. after conception:

> For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.[20]

Erikson states that the first developmental task of a child is to develop trust as a basis for self-control, relationships and faith. Psychological development helps prepare children to live in society, whereas spiritual development enables them to begin to formulate an understanding of the meaning of life.

Erikson asserts that parents must communicate a sense of meaning to their children because

> . .ultimately children become neurotic not from frustrations, but from the lack or loss of societal meaning in these frustrations.[21]

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[19] E. H. Erikson, Childhood and Society, 2nd edition, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, (1963), pp.247-63.

[20] (New Revised Standard Version).

[21] E. H. Erikson, Childhood and Society, pp.249-250.

The role of trust between parents and a newly born baby is paramount in the early stages of spiritual development, according to Erikson. As the infant progresses to the age of three there is a strong need for the child to be in frequent and regular contact with its parents. This is the age where anxiety concerning separation from parents is at its highest. The child is more likely to develop a healthy self-concept, and so lay the groundwork for developing the ability to make more intimate personal relationships with others and with God, if he or she has been nurtured in an atmosphere of love and discipline built upon the early base of trust. A lack of experience, co-ordination and knowledge may cause the child low self-esteem, as may illness, handicap and separation from parents. A religious faith and practice may help to provide stability and comfort through an atmosphere of love, for example by the routine of saying prayers, or grace at mealtimes, or the reading of Bible stories. Routine is considered by many to be essential in the formation of trust and stability.

With the closeness and frequency of contact, parents shoulder the major part of the responsibility for the spiritual development and basic self-concept of children. An illness or death in the family, or painful treatments and injuries are often seen by the children as deprivation and punishment, feeling that God may be inflicting this suffering as a punishment for some past wrong-doing. A healthy approach is to reinforce the notion of a loving God who accepts us just as we are and who does not make anyone sick because they misbehave, nor indeed for any other reason.

Death is another contributing factor in the spiritual development of children. Clearly a child's understanding of death will be influenced by their experience of it. Death may be seen as violent, or as a mutilation if, for instance, a child sees an animal killed on the road, or if the child visits someone who is seriously ill or deformed in hospital. If it is the death of a close relative to the child, then death may be seen as abandonment. Some parents have helped their children to accept illness and death as a fact of life, rather than as divine punishment, by saying such things as "God could not make daddy's earthly

body better, so daddy has gone to heaven for God to make his heavenly body better." or "God needed daddy in heaven so he could make him better there." That may satisfy children, but may pose problems for those children and adults who have an understanding of a different understanding of an omnipotent God.

Spiritual development is often accelerated in dying children who may display a wisdom far beyond their years, e.g.. a dying child may try to reassure its parents by telling them not to worry as God will take care of them, or that they are going to heaven to be with Jesus. Children can learn basic concepts of God and trust in him from an early age.

Dorothy Marlow [22] suggests three requirements to give a foundation for spiritual development in children: unlimited love with much positive reinforcement; realistic discipline which holds children responsible for their actions within the limits of their abilities; and a support system which is dependable and truthful. Children have a natural interest in God and an inborn sense of the divine and numinous, she suggests, which needs to be nurtured by the family and the community.

To continue the stage theory. the next stage is that of early school years, ages five to nine, which is when the child's conscience begins to mature. At this time in the child's life they begin to have an understanding of right and wrong and forgiveness. They become aware of their limited abilities and their fallibility and need some assurance of someone or something greater than themselves. The perception of guilt matures around this time. By the ages of ten to twelve, they begin to judge their own behaviour and that of others according to some standard, which is usually learned at home. Through their experience of trust and love, children at this stage begin to have the basics of spirituality, faith, hope and love, and begin to think how all this relates to their life.

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[22] D.R. Marlow, Textbook of Paediatric Nursing, 5th edition, W.B. Saunders Co., Philadelphia, (1977), p.613.

When trying to assess the spiritual needs of children, I suggest that some of the following questions may be asked:

1. How do you feel when you are in trouble?
2. Who do you turn to when you are frightened (other than parents)?
3. What are your favourite things when you are sad?/Happy?
4. Who do you talk to when you are happy?/Sad?
5. Do you know who God is? What is God like?
6. Do you ever pray? How does God answer your prayers?
7. What do you think dying is like?

In answer to the latter question, an eight year old dying boy said "Death is an adventure, like going to Disneyland." Because he had been encouraged to think and talk about God and matters of life and death, his conclusions were that there is no need to fear death.

2.5.5. Spiritual Needs

Spiritual needs are linked closely with developmental levels, which translated through Erikson's stages would read:

Love and relatedness - faith. (Stage of trust).
Need for forgiveness - Hope (Moral development).
Initiative versus guilt and industry versus inferiority - Self-confidence (Purpose and competence).
The need for purpose and meaning (Identity versus role confusion).

A child's fears may also give us clues about their spiritual needs, such as a child up to the age of six months being afraid of sudden movements or loud noises may indicate

fear through loss of parental support. Fears become more complex with age and may be summarised by asking the questions "Who is in control?" and "Is there a God and what is he/she like?".

2.6. FAITH EXPERIENCES

Among those who do not agree with the stage theory of spiritual development in children is V. Bailey Gillespie[23] who suggests spiritual development occurs as a result of life experiences, which of course vary tremendously between individuals and do not necessarily depend upon age. He suggests that we venture in faith in our lives.

As an alternative to offering a theory of stages of development, Gillespie offers what he calls models of faith which he suggests are generic faith situations which roughly correlate with the life-cycle concerns of most religious people. His idea develops a nurturing of the faith experience as life progresses through the whole of life to old age.

In these models of faith, or spirituality, there is a deep implication of the importance of 'relationship'. If faith is rightly understood, it is seen in relationship, whether that is a relationship with others that reveals its presence, or whether it is in the trusting and open relationship to the whole of reality itself. It is from this faith experience that we have feelings of something beyond the physical, beyond words - transcendence, mysticism, love and hope.

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23 V. Bailey Gillespie, The Experience of Faith, Religious Education Press, Birmingham, Alabama, (1988). Gillespie asserts that "Faith is certain of itself only in looking to its object, which is also its source: in looking at itself it is always uncertain and thus faith is a 'leap in the dark' because man would fain find security by looking at himself and yet must precisely let himself go in order to see the object of faith." p.25.

2.6.1. Borrowed Faith

In childhood, Gillespie suggests two types of faith, borrowed faith and reflected faith. Borrowed faith is seen in early childhood where basic trust has been established within permanent relationships, such as the family unit, where the parents provide the relationship. Faith in that situation can be observed from outside by seeing faith, trust and reliability working in the relationships, which in turn teaches God's trustworthiness (as a parental image) which is one of the primary elements in spiritual or faith development.

Gillespie insists that young children do have faith experiences and develop religious ideas, but suggests that often this is not accepted because children are not able to sufficiently articulate their thoughts and feelings. It is therefore assumed that they do not experience them. He continually returns to the idea that spirituality and faith begins in relationship, usually within the family situation, whereas Erikson sees faith more as a character trait than a life experience. Gillespie returns to the idea that children develop in many ways and at different times, with their concerns being the result of their attitudes and experiences of faith in relationship, and that it is not something cognitive - something that I would dispute. Faith experience is similar, he maintains, as it is seen in the lives and actions of others who are predominant in the child's life, rather than in the child itself. Faith in the child is then seen to be owned by someone else and borrowed by the child. Predominant characters in the child's life play by far the largest part in faith development, says Gillespie. Whilst this comment may be considered to be largely true, it cannot be prescriptive for all children. Many children do have the ability to think creatively for themselves from a very young age.

Again, Gillespie suggests that experiences such as Play School and Sunday School do not play a very large part other than to provide an environment in which the child can begin to develop physical processes, such as drawing, cutting out and pasting. They

tend to learn more physical things than faith. Indeed, until at least the age of three the child is unable to have a conceptual knowledge of God in terms of thought and logic.[24] Cognitive learning is at its lowest in the very young child, says Gillespie, but again I would dispute that as a general statement. Young children do develop their powers of reasoning and understanding, arising out of their experiences.

In the eighteenth century the great Anglican preacher and leader of the people called Methodists, John Wesley, used to say before his conversion experience that faith had to be taught, that it was something cognitive. However, as a result of his conversion experience he realised that faith was something that could not be taught, it had to be experienced as a matter of the heart. I would agree that we can teach what faith is, but to understand what faith is does not mean that we have faith. To have faith we must experience it.

2.6.1.1. Faith as a Gift

If we cannot achieve faith by working for it, by learning it, it must then be thought of as a gift of God for use in our relationship with him. Fowler[25] sees faith as a beginning in relationships. The Bible teaches that faith is a gift of God,[26] so how does faith and spiritual development fit in with this sense of gift rather than something which can be taught or earned, especially in the lives of children who may not even be conscious that they have received faith? The answer lies in understanding faith as part of God's gift in creation as well as his gift in salvation. They are connected, for God is Lord of both, as

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24 V. Bailey Gillespie, The Experience of Faith, p.92.

25 C. Dykstra and S. Parks, Faith Development and Fowler, Religious Education Press, Birmingham, Alabama, (1986), p.25.

26 Philippians 1:29 and 1 Corinthians 2:5

the incarnation shows. So when we think of children possessing faith 'naturally', that is not to say they do so independently of God, but that they are capable of trust, love, and response both to God and others by the grace of God in his creation. Faith is a gift, just as the whole of life is a gift.

Personal growth and learning come through interaction with our environment. A child will be responsive to its environment and so this is where it is likely to first recognise what it might be like to know a loving God through the attitudes and relationships of others. Again, this is supported by Biblical teaching in Ephesians 5:21-65, which teaches the value of such things as honesty, integrity, love, caring and forgiveness.

2.6.1.2. Prayer

Another experience of faith can be through prayer, both through its theological content and as a way to enter into an awareness of the presence of God. This is again an experience that can be provided through the role model of parents or guardians. Gillespie suggests that the family is a vehicle through which children can experience faith and develop their own thoughts about God, and so their own faith and spirituality.

> If, for example, the family makes children keep quiet, close their eyes, and basically hold still, they teach negative ideas and feelings about God: (1), that God does not allow movement; (2), that prayer time is essentially boring; (3), that prayer may perhaps appease God; (4), that God is unfriendly.[27]

Gillespie claims that children do not derive abstract truth from action but in action. Whilst it might be true to say that if the action is poor, the truth learned will be equally

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27 V. Bailey Gillespie, The Experience of Faith, p.95.

poor, Gillespie's claim leads to a false understanding. His claim would seem to indicate that truth can only be learned from physical actions and from word of mouth. This does not allow for a deep truth which may be recognised from something visual alone, such as the symbolic meaning of a lighted candle. The lit candle may inspire the viewer to understand Christ as the light of the world, but it is not necessary for that truth to be articulated for it to be learned. Children can be influenced by a sense of awe and wonder just as adults can be, but it is not something which needs to be put into words or actions for it to be learned. It is experienced.

For a child to experience faith and develop their spirituality they need to have activities suitable for their age, for example, at such times as birthdays and Christmas. They need to feel important and valued and learn to recognise value in the use of symbols. Through their experience of faith within relationships they will begin to recognise and nurture a sense of morality.

2.6.2. REFLECTED FAITH

Middle childhood, that is from the age of around seven to twelve, is the time when they become aware of their individuality and that they belong to a number of faith communities. The family is the primary faith experience and then as the child becomes older it moves on to the wider relationships of friends, school, church etc. Experience within such groups can help a child to feel accepted and aid their self-identity, so beginning to recognise that they are also a child of God. Such faith communities also teach the importance of an historical identity, such as within the family of God.

Whilst the faith of others as a role model for children is still important, it is at this age that personality, industry, differentiation and individuality begin to help a child to develop a faith of their own rather than borrowing someone else's. It begins to be

reflected back into the life of the child. It becomes almost, but not quite, a personal faith because the child is still growing in every aspect. The child is becoming an individual and is being gradually weaned away from its parents and so finding its own identity. Much spiritual growth occurs when in their life of faith they begin to meet challenges rather than turn away from them. Reflected faith is still the faith of someone else, but it is that faith in action in the child, with all the childlike attributes that come with that. Again there is Biblical support:

> Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the Kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.[28]

Jesus saw value in the life of children through their unquestioning acceptance that God is in charge, through their openness to suggestions and ideas about God, through their varied faith experiences, creativity and imagination.

Children can be helped in their spiritual and faith development if their sense of awe and wonder is nurtured, for that is numinous, which is indescribably God. We can nurture them through prayer, relationships, role-models and through teaching a sense of history to provide context and position in life.

Faith is a gift of God exercised by us. Fowler says we should understand this as an activity which enables us to make sense of our lives. Faith is:

> . . our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives . . . [It is] a person's way of seeing him or

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[28] Mark 10:13-15; Matthew 19:13-15; Luke 18:15-17 (Revised Standard Version).

herself in relation to others against a background of shared purpose and meaning.[29]

2.7. THE FAMILY'S ROLE IN CHILD SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

As I have indicated, it is widely agreed that spiritual and faith development in children takes place within their human relationships, which traditionally has been the family, to a large extent. Families may provide the foundation for a meaningful development in faith to take place as well as the basis for achieving a more mature personal spirituality. The traditional family unit offers a closeness and warmth to children that other relationships may not. The interaction which takes place within the family enables the child to learn how to live with disagreement while still loving each other. The family provides a safe environment to develop and practice rituals which demonstrate love and dependability, a practical outworking of faith. It is within the family that opportunities may be provided for the nurture of team spirit, celebration, forgiveness, and mutual support. In families where many of these elements do not exist, then the effectiveness of the family is eroded, reducing its ability to function properly as a loving and supportive unit. The absence of such basic elements within a family will affect the child's spiritual and faith development detrimentally because dysfunctional families tend to create an environment of disorder, loss of control and discipline, lack of unity in purpose and aim leading to loss of support for each member in some way.

The parental role is a role-model which influences the child's spiritual and faith development. The words and actions of parents are a guide to their children on how to speak and behave. It is through the role-model of their parents that children learn to make sense of their own experiences and to have a sense of their own identity within

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[29] J. W. Fowler, Stages of Faith, p.4

the wider world as well as within the family unit. When the family unit is operating effectively, the children develop self-esteem through the growing ability to love, share, and solve problems with each other. The basis of a child's early faith stems from the loving things parents do with and for their children.

Whilst emphasis has been placed on the influence of adults upon their children, we should not forget the inherent value in children. Many children possess qualities such as simple trust and openness. If such qualities were recognised more widely as being of value to all people, rather than simply being thought of as childlike attributes, we could also allow children to influence adult behaviour from the example they set.

The parental role-model and the functioning mode of the family unit is perhaps the greatest influence upon a child. The healthy development of faith and spirituality in a child's life will very largely, if not solely in the very early years, depend upon how their parents live their own lives. A positive self-image and spiritual awareness will both be reflected in daily living: a sense of partnership, or team work in the marital relationship; an open demonstration of a loving and caring relationship; a healthy questioning attitude; an openness and willingness to achieve and develop personal growth and commitment.

If parents are to be of help to their children in the development of their spirituality, then they must have an awareness of their own spirituality and an understanding of their role as parents in spiritual terms. Parents aware of their own spirituality will be aware that their own resources are limited and that they will need to draw on the resources of their faith community, whatever that may be. How they draw on those resources to meet or supplement their family's faith needs will influence the children. The role-model will have been established. Clearly there are differing ideas about parenting, and the notion of parenthood may well differ between Christians and non-Christians. Westerhoff would agree with the notion of parenting suggested above.

> For most people, vocation means merely career, but to the Christian, vocation is first and foremost our response to God's call to fulfilment.[30]

Parenting skills are not something we acquire when we become parents. That may be the time when we hone and more fully develop them, but the process of preparation to become a parent begins when we are children, from our childhood images of what it is to be a parent. We learn from our parents and from our significant experiences. As the child grows older, their spiritual development is not only affected by their family experiences, but also by the role of their faith community. The faith community can help to give some formation to ideas of what it is to be a family, even a theology of the family. Both families and communities have times of celebration which all add to the development of spirituality and faith. Rituals are an important element to life, especially when they give a formal welcome to children at times such as a baptism or a service of thanksgiving.

The nurturing role of the parent is vital because it embraces an intimacy between parent and child which extends throughout the lifetime of the family. A source of energy is required for any journey to be made. The spiritual source of energy for the family's journey through life comes from the warmth, love and care shared with each other and particularly with the children. This demonstrates the family's living faith.

> The first commandment is "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is the one Lord, and you must love Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this: "You must love your neighbour as yourself."[31]

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30 J.H. Westerhoff III, Bringing up Children in the Christian Faith, Harper row, San Francisco, (1980), p.72.

31 Mark 29:29-31 (Revised English Bible) c.f. Matthew 22:37-39 and Luke 10:26-28.

The wholehearted love of God and of our neighbour is the Christian aim of human life. Our spirituality is the practice of such love. Love is at the heart of human spirituality and faith development, so it is love which must be communicated to our children to enable them to develop their own faith and spirituality.

2.8 SUMMARY

Understanding what is meant by spirituality and relating that to the lives of children and families is crucial if we are to be able to guide children in their times of distress and crisis. It is not always appropriate to apportion blame for bad behaviour on the child's character or lack of discipline in their upbringing. Children have spiritual needs and must be enabled to explore and articulate these needs in order for their spirituality and faith experiences to develop healthily.

For children, as with adults, there are many life experiences which severely test our faith. These usually arise out of something traumatic, when the question of pain and suffering become the focus. In the following chapter I look at the problem of evil and suffering, especially from a Christian standpoint, to show how Christian faith and our experiences of God can be used to give children reassurance in their experiences of loss and bereavement.

CHAPTER 3
TOWARDS A SPIRITUALITY OF LOSS

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 3

3.1. TOWARDS A SPIRITUALITY OF LOSS

Spirituality forms the basis of human life, for it is concerned with relationships. When a person experiences a significant loss in their lives, then it is their relationships which can either help them through their experience, or in some way entrap them within it. The same can be true for children.

The last chapter discussed the development of spirituality in children, leading towards a spirituality of loss. I will now examine the problems of evil and suffering, looking at the various resources available to inform us. I particularly introduce the subject of patience, especially as a Christian virtue. Patience is not usually part of our questions concerning theodicy, but I suggest that this should be considered to be an important aspect. When suffering is encountered, a great deal of patience may be required before the suffering is over. How a person emerges from their suffering may depend upon the extent of the patience they brought to bear in their situation. I briefly explore a number of theodicies which I believe help us to recognise our life's experiences of evil and suffering and relate them to our experiences of God. Much of our response to evil and suffering depends upon our spirituality. It is therefore important to move towards a spirituality of loss, particularly with regard to loss experienced by children. Helping a child towards patience in their loss experiences also helps them to a deeper maturity in adulthood experiences of loss.

3.1.1. The Problem of Evil and Suffering

In medieval times it is apparent that there was a need for a lingering death in order for a proper spiritual preparation. It seems that people of that era feared sudden death. Preachers advised people to go to bed each night with the assumption that it would be

their last, and with the feeling that their beds were their tombs. This was considered to be the art of dying well, a concept of a good death.

Fear is one of five natural emotions,[1] and we are born with only two inherent fears: of falling from high places; and of sudden loud noises. These two fears are gifts since they preserve life. All other fears are acquired and learned, usually as a result of our cultural life-style. The fear of pain and death is an acquired fear and there is a sense in which pain is exacerbated by our fear. Stress and tension caused by fear will heighten the experience of pain.

In the culture of the current western world, we seem to have lost the notion of a 'good death'. When asked how they would prefer to die, many respond "Suddenly and quickly, without pain". A common concern seems to be the need not to know anything about the death when it occurs. Michael Ignatieff's response to this is:

> What would astonish a primitive tribesman about the state of our spirits is that we believe we can establish the meaningfulness of our private existence in the absence of any collective cosmology or teleology . . . We share with other tribes the idea that certain forms of knowledge are necessary to our health, but we are the only tribe which believes that such necessary knowledge can be private knowledge - the science of the individual. We have created a new need, the need to live an examined life; we pursue its satisfaction in the full babble of conflicting opinions about what life is for, and we pursue it in a collectively held silence about the meaning of death . . [2]

Ignatieff goes on to say that he believes we have been living this way for a very long time, at least since the European Enlightenment. Philosophers began to demonstrate by

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[1] The five natural emotions with which we are born are fear, grief, anger, jealousy and love - E. Kübler-Ross, On Children and Death, MacMillan Publishing, Oxford, (1993), p.61.

[2] M. Ignatieff, The Need of Strangers, Viking, New York, (1985), p.79.

example and by writing that secular society supplied the conditions whereby we become competitive individuals with sufficient reasons for co-operating and for living.

Stanley Hauerwas suggests that this co-operation may be sustained by our mutual agreement not to raise issues about the meaning of life. He also suggests that this co-operation is based upon the common desire to avoid issues concerning death which we all have to face at some time. The subject of death then becomes hidden and we cease to speak about it. It becomes a taboo subject, and this is justified out of a misplaced sense of respect for the individual.

Children often ask, in a simple way, deep and searching questions. These questions will often include such as "You told me God loves us, so why did he let my Mummy die?" The answer is difficult, if not impossible, to formulate, for we neither fully know nor fully understand God or his purpose. Hauerwas suggests that in asking the question 'Why does God allow pain and suffering?', we are asking the wrong question. He suggests that we should be asking why we need to ask that question![3] Hauerwas speaks of illness and suffering in terms of a 'silence' in our lives and that medicine is simply a noisy way to hide this silence, because we seem unable to "name the silences such illness creates"[4]. He goes on to say that he believes that God can give a voice to our pain in such a manner that we are enabled at least to find a way to carry on through our suffering. So often we try to explain it in terms of evil - 'I must have done something very wrong for this to be happening to me'. Hauerwas suggests that instead of thinking in terms of an explanation for evil, we should be recognising the need for a community which is capable of absorbing our pain and grief. To say it in a different way, when we think that the suffering we are experiencing is as a result of something bad we have done, that is to say that the 'bad' does not exist in its own right, but is the result of our

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[3] S. Hauerwas, Naming the Silences - God, medicine and the problem of suffering, Eerdmans, Michigan, (1991).

[4] S. Hauerwas, Naming the Silences p.xi

actions or words. Instead of piling on the self-guilt for such consequences, we should simply accept what 'is' and lean on friends, family and God to receive the comfort and strength we need in order to get through the experience.

Before we can begin to formulate any sort of response to the child asking the question about a loving God and mummy dying, in a language they can understand, it may be helpful for us to look further into this age-old question, examining the different theories and responses to what we call 'Theodicy', which from the Greek means 'justification of God'.

Theism asks if there is a god who is omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good, why do evil and suffering exist in the world? That then leads on to questions about the existence of God, which arise from the premise that if such a god exists, then surely evil would be eliminated? Since evil does exist, the assumption may then be made that there is no god as previously described. Walter Brueggmann expresses this discussion more eloquently:

> The conventional idea of theodicy concerns God in relation to evil. If God is powerful and good, how can there be evil in the world? If the question is posed in this way, religion can offer no adequate logical response. Logically one must compromise either God's power or God's love, either saying that evil exists because God is not powerful enough to over-rule it, or because God is not loving enough to use God's power in this way. To compromise in either direction is religiously inadequate and offers no satisfying response. Today the theological discussion seems to insist on holding on to God's love even at the risk of God's sovereign power. What faith offers is a sense of trust that is prepared to submit. That deep trust summons us to hard re-thinking about the categories in which we do our reflection.[5]

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[5] W. Brueggemann, The Message of the Psalms: a theological commentary, Augsberg, Minneapolis, (1984), p.169.

We may find two different approaches as we look through the history of religion and philosophy.

1. Dualistic

This approach is concerned with the conflict of both good and evil principles in the world. In this conflict we must decide which side to be on. Only good comes from God. Evil comes from that which is not God, what we call the power of Darkness, the 'evil one'.

2. Monistic

Here the view is only that which is good has existence, so evil is that which does not exist. Moltmann explains:

> It [evil] has no quality of being, but only the quality of negation of being. Therefore in history it serves the good in one way or another, and the good shows its greater power in the negation of negation.[6]

Platonism, Jewish and Christian creation faith follow this approach.

3.2. RESOURCES OF TRADITION

Looking into the Christian biblical tradition that we see particularly in the Psalms, Job, Lamentations and the passion narratives, this question of theodicy is basic and demands some sort of response. Why do those who are faithful to God suffer while the faithless do not? Does this help us to believe in God as being just? Why was Israel handed over

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6 A. Richardson and J. Bowden (Editors) "Theodicy", A New Dictionary of Christian Theology, SCM, London, (1989), p.564.

to the Gentiles if God is faithful? Why did God the Father apparently abandon his Son, Jesus, on the cross?[7]

One proposal suggests that Christian faith in God leads us to some understanding that there is a kind of evil which people bring upon themselves. Evil consequences are seen as the result of evil actions. This inter-play between action and consequence is understood to be part of God's justice, so to that extent, God may be responsible for the existence of evil, but not for its immediate cause.

The destruction of sinners is seen as the manifestation of God's wrath.[8] This thinking is clearly seen in the Yahwistic, Deuteronomistic and Chronistic histories, the prophecy of judgement, Matthew's Gospel, as well as Paul's Letters.

There is, too, the sort of suffering which the righteous experience which the unrighteous do not. This means there is a sense in which this 'action/consequence' inter-play does not apply to the suffering of the righteous, as we can read in the book of Job. A sense of injustice prevails, with a great deal of anger towards God. Yet Paul tells us that we have no right to accuse God.[9]

3.2.1. The Impassibility of God

The question of whether or not God suffers is very much a live issue. There are, of course, arguments both for and against the passibility of God as well as for the impassibility of God. In the search for an answer to this question of a suffering God, we

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[7] Mark 15:34

[8] Romans 1:18ff

[9] Romans 9:20

are led by philosophers and theologians to look more closely at our question to ask further 'Is God capable of being acted upon by an outside force?'

Early Christian theology had two specific meanings of impassibility, defining it as being incapable of experiencing emotions and of being incapable of suffering. Marcel Sarot argues that both of these meanings are qualifications of the original meaning, since emotions (meaning passions and affections) were understood to be

> . . essentially passive as states of the soul aroused by an outside force.[10]

Richard Creel[11] argues for eight definitions of impassibility which lead him to a core definition which states that impassibility is impervious to causal influence from external factors. Creel goes on to give four applications, where he says that an incorporeal being could conceivably be impassible with regard to his or her nature, will, knowledge or feelings.

Sometimes there is a certain amount of confusion between the meaning of impassibility and immutability, which Creel helpfully attempts to distinguish:

> An immutable being is unchangeable *simpliciter*, whereas an impassible being is not subject to change or influence *by external factors*. An impassible being is not necessarily immutable - it might change itself - whereas an immutable being is necessarily impassible.[12]

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[10] M. Sarot, God, Passibility and Corporeality, Kok Pharos Publishing House, Kampen, The Netherlands, (1992), p.26.

[11] R.E. Creel, Divine Impassibility: An Essay on Philosophical Theology, Cambridge, p.3-9. Creel's eight definitions are : lacking all emotions; in a state of mind that is imperturbable; insusceptible to distraction from resolve; having a will determined entirely by oneself; cannot be affected by outside force; cannot be prevented from achieving one's purpose; has no susceptibility to negative emotions; cannot be affected by an outside force or changed by oneself.

[12] Ibid., p.11 (his italics).

Sarot identifies three arguments against passibilism:

1. The experiences which a passible being must be capable of having are intrinsically imperfect; therefore a perfect being could not have them.

2. God's unconditionedness, his consequent immutability and eternality, are incompatible with passibility.

3. God's blissfulness is incompatible with passibility.

The first of these three arguments fails, Sarot claims, because the imperfection which is linked to many impassible experiences is not intrinsic. He says it is possible to be both perfect and passible. A perfect passible being could not have all the experiences of passibility because, he says, many of them are incompatible with perfection and so

> . . .all God's experiences are subject to his will and therefore perfectly rational.[13]

With the second argument, Sarot objects saying that God must be self-existent, not self-sufficient: he may be influenced by the world as long as the influence is controlled by his will. Consequently, the perfect God may change under the control of his own will and so that change is subject to his will, thereby guaranteeing that the divine experiences are always compatible with God's moral character. Furthermore, if God is eternal in the sense that he exists outside of time, then he could not be passible. God's

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[13] M. Sarot, God, Passibility and Corporeality, p.65.

omniscience requires that he exists in time, because he can only know change when his awareness follows that change, which it cannot do if it does not exist in time.

God is blissful, according to Sarot, because his perfection entails blissfulness, and because the possibility of our happiness depends upon God's blissfulness. It seems to be human nature to expect mature moral beings to respond emotionally to suffering and moral evil, so presumably we should expect the same of God? If our happiness depends upon our relationship with God, then surely it will be affected by God's state of happiness or otherwise? It would then seem to follow that a happy God is better able to make us happy than an unhappy God, but that is not to say that God's happiness cannot be mixed with sorrow or that he cannot be passible. We can see from our human experiences that relationships with others who are not completely happy can still contribute to our happiness, and that we can be passible and suffer without being overwhelmed by suffering.

Jane Grayshon[14] describes her own situation of being in acute pain and suffering, yet being so full of the love and the peace of God, her face radiating warmth and a sense of peace, that those who witnessed her glowing smile in the midst of such terrible pain were moved to great joy and happiness. Through her experience of pain and suffering others found happiness:

> . . . John ran home . . . and told his wife excitedly, 'I've seen Jane Grayshon! I've seen her face! I didn't know who she was before but I recognised her immediately. She was stooping physically - but her face! It glowed. She was absolutely radiant.' . . . and he was inspired to write a beautiful poem.
>
> This joy, which had emerged from the deep peace, was the joy of accepting God's way for me. I had reached the point of conceding even subconsciously, 'Not as I will, but as you will, O Lord.' This was not a passive submission to what I could not change. I had not resigned myself to God's will, I had done something much more positive than that. I had begun to embrace God's will

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[14] J. Grayshon, A Pathway Through Pain, Hodder & Stoughton, London, (1995).

> and as a result I discovered that some precious fruit was growing even within my suffering.[15]

Negative experiences do not necessarily preclude happiness provided there are other positive experiences to counter-balance - so it is possible to be passible, to suffer and not be overwhelmed by it. The passibilist would say that if God suffers then his suffering must be embedded in his happiness, not the other way round.

Moltmann also addressed the suffering of God:

> What kind of a poor being is a god who cannot suffer and cannot even die? . . For a god who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. Suffering and injustice do not affect him. And because he is so completely insensitive, he cannot be affected or shaken by anything. He cannot weep, for he has no tears. But He who cannot suffer cannot love either. So he is also a loveless being. Aristotle's God cannot love; he can only be loved by all non-divine beings by virtue of his perfection and beauty, and in this way draw them to him. The 'unmoved Mover' is a 'loveless beloved' . . .
>
> But a man can suffer because he can love, even as a Narcissus, and he always suffers only to the degree that he loves. If he kills all love in himself, he no longer suffers. He becomes apathetic. But in that case is he a God? Is he not rather a stone?"[16]

Moltmann argues that God was fully human in the form of his Son Jesus Christ, so the experience of the suffering of Jesus must also be the experience of God. Consequently this must lead us on to think that in the death of Jesus on the cross there was also a death within God, since the Son was himself God. When confronted with questions concerning the significance of life, we consider our own experience and problems. If, however, we take the consideration further, we ask what are the characteristics of God in this life, especially if he really was in the human life of Jesus, who suffered and died.

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15 J. Grayshon, A Pathway Through Pain, p.39-40.

16 J. Moltmann, The Crucified God, SCM, London, (1973), ch.6.

So surely, somewhere within our answer must be the aspect of suffering and the pain of failure. As we reflect upon the cross, we begin to recognise that God was indeed present to it and in it, and so surely must still be present in the sufferings of our lives.

Elie Wiesel reflects on his war-time experiences in Auschwitz, writing of one occasion when he stood among the other prisoners, forced to watch the hanging of three of their number, found guilty by the Germans of some minor offence against prison rules. Of those three, one was a young boy. As his body dangled from the rope, Wiesel was asked by someone,

> Where is God now?" and a voice within him replied, "Where is he? Here He is - He is hanging here on this gallows . . .[17]

This question must surely have been asked by countless people in the depths of their suffering. God does seem to be absent from us, especially in suffering, and yet if we work through our crisis of faith we can be led to understand that God is present with us in our suffering, just as we believe he was present in the suffering and death of Jesus.

The term 'innocent suffering' is one often used, especially with regard to the suffering of children and implies suffering imposed upon a person at the hands of another person. Innocent suffering is not suffering by natural causes, but that which is inflicted on a person or persons by others, or by themselves in support of a worthy cause.

This problem of innocent suffering is often not the same as the problem of evil. Human beings have tendencies towards the assertion of autonomy. This gives, on the one hand, the virtues of independence and creativity, whilst on the other hand it yields the vices of

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[17] E. Wiesel, Night, Bantam, New York, (1982), p.62.

self-interest and egotism. Another tendency is to identify ourselves as part of a greater whole, which may lead to self-sacrifice and even blind cooperation and identification with a specific group. It is this latter tendency which has been responsible for the many crimes against humanity, holy wars and inquisitions, witch-hunts, Nazi concentration camps such as Auschwitz and Belsen, and Hiroshima. We have seen it in more recent years in the hunger strikes of I.R.A. prisoners willing to die for their cause.

Clearly, there is a connection between the willingness to sacrifice oneself for a higher cause, and a willingness to sacrifice others for it. One wonders just how much 'blind obedience' and a readiness to pass on the responsibility of one's actions to a higher authority may be considered to be evil in itself, or simply the consequences of freedom, authority and delegation. Those who suffer the nightmare of being 'sacrificed' against their will must surely have a sense of fear and aloneness in their experience. At such times it does seem to be a very basic human instinct to call upon God for help, even if the sufferer has paid little or no attention to the worship of God in their lives. Perhaps it is this basic instinct which is the prompting of the Holy Spirit, reminding us that God is there with us, sharing our suffering, giving us companionship, love and hope.

In the history of Israel, God, through his covenant with the Israelites, takes part in the persecutions and sufferings they endure. God is the companion of the suffering righteous, so when Israel is redeemed, God is also redeemed and so glorifies not only Israel, but himself too. Theopathy (the fellow-suffering of God) is the basis of the passion narratives in the New Testament. Jesus, the Son of God, not only suffers with us, but suffers and dies for us in such a way that we are freed. We are redeemed from our sinfulness through the divine suffering. God through Jesus, is in solidarity with us.

When we suffer, we are often prompted to ask questions about life and death. These questions are always asked by specific people at a specific time in a specific culture, and never in an historical vacuum. Questions of life and death are always in a cultural and

historical context. Surely, we cannot then confidently assume that the relationship between suffering and God is evil?

The book of Job in the Old Testament deals with this problem of God and human suffering, but perhaps we should not try to interpret God's answer to Job as an answer to the problem of evil. Job's story has a message for us in our own situation, in our own culture, identifying with our own needs. Of course we ask the question about the existence of suffering and distress, especially when we consider it to be innocent or 'undeserved' suffering. Quite naturally we want to know 'where is God?', and 'how do we hold on to our faith and apply it to our lives when our children die from disease?'. Has God abandoned us, let us down? It is very easy to see how this can be related to evil. What the story of Job offers us is a way through our suffering while still holding on to our faith in God.

The pain and suffering of Job confirms to us that God's people are not immune to suffering. Our experiences, be they good or bad, have nothing to do with a person's spiritual standing. Through pain we may receive blessing; a rift between us and God may be healed, and consequently we may draw closer to God through the pain.[18] Job suffered in just about every way imaginable: in body, mind, spirit, relationships, and emotions. This experience shows how moral resolve can be strengthened in adversity. "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance character, and character hope."[19]

There is a sense in which joy can come from suffering. When we can see personal characteristics in the light of the important relationship we have with God, then we have a glimpse of this joy. Job was described as a faithful and upright man. The joy can be

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[18] As described in Jane Grayshon's experience: A Pathway Through Pain.

[19] Romans 5:3f

experienced when those characteristics find their place only in the light of that which is more important - the fellowship of God.

St. Paul spoke of his "thorn in the flesh" and pleaded with God to take the suffering away from him. God's reply was:

> My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness.[20]

Consequently, Paul is able to boast gladly about his weakness, in order that Christ's power may rest upon him:

> When I am weak, then I am strong.[21]

Those who suffer can then take comfort from the depths of suffering experienced by Job. Whether it is in this world or the next, suffering will come to an end. Julian of Norwich speaks of the healing of our wounds which are somehow transformed as we turn to "Holy Church"[22], that is, as we turn to God offering our suffering to him as part of our life's experience. As we turn to God we worship him, so even in our suffering we can worship and adore the loving God, so receiving the healing comfort and joy.

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[20] See Corinthians 12:7

[21] 2 Corinthians 12:8-10.

[22] Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love, Penguin, London, (1966), ch.39.

The crucifixion of Jesus reveals the lengths to which God's love will come. On the cross we see not only the suffering of the crucified God, but also the gift of the new life and hope that he promises.

> He has borne our grief and carried our sorrows.[23]

As we examine and interpret the life and experience of Jesus, the Son of God, we can see that we are not promised a life free from suffering and pain,[24] nor are we allowed to fully know God's purposes for us in this world. We are, however, like St. Paul, promised grace. Some of us may be healed in this life, others may have to wait until the next life, the new heaven and the new earth:

> .... where there will be no more pain, no more tears, no more death.[25]

It is in God's grace that St. Paul became aware of his strength in his weakness, and it is in grace that God made himself known to Job. Job is caught up in the purposes of God, but he knows nothing about that. No direct answer was received by Job from God. Like us when we are in the depths of despair, we tend to think the worst and believe that although it may turn out alright for others, it will not for us. It is as though we fear that we have fallen so far that we are out of God's reach and control, and so beyond his grace, love and healing. Job was reassured by God, who took him in a 'mind's picture

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[23] Isaiah 53:4 (RSV).

[24] See John 16:33.

[25] C.f. Revelation 21:1-4.

tour of the world', reminding Job who created all things by the word of his power. There is not one thing in all creation that was not created by the hand of God. From that both we and Job can be comforted and feel secure, even though we do not have the answers to our questions concerning pain and suffering, for the creative hand of God reaches everywhere. There are ambiguities and uncertainties in our lives. We may never have the answers to many of our questions, we can only trust in the mysteries of God. Faith is a gift from God and it is faith which helps us to live with uncertainties.

The story of Job leads us to the ultimate conclusion that whatever we may have to suffer in our lives, whether it is incomprehensible or irrational suffering, faith in God will give us the strength and willpower to endure it. Like Job, we too may be restored.

> Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brother and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.[26]

3.2.2. The Suffering of Christ

Theologians who hold that God is passible may well say that the God we encounter in Christ is a suffering God, not an impassible God. The argument is not without critics who would say that it depends upon what interpretation we put upon 'encounter'. One argument says that we encounter God in Christ because Christ is God incarnate.

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26 1 Peter 5:6-11 (New Revised Standard Version).

Accordingly, when Christ suffers, God incarnate suffers. This would seem to be incompatible with the impassibility of God.

If Jesus was truly God and truly man, the impassibilist theologians have a problem regarding the suffering of Christ. If Christ was truly God, did God suffer in Christ? This is, of course, an age-old controversy which we can trace back in the early Church as far as the fifth general council (Constantinople 553). This gave rise to the theopaschite controversy and resulted with the fifth general council pronouncing an anathema on anyone

> . . . who does not confess that our Lord Jesus Christ who was crucified in the flesh is true God and Lord of glory and One of the Holy Trinity.[27]

Sarot suggests that the theopaschite formula is a christological formula and not a theological formula,[28] and says that it permits us to say that the human nature of Jesus suffered, that the second Person of the Trinity suffered, that the Logos incarnate suffered, but that the divine nature of Jesus did not suffer. This gives us a problem in that on the one hand we are saying that the second Person of the Trinity suffered, and on the other hand we are saying that the divine nature is not capable of suffering. The doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum*[29] proposes a solution to this problem. This doctrine says that the hypostatic union of the human and divine nature in the Person of Christ is such that the attributes of both natures can only be ascribed to this one person. Thus Christ is omnipotent, since this is an attribute of the divine nature, as well as

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27 English translation taken from J.K. Mozley, The Impassibility of God: A Survey of Christian Thought, Cambridge, (1926), pp.95-96.

28 M. Sarot, God, Passibility and Corporeality, p.92.

29 See J. Moltmann, The Crucified God, pp.231-235.

passible, since passibility is an attribute of the human nature. As the subject is one of the same - Christ , who is God and man, the man in God shares the properties of God and *vice versa.* Therefore, if the divine Logos shares in the passibility of the man Christ, then it could be said that the divine Logos suffers. However, the *communicatio idiomatum* only applies to the conjunction of concrete to concrete, not abstract to abstract. Consequently, the divine nature does not share in the attributes of the human nature, and so the divine nature does not suffer. It is only by Christ's union with the flesh that the divine Logos, though his nature is impassible, can suffer.

Against this theory is the suggestion that here we have a contradiction. If the divine Logos suffered through or in the flesh, then surely the divine nature itself is capable of suffering? Another argument says that we encounter God in Christ because Christ reveals God to us. However, if Christ is the supreme revelation of the Father, then the suffering of Christ would seem also to reveal the suffering and passibility of the Father. Sarot suggests the first argument is rooted in a misunderstanding of traditional Christology and that in his opinion the Father is passible because Christ is the supreme revelation of the Father.[30] This argument presupposes both the reality of the incarnation and that Christ is the most perfect ultimate revelation of God. This being so, it would seem acceptable to say that as Christ's life was one of suffering, then God's life is one of suffering and that this is one of the things that Christ has revealed to us. There are those who say that God is not in Jesus, but that Jesus is in God, and we cannot infer that because Jesus suffered, God is passible.[31] However, that would seem to contradict the words of Jesus recorded in the gospel of John.

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30 See also H.J.M. Nouwen, D. P. McNeill and D.A. Morrison, Compassion, DLT, London, (1990), pp.15-16, 23, 34, 39.

31 H. McCabe, "The Involvement of God," New Blackfriars, 66, (1985), pp.464-476, reprinted in H. McCabe, God Matters , London, (1987), pp.46-48.

> Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.[32]

3.2.3. Patience

As one of the Christian virtues, patience is perhaps something which many of us find very difficult whether or not our lives are running smoothly. When we encounter suffering it is hardly surprising that we thrash out impatiently, wanting the suffering to be over. Reflecting upon the lives of children who suffer, many appear to exercise great patience, especially when they are aware of their own terminal illness. We witness great deprivation among children around the world, yet they seem resigned to wait patiently. Is this a God-given attribute which we lose as we age, or is it that children look to adults for their security and well-being? Perhaps it is a mixture of both.

Human suffering tends to make us feel a sense of injustice and so we may be led to feel angry: "Why should I have to suffer?"; "Why should my daughter suffer?". Our whole attitude towards suffering and loss seems to be coloured by our insistence that death, bereavement and loss are something that we do not talk about. The subject is taboo. Is it any wonder then that we seem to have lost the art of dying well?

In the fourteenth century there was a tendency to accept suffering as a blessing. It was an opportunity not just for character-building, but also for submission to the divine will. It was apparently an attempt to move toward a state of external surrender to God's will, presupposing that suffering, as well as everything else in this life, finds its meaning in a potentially permanent relationship with God.

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32 John 14:10 (NRSV).

> The sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come.[33]

Fourteenth century piety seemed to dictate that suffering was to be patiently endured. It involved submission to God's will and so was linked with being passive. This leads to the idea of non-retaliation and inaction as a response to suffering and as a way of bringing one's adversary to repentance. An adversary usually provokes us to encourage retaliation and so perpetuate the evil of destructive conflict. Non-retaliation, or patience, in the face of such persecution confounds and thwarts the evil intentions, revealing the adversary for what they are and so, hopefully, leading them to repentance.

Patience requires external inactivity, yet inwardly it requires an active submission to the will of God. Both in Christian spirituality and secular psychology there is a common link usually made between suffering and personal growth. Some would say that we must submit patiently to our suffering, others would say that we have to actively fight it to overcome it. We live in a culture which tends to seek the anaesthetisation of pain and so find it difficult to understand a culture which welcomes pain. The majority of people seem to be concerned with easing or fighting pain, while others are looking at ways in which to embrace pain and suffering as part of life, and so, as part of the whole experience, in a sense to welcome it.

3.2.3.1. Patience as a Christian Virtue

It is, of course, long before the fourteenth century that patience was understood as a Christian virtue. Patience plays a prominent role in Christian interpretations of morality. In his "On the Good of Patience", Cyprian questioned how anyone could be either wise or patient unless they knew the wisdom and patience of God, as patience has

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[33] Romans 8:18.

its source in God. Both Cyprian and Tertullian spoke of God's patience in the life of Christ. God was patient while the divine unborn child grew in the womb, was born, and grew from childhood into a mature adult. As an adult, Jesus demonstrated patience by caring for the ungrateful and by refraining from identifying Judas, who betrayed him. Patience is to be exercised not only in the body, but also in the mind.

In telling her story of suffering and pain, Jane Grayshon recalls how the physical pain she endured became so great that she seriously considered suicide.[34] As with so many before her, she felt abandoned by God, incredulous that he had done nothing to take her suffering away. The only apparent way out of this terrible experience was to take her own life. Grayshon was, in fact, asking the same of God as Jesus did in Gethsemane - for the cup of suffering to be removed from her. In realising that her will had to be subordinated to that of God, she knew that suicide was not an option, but that patience was required.

Some of the ancient theologians[35] agreed that patience was a virtue originating from God. Since there may be many evil people who display patience, it could be construed as a 'natural virtue'. The difference is, according to Aquinas, that true patience is a gift of the Spirit and is identified by appropriate sadness and joy. Christian patience is that which holds on to a sense of joy in the midst of terrible suffering in order that we do not reach utter despair, that we might not be tempted to give up hope.

Grayshon found that when she stopped fighting the pain she stopped questioning God's purpose in her suffering. Relaxed and patient, she knew that rather than being rescued from her suffering by God, she would come to know him in a deeper way through it. The peace of such acceptance can be the healing power of God, be it physical healing or

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34 J. Grayshon, A Pathway Through Pain, p.33.

35 E.g. Cyprian, Tertullian, Augustine and Aquinas.

a healing of wholeness. The medical profession refer to those in their care as 'patients', so it would seem to follow that as patients we need to exercise patience for our own well-being.

Hauerwas, in his paper "Practicing Patience: How Christians should be Sick",[36] suggests murder to be the fruit of impatience, citing the story of Cain and Abel. It would then follow that suicide, being murder of oneself, is the fruit of impatience, and is evil. Hauerwas also suggests that medical care is surely one of God's gifts which we use as a hedge against the impatience of the world. Caring for each other when we cannot cure surely must be the exercise of patience.

> It makes no sense to be committed to alleviating the other's pain in a manner that makes all other considerations irrelevant if we have not been made to be patient people. Yet it is surely the case that the powers of impatience have breathed on the practice of modern medicine and, accordingly, led it to promise more than it can or should deliver.[37]

If we are to be patient when we are sick and suffering, then it can be helpful if we are first able to practice patience when we are well and free of suffering. This patience is one of both external bodily patience as well as internal patience of the mind. These resources of patience, whose source is with God, are shaped by God's patient care of the world. Consequently, when we are sick or suffering, to be patient is to recognise that we live in God's world. Whilst it is quite natural to feel sad and weak when we meet suffering, either in ourselves or in others, we can still feel this sense of joy that Aquinas speaks of. If we are formed by the virtue of patience, then perhaps we have a better

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36 S. Hauerwas, "Practicing Patience: How Christians Should be Sick", (July 1995), p.26f, unpublished paper.

37 S. Hauerwas, "Practicing Patience: How Christians Should be Sick", p.27.

understanding that life is not an end in itself. The enemy is not the pain and suffering, nor even death. The enemy is that which tempts us to be impatient or fatalistic and depressive about our condition. If we have the Christian virtue of patience, then we are much closer to having an understanding about what it is to die well. We may be nearer to seeing death and loss as part of a process, and as more of a stepping stone from one form of existence to another.

When we, as adults, are able to learn and exercise the virtue of patience, we are better equipped to face and deal with our own situations of loss and suffering. That will also enable us to help our children become aware of the strength and inner peace to be gained through the exercise of patience, and so take us all further along this journey where we search for meaning, for healing and wholeness of life, which of necessity must embrace death and loss.

3.3. TRADITIONAL THEODICIES

According to John Hick,[38] there are two traditional Christian theodicies: the Augustinian and the Irenaean.

3.3.1. Augustinian

This theodicy was first expounded by Augustine, and was followed by such as Aquinas, Calvin, Leibniz and many traditional Catholic and Protestant accounts. Augustine claimed that human beings are responsible for the existence of evil through the misuse of their God-given freedom. Consequently, moral evil is our fault, and natural evil

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38 J. Hick, Evil and the God of Love, Harper row, New York, (1966), ch.xi.

(such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions) is the inevitable result and punishment for that moral evil.

Augustine describes evil as 'non-being', since God only creates good. Evil is therefore good which has gone wrong, or is to be found at the very edge of existence. This line of argument goes on to say that it is better for God to create all the categories of being, including 'good which has gone wrong', in order that the universe can accommodate as many beings as possible. This must then include those who suffer evil as well as those who create it.

This theodicy looks back to 'original sin', the Fall, as its central point for explaining the origins of evil. Man was perfectly created in the form of Adam within a perfect world. Adam sinned deliberately and so his original righteousness was lost and we, as his descendants, have inherited this 'original sin' and 'original guilt' as a punishment for Adam's sin. We are therefore subjected to natural evil. Our ability to approach God and our ability to think and reason about him (theology) has at best been impaired, or, at worst, has been lost completely in the Fall.

Consequently, Augustine said that the universe as we know it is not how God intended it to be - a paradise where evil and suffering do not exist. We therefore need to be saved from this unintentional universe by God's grace, through redemption. We are therefore masters of our own destinies, depending upon our behaviour in this world. Our destiny may be heaven or it may be hell.

3.3.2. Irenaean

Followers of Irenaeus are Schleiermacher, Tennant and many modern liberal accounts. Here, God is held explicitly responsible for the existence of evil in the universe. Moral

evil, however, is our responsibility, and comes about because God made us with the freedom to sin. God is believed to have purposely created a world where natural evil exists in order to create a 'vale of soul-making'. Irenaeus gives no metaphysical explanations, no views concerning 'reality' and 'being'.

Irenaeus believed that God's relationship with the world was essentially a personal one, where the purpose for the creation of human-beings was to have fellowship with God. Where Augustine looked to the past to explain evil, Irenaeus looked to the future, i.e. to heaven, in order to justify the end of evil. In other words, God brings good out of evil.

The Fall was far less catastrophic to Irenaeus. He said that either the Fall of Adam may be likened to the sin of a child; humankind has lost the 'likeness' of God (i.e. perfection) at the Fall, but has retained God's 'image' (i.e. freedom, responsibility etc.), or that humankind was created and evolved in a 'fallen' state, and as such are some distance away from knowing God, and so have the opportunity to grow towards him as they have no direct overwhelming vision of the divine nature.

How the universe is, is how God intended it to be, more-or-less. This 'vale of soul-making' has temptations, risks and ambiguities because that is what God intended. It is only through being subjected to this sort of world that humankind is able to develop faith and virtue, and so learning obedience through suffering in cooperation with the grace of God through creation.

The theology developed through followers of Irenaeus and tends towards a universal approach to salvation. It tends to reject any idea of hell and says that all will be saved in the end. This may be through a continuing process of soul-making after death.

3.3.3. Free Choice

In general, the Church Fathers, such as Augustine and Irenaeus, led to the thinking that evil has no existence and is simply that which lacks any good, and so God has not caused it to be. The free choice, and so sinfulness, of humankind, results in moral evil, and that physical suffering is divine punishment aimed at purifying and cleansing us.

This aspect of free choice, or what is perhaps more commonly known as 'The Free Will Defence' has been a topic of discussion following on from the Church Fathers' thinking. The argument goes that God could not have created us to be free and yet always guaranteed to do the right thing. Some 'Soft determinists' such as Flew and Mackie, would argue that freedom is to be free of external constraint, even if our choices are predictable because they are completely determined. They would say, against the free will defence, that God, being all-powerful, could have given us all such good characters that we would always express ourselves with good actions. On the other hand, the 'Hard determinists' would argue the truth of determinism, saying that it is not appropriate to make moral judgements of 'good' and 'evil'.

John Hick comments on the 'Soft determinists' argument, saying that it has considerable power.

> A modified form of free-will defence has, however, been suggested in response to it. If by free actions we mean actions that are not externally compelled but flow from the nature of agents as they react to the circumstances in which they find themselves, then there is indeed no contradiction between our being free and our actions being 'caused' (by our own God-given nature) and thus being in principle predictable. However, it is suggested there is a contradiction in saying that God is the cause of our acting as we do and that we are free beings specifically in relation to God. The contradiction is between holding that God has so made us that we shall of necessity act in a certain way, and that we are genuinely independent persons in relation to God. If all our thoughts and actions are divinely predestined, then however free and responsible we may seem ourselves to be, we are not free and responsible in the sight of God but must instead be God's puppets. Such 'freedom' would be comparable to that of

patients acting out of a series of post-hypnotic suggestions: they appear to themselves to be free, but their volitions have actually been predetermined by the will of the hypnotist, in relation to whom the patients are therefore not genuinely free agents. Thus, it is suggested, while God could have created such beings, there would have been no point in doing so - at least not if God is seeking to create sons and daughters rather than human puppets.[39]

3.4. OTHER THEODICIES

Whereas the theodicy of the early Church was to look at ways of justifying God from creation and from salvation history, the Reformers played this approach down. The focus of their theology was the justification of humankind 'before God'. The doctrine of justification is the Reformers' response to the question of theodicy. The sinner is justified through God's grace. God thereby shows his grace to be creative, so justifying righteousness, and so justifying himself.

3.4.1. Natural Evil

This expands the thoughts of Irenaeus and what he refers to as a 'vale of soul-making'. Natural evil is the view which says that such things as injury and suffering caused by disease, accidents, earthquakes, fires, floods etc., are necessary if the world is to provide an environment in which we 'free beings' can develop morally. Therefore, in order to be good, we must be susceptible to temptation and not immune from evil. If we lived in a world where there were no suffering or danger, then we could not develop virtues such as compassion and courage. If God were an interventionist God, then he would intervene to prevent the consequences of our moral evil. We would then have a situation where we would not develop a sense that our evil intentions were indeed evil, for there would be no 'bad' consequences for the 'wrong' actions committed.

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39 J. Hick, Philosophy of Religion, Prentice Hall International Inc. New Jersey, (1990), p.42.

We are vulnerable, finite mortals, but it would be a mistake to think of those aspects of our existence as evil in themselves as we try to cope with experiences of natural evil. Some limits and vulnerabilities belong to the goodness of life which God has created. We are subject to the natural laws established by God, and so we are subject to the possibility of pain, illness and grief, failure, incapacity and the certainties of ageing and death. Challenge, struggle and some forms of suffering are a part of the structure of the world in which we live. If we were to wish ourselves immunity from these, that would be to wish that we had not been created at all. For Christians to wish such immunity would be both petty and self-indulgent. Indeed, we would have no need to exert ourselves, our lives would hold little or no challenge, and there would be no difficulties or problems to be overcome. As John Hick puts it:

> The race would consist of feckless Adams and Eves, harmless and innocent, but devoid of positive character and without the dignity of real responsibilities, tasks, and achievements. By eliminating the problems and hardships of an objective environment, with its own laws, life would become like a reverie in which, delightfully but aimlessly, we should float and drift at ease.[40]

3.4.2. Moral Evil

Suffering inflicted by others, such as the torture inflicted by the Nazis upon the Jews in the holocaust of the second world war, is moral evil. Such actions often make the sufferer feel abandoned and helpless, with feelings of injustice, hence the common question 'Why me?' Like the Psalmists we ask "How long, O Lord?"[41]. Jesus

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40 J. Hick, Evil and the God of Love,p.342f.

41 Psalm 13:1.

demonstrated his humanity when he cried out from the cross "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"[42]

3.4.3. Protest Theodicy

This view has a strong sense of the sovereignty of God and tends to question the total goodness of God because tragedy, injustice and murder are so prevalent. If we are to be honest to our experience, then we must surely question that God is love. In questioning what we understand to be the very essence of God, that is, love, then we question his very existence and so this view may equally be called Protest Atheism. Moltmann[43] suggests that protest atheism points beyond both God and suffering and that it sets them against each other, so resulting in an atheistic protest against injustice 'for God's sake'. In such a context, theology could not accept the view of God enthroned in a heavenly splendour which no one can share. Equally, if a person is not affected deeply by grief, that does not do grief any justice. In order to approach the question 'Does God suffer?', Christian theology must examine the significance of the suffering of Christ and recognise what took place between Jesus and God on the cross. Then we may be able to speak of the significance of God in the light of our protest at the suffering and injustice in the world.

To progress beyond protest atheism we need a theology of the cross which helps us to understand God as the God who suffers in the suffering of Christ, so that God and suffering are no longer contradictions.

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42 Mark 15:34

43 J. Moltmann, The Crucified God, pp. 226, 227.

3.4.4. Process Theodicy

This approach has been suggested by such as John Cobb, David Griffin and Marjorie Suchocki, and comes from the perspective of process metaphysics. Here the argument is not a compromise on divine goodness, but a radical restriction of divine power. They speak of God's power as persuasive rather than coercive, saying that persuasion is the only way one power can influence another without violating the freedom of the other. The world is full of beings with freedom and power of their own, so God does not have a monopoly on power. That then leads to the understanding that God is not able to do certain things, such as prevent the holocaust, or prevent the murder of James Bulger, or eliminate cancer.

The argument proceeds that God is indirectly responsible for the existence of evil in the world because God created the potential for evil. That is not to blame God directly for evil, but that he is indirectly responsible. God always intends good and always shares the suffering of his creatures. Some features of this view, though, are far from most biblical witness:

> This is perhaps best seen in the fact that process theodicy, with its teaching that the sovereignty of God's love is metaphysically limited, can make no sense whatever either of the doctrine of creation out of nothing, or of the biblical hope in a definitive eschatological victory over suffering and evil.[44]

3.4.5. Person-making Theodicy

John Hick has developed this theodicy from his interpretations of what he distinguishes between the Augustinian and Irenaean types of theodicy. Whereas Augustine represents

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44 D.L. Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, (1992), p.112.

evil as the consequence of sin, Irenaeus represents the possibility and experience of evil as conditions for the possibility of growth towards a humanity made in the image of God, free and mature. Difficulty arises because both our freedom and human potential can be abused. If there is no real choice between good and evil, and no opportunity of learning by experience, then it is impossible for our characters to form and develop. It is Hick's opinion that God requires us not to be puppets, but to be people who have the freedom to offer worship to God, or not. Consequently, for this freedom to occur, he says we are created incomplete and have the opportunity to participate in the process which leads us to be the sort of people that God wishes us to be.

This theodicy could be criticised for its lack of a social-ethical dimension. It tends to stress growth through the acceptance of suffering, rather than any idea of resisting the sort of suffering that can and should be removed. This notion of learning and achieving growth through suffering may appear to be biblical.[45] Many people have indeed been able to bear witness to the working of God's grace in their suffering experiences, but we also must acknowledge that suffering and evil do sometimes almost destroy their victims to the extent that there is no opportunity for spiritual development.

3.4.6. Liberation Theodicy

Any claim to the notion that God is active in the world to liberate the poor seems to contradict the reality of the experience of those who suffer poverty and oppression. James Cone[46] tackles this problem and refuses to entertain any idea of diminution of either divine power or divine goodness. He does, however, recognise the many different responses in the Bible made to the question of the problem of evil. In the Servant

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45 Hebrews 5:8 - Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered.

46 J. Cone, God of the Oppressed, Seabury Press, New York, (1974), p.183.

Songs of Isaiah, Cone sees the deepest response in the form of redemptive suffering, as well as looking into the New Testament and the life history of Jesus Christ. He says that this tradition supports the idea of human participation in God's struggle against suffering, as, for example, on the cross, since the resurrection is understood to be God's promise of his final victory over evil.

3.5. THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD

Having examined theories concerning the suffering of God and of Christ in our search to find meaning for our own suffering we must attempt to make our own evaluation particularly with regard to children. Pain and suffering is a form of loss, for that which is lost is the freedom from those things. Whether or not a suffering child and their parents or guardians believe in God, it is vital that a Christian carer understands what the Christian approach and understanding is to matters of life and death. Those who are being cared for can still be led towards healing and wholeness through a Christian approach, without being put under explicit pressure to become Christians themselves. Indeed, it may well be that the sufferers are of a different faith. Sensitivity and respect are required whilst remaining true to the Christian position.

Suffering is a reality and a problem. It may be deprivation in childhood which gives life-long emotional turmoil, or it may be a disability. The suffering could be one or more of a painful illness, poverty, bereavement through death, abuse or neglect, separation, divorce, depression or loneliness, or indeed something else. Frequently the question 'Why?' is asked and that is not easy to answer even for the Christian. The Christian faith can lead us in the direction of being able to understand, even if we do not fully achieve that understanding in this mortal life. The biblical story of the suffering of Job shows us how a child's fascination with nature can be a help in understanding suffering. God reminded Job of the wonders of creation and Job's very small part in

that. Again, we are reminded of nature's circle of life and of the necessity of that circle for the continuation of life.

Suffering is due to the kind of world we live in. Human beings are largely responsible for the suffering of other human beings. This tells us that we are responsible for our own actions and words, and for the consequences of them. When it comes to disease and natural disasters, the answer is not so easy. We demand to know why God has not intervened to stop such atrocities as whole towns and villages being wiped out by a volcanic eruption. 'Why?' is a natural question to ask, but not a helpful one. God created a world which is free. We are not chained to God as though we were puppets on a string. We have free will, free choice. If God prevented every evil thing from happening, then our free will and responsible response would be impossible. We would be denied free will and free choice, our response would be restricted.

The acceptance of the reality of death and integrating death into life is a gradual process which takes place as we mature. When a child is involved, the question "Why does death exist?" emerges more forcefully, especially if much suffering has been encountered on the way to death. Perhaps a more helpful way to address the subject, both with adults as well as children, is to try to help them not to allow the suffering to blind them from the lasting and inspiring things of life such as courage, joys and laughter, and happy memories. Young children can be reassured that God is taking good care of their loved ones.

A Christian understands that Christ suffered for his people[47] and shares in our suffering,[48] and that he sympathises with us.[49] God does not take the pain and suffering

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47 Acts 9:4-5.

48 1 Corinthians 12:26-27.

49 Hebrews 4:15.

away. Even Jesus suffered pain, torture and death, but his death on the cross teaches us that suffering is not pointless nor without value. Whilst we would not choose to suffer, when we do we are strengthened by God[50] and it will ultimately lead us to God's blessing.[51] In our suffering we are required to have patient endurance.[52] Maturity, our reaction to suffering, not the suffering itself, can be creative. Fellow sufferers often recognise each other without words being spoken. They may recognise certain qualities in each other, such as humility, meekness and gentleness. Such attributes are often the result of patience, especially patience in suffering. Christ's suffering on the cross may lead us to the hope of glory. We must suffer with Christ if we are to share in his glory.[53] So it is the hope of glory which makes suffering bearable.[54]

It seems to be a common thought to consider pain as evil, yet the feeling of physical pain is the body's warning mechanism, telling us that something is wrong. So something which, in itself, we regard as evil, is in fact a means to good, for the sensation of pain prompts medical action to diagnose the problem and, hopefully, cure it. The problem becomes most acute when the suffering of pain cannot be eliminated and where the results of that pain are long-lasting and produce further physical and psychological suffering. We then, quite naturally, ask why Almighty God, who claims to love us and to care for us, allows us to suffer. Why does God not intervene? Where is God? Are the problems of suffering and of evil the same problem, or are they different things? These questions are pertinent enough when adults experience pain and suffering, but when it is a child who is affected we feel a sense of outrage, we want explanations. Perhaps this need for an explanation comes from our sense of existence

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50 Isaiah 43:2-4.

51 1 Peter 1:6-7.

52 Hebrews 12:1-3.

53 Romans 8:16.

54 2 Timothy 2:11-12; 1 Peter 4:13; Jude 24.

which tells us that pain and suffering are not what we would expect or hope for in this life. It may be that we are afraid that such experiences render both our mortal and the divine existence as absurd?

Suffering and pain is a unique experience to each of us, which is perhaps why we so often feel abandoned by God and question God's goodness or even existence at such times. The scriptural message is that which Elie Wiesel expresses,[55] that God participates in our suffering, sharing it with us. He does so through the love he has for us, a love which is self-giving and so is vulnerable to pain. Jesus identified with people in need[56] and so God entered the world in the form of Jesus, and entered into the experience of human pain and suffering.

To suggest the companion-suffering of God in such terms to a child would be largely unhelpful due to their even more limited ability to comprehend such theology. However, we can express such beliefs of God in the way in which we care for a suffering child. If a Christian is to give care, support and guidance to a suffering child, then they will need to be armed with this awareness of a suffering God who is involved with us in our suffering. Such awareness will permeate the entire being of the carer and so affect how they approach their work in guiding a child towards healing and wholeness. There is a need to have an awareness of God in the world as well as in our lives and to be able to translate the love of a suffering God into the lives of others. Having some understanding of this part of God's nature will aid an objective and sensitive approach to the healing and wholeness of our children, be it physical or emotional healing from anguish, pain and suffering.

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55 See footnote 17.

56 Matthew 25:31-46.

However much understanding adults may have with regard to the suffering nature of human beings and of God, there is still a need to be able to communicate that to children. To tell a child that God suffers with them in their suffering is not likely to be a helpful explanation for them. There is no easy way to explain it clearly, but perhaps one of the best methods is to personalise the explanation. Christians believe in a God of love, and this is the foundation of their faith. The love of God is seen throughout creation, but more expressly through Jesus Christ. In him we see the human face of God. It may help a child if they understand that Jesus also suffered in many ways, and died, and that he came through the experience. Whilst pain and suffering are not desirable by any of us, the suffering experiences of Jesus guide Christians to the certain hope of resurrection, which tells us that Jesus overcame suffering and even death. If he, as a human, could do that, then the hope is that we also will come through our times of suffering and pain. It is often difficult to see beyond the suffering. If we are able to help children to see beyond their suffering to the possibilities and hopes that lie ahead, then we help them towards an experience of healing and wholeness.

3.6 SUMMARY

The problem of evil and suffering is an on-going problem, raising many questions and doubts. In exploring the questions concerning the suffering of God, especially as we examine the suffering of Christ, it is clear that exercising the virtue of patience is important when moving toward a spirituality of loss.

As we seek to help children to understand their experiences of loss and bereavement, and in some way to come to terms with them, it is helpful for us to draw on the resources of the past Christian traditions to inform and guide our thinking. Having briefly examined the traditional theodicies, it can be seen that Augustine expresses what we may consider to be the child within us: if something has gone wrong then it must be

our fault, as God only creates good. With Irenaeus, when we experience loss we seek to negotiate and renegotiate in our attempt to avoid the inevitable loss. The 'free choice' theory perhaps lends the idea that because of our freedom to choose, then the consequences are also our choice, burdening us with guilt. In the next chapter I examine childhood experiences of death and bereavement, from which it will be seen just how much of the traditional theodicies permeate our bereavement experiences.

When working with children suffering loss and bereavement, we can draw on the other theodicies which have been developed to assist children towards a healthy conclusion of their grief. Natural evil tells us that bad things do happen in the world, and there is nothing that we can do to stop them happening. Moral evil suggests that bad people do exist and that sometimes we make bad decisions which have unpleasant consequences. Protest theodicy affirms that it is alright to be angry, and Process theodicy confirms that bereavement is not an event but a process to be worked through. All of these things make us the people we are, which although does not lessen our suffering or pain, does lead us towards a spirituality of loss whereby we are able to grow and develop in maturity and spirituality. Liberation theodicy allows us to be free to explore and ask questions. Questioning usually comes naturally with children, but they often need encouragement, even permission, to question, to doubt, to be angry. When, as adults, we can be better theologically informed concerning the problem of evil and suffering, we shall be in a good position to be able to guide our children towards their own spirituality of loss. Part of that process is dealing with the death of someone or something we love, which I will now examine in greater detail.

CHAPTER 4
CHILDREN AND DEATH

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 4

4.1. CHILDREN AND DEATH

The problem of suffering is just as acute for children as it is for adults. Having explored various theodicies to inform our understanding of why we suffer, I now look specifically at the pain and suffering in children, caused by the death of a loved one.

4.1.1. Historical Changes

As society and culture changes with ever-new and increasing understandings and technological developments, so does the way in which we understand ourselves, our families and our children. To hold a particular view of an aspect of childhood at any given time is not to say that it is right or wrong, but that it is simply the current perspective of this aspect of children's lives, stemming from our current perspective on children and childhood in general. What may have been defined as childhood in the nineteenth century is not likely to be the same definition by people in the late twentieth century.

4.1.2. Childhood and Families

What society understands as the nature of childhood will affect its responses to it. As the understanding of the nature of childhood changes, so do the responses although not necessarily at the same rate or the same time. The eighteenth century witnessed a great deal of child-exploitation in Britain when many children were required to work at a very young age to supplement the lower class family's income. Whilst their physical limitations were recognised, they were expected to undertake work that we would not consider appropriate for children of the twentieth century, such as chimney cleaning and

mine-working. As the understandings of childhood changed through to the nineteenth century, there continued many examples of cruelty, exploitation and neglect of children, even into the twentieth century, clearly indicating that responses do not change at the same rate.

In mid-nineteenth century Britain the differentiation of children from adults had largely been completed in relation to age. This led to the development of professional child care in terms of education, health and social well-being. A grieving child would have been likely to be cared for by the family with support also being given by some neighbours and possibly the Church. Except in the cases of the very young children, the care which grieving children received may have been little different from that received by adults. By the end of the twentieth century we see a very different response to the needs of grieving children as we develop our understanding that the grief process for children, whilst similar to that of adults, is expressed and dealt with in a very different way, requiring a different response from those who care for them.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries especially, the family was seen as the ideal unit in which to raise children. The constitution of the family was not always constant though, as wealthy families would have expected child care to be undertaken by paid servants, whilst poorer families may have shared the responsibility between siblings, extended family and even with neighbours. By the early twentieth century, child care was still viewed in a similar way with regard to the wealthy and poor, but there was much more emphasis on the family unit as the centre of care responsibility for children. By the end of the Twentieth century we are seeing a more fragmented pattern emerging with a higher incidence of working mothers, divorce and single-parent families. Child care is in many cases being passed on to such as grandparents, registered child minders and nurseries. Whilst this is not prescriptive or comprehensive, it is seen as an emerging pattern.

With changing lifestyles and culture, it is clear that there may be numerous definitions of 'family', although as Van Emery[1] suggests there is rarely a definition in social policy. Attitudes and policy decisions tend to be based upon assumptions of the traditional family model which places the father at the head with a subordinate wife who is the child-carer. It is widely believed that this model has been dominant for centuries and so has permeated our ideas about family.

Stereotyping of families is now being questioned as roles and relationships change. Van Emery offers a definition of 'family' which takes into account these many changes, also accounting for the affects of living within a multi-ethnic society.

> One could define family as an emotionally supportive network of adults and children some of whom live together or have lived together.[2]

This definition also accounts for those children who are brought up in residential care and adoptive families. However this may be criticised for being too broad a definition. The assumption is made that all families are emotionally supportive, when in fact there are family units which are destructive and damaging, for example where children are subjected to abuse.

In trying to avoid a broad definition of 'family', we are in danger of applying too narrow a definition. Whenever we seek to define our understanding of the family, it is important that we recognise and include the living arrangements made by some which do not conform to the social norm. For example, homeless people may group themselves together as a 'family' in an attempt to provide self-protection.

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[1] J. Van Emery, Who is "the Family"?: The Assumptions of British Social Policy, Critical Social Policy, (1991/2), p. 33.

[2] J. Van Emery, Who is "the Family"?: The Assumptions of British Social Policy, p.33.

4.1.3. Children, Separation and Loss

Health professionals today acknowledge the importance of the emotional needs of children. Emotional problems arising from situations of separation are now recognised and the care offered is aimed at minimising the problems. Whilst the written and pictorial evidence we have to hand regarding the opinions of professionals of the last century provide us with the view that child healthcare was similar to that given to adults, with little or no child 'comforts', there is evidence to show that health professionals recognised the detrimental effects of separation from their parents on children:

> If you take a sick child away from the parents or nurse (i.e. nanny) you break its heart immediately.[3]

In the latter half of the nineteenth century opinion was growing that hospital care for children was poor and needed to be addressed. This was the case notwithstanding that there was a growing concern for the effects of separation, but it was held that the care provided by a hospital over-rode the emotional problems caused by the separation of being in hospital. It was Charles West, the physician, who founded the Great Ormond Street hospital for children in London, in 1852, who had an affinity and love for sick children. West identified the special needs of children, especially of love and care when in hospital[4], and taught the requirement of special qualities when nursing sick children. The understanding has since been developed further and now the maintenance of a child's self-respect, the importance of play and the involvement of parents and siblings are all acknowledged as being of enormous value.

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[3] G. Armstrong, 1767, and cited by I. Miles in "The emergence of sick children's nursing part 1. Sick children's nursing before the turn of the century", Nursing Education Today, 6: (1986), pp.82-87.

[4] C. West, How to Nurse Sick Children, Longman, Brown, Green and Longman's, London, (1854).

The debate concerning the separation of children from their families continued well into the twentieth century, with emphasis being placed on the psychological and emotional damage caused. This resulted in a number of eminent writers publishing articles and books on the subject.[5] This has all resulted in much care and attention being devoted to the recognition of separation as a source of loss and grief for children and has increased and improved the care given to children.

4.2 ATTACHMENT

It is argued by some that the first experience of separation for all human beings is at birth and that this experience of being expelled from the womb is the origin of all emotional disturbance.[6] Whether or not that is true, it is clear that birth is our first experience of separation and so of loss. It is a loss of security. Such attachment and separation is inevitable in the sustenance and development of human life. There can be no life without attachments and there can be no attachments without eventual separation and loss, and therefore grief. Bowlby has written extensively on this subject of attachment and separation from childhood and how such childhood experiences continue throughout life.[7] Bowlby maintains that the need for attachment is not the same as dependence. The making of affectional bonds is an interactional process and adult attachments are a straightforward continuation of childhood affectional bonds. The desire to love and be loved is something that stays with us all, it is fundamental to human nature. Therefore the possibility of loss is always present.

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5 E.g. J. Bowlby, Forty-four Juvenile Thieves: their characters and home life, Ballière, Tindall & Cox, (1946).

6 O. Rank, The Trauma of Birth, Robert Brumner, London, (1952).

7 J. Bowlby, Attachment: Attachment and Loss. Vol i, Basic Books, London, (1969).

Throughout their development, children need the reassurance of special people in their lives, the people who have the most influence upon them. These attachment figures are of enormous importance and significance when dealing with children suffering loss and bereavement.

Bowlby is the classic author on this subject of attachment and his writings, together with those of Margaret Mahler[8] and Melanie Klein,[9] have informed our thinking. Part of our propensity to learn is devoted to sorting out who we can trust to be there for us in our hour of need, particularly when the need is an emotional or social one.

Attachment is usually to the mother, but it does happen with others too. If mother is lacking in warmth and affection for the child, the child will turn elsewhere in search of those qualities. That may be to another relative, even a sibling or even to more than one person, although in that case the attachments made are not likely to be equal, with one key figure usually taking precedence over the others. Some siblings with an unresponsive mother may become more attached to each other than those who have warmer parents. Children tend to form bonds with the best available person. Some children develop attachments to 'transitional objects' in order to achieve comfort in distress, such as a teddy bear or piece of old towel. The sense of smell is an important and primitive form of attachment, and in such cases if a mother has to go away from her child, she would be well advised to leave a treasured object bearing her personal scent with her child in order to offset the feeling of being abandoned.

If the person to whom the child has formed an attachment is not happy or confident, for example a person suffering from depression or acute bereavement, the attachment will

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8 M.S. Mahler, On Human Symbiosis and the Vicissitudes of Individuation, International Universities Press, (1968).

9 M. Klein, Our Adult World and its Roots in Infancy. Tavistock, London, (1960).

be insecure. In order to reduce anxiety, the child forming the attachment will draw closer to the adult, demonstrating a primitive survival mechanism. However, it fails when the adult is neglectful, dangerous, or full of anxiety themselves. In that case, close proximity is more likely to cause further distress resulting in the child becoming aloof, with an extreme reaction of having no energy for normal activities and learning. A less extreme reaction may be deceleration or a block in emotional development, thus impairing the capacity for mature relationships, so resulting in immature responses.

> The loss of an attachment figure, for whatever reason, can have a profound effect on a child. The risk of these children developing depression in later life is considerably increased, especially when poverty compounds other reasons for anxiety and insecurity.[10]

When it is an important attachment, such as a mother, which is lost to the child, there is the need for a replacement. However that cannot be achieved until the process of grieving is completed because the necessary detachment from the original attachment will not have been completed.

4.2.1. The Grief of C S Lewis

The effects of a child's loss of a mother are described by Lewis[11] as he makes adult reflections on his own childhood loss. His mother died when he was approximately eight years old. She suffered with cancer and her illness was long and drawn out before she eventually died. Lewis describes his childhood feelings of distress when, on one

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10 J.L Tweed, "The effects of childhood parental death and divorce on six month history of anxiety disorders", British Journal of Psychiatry, 154: 823, (1989).

11 C.S.Lewis, Surprised by Joy, Geoffrey Bles, London, (1955).

occasion during his mother's illness, he was crying because he felt ill with a headache and toothache. His distress was compounded because normally his mother would have come to him to care for him and to comfort him. This time was different because she could not come due to her illness. He tells how the real bereavement for both himself and his brother came before his mother's death. The loss of their mother was gradual over a long period of time. Through her long illness she became gradually weaker and so became unable to care for them. For Lewis, there seems to be a sense of his mother having been 'taken', for he continues

> She was gradually withdrawn from our life into the hands of nurses and delirium and morphia, and our whole existence changed into something alien and menacing as the house became full of strange smells and midnight noises and sinister whispered conversations.[12]

The effect was to not only separate him from his mother, but also to separate him from his father as well. Lewis witnessed adult misery and terror which, for him as a child, was paralysing and alienating. As his father's grief was expressed more and more in wilder and more uncontrollable emotions than were normal, Lewis felt a sense of guilt that had he been a better child he might have been able to relieve some of his father's suffering. As a result of this widening separation from his father, Lewis and his brother came to rely more upon each other. They had lost the security of their home and their family. It seemed that all of their life had failed them, but they did have each other.

Encouraged to view his dead mother's body, Lewis recalls nothing but horror against the dead body, as well as the flowers, the hearse and the funeral. He observed that his childhood grief was complicated by other miseries. As a child, Lewis had been taught that prayers offered in faith would be granted. He had tried that, but his mother still

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[12] C.S. Lewis, Surprised by Joy; p.24.

died. He then had to adapt his thinking into a belief that there would be a miracle, which also did not work. His adult reflections on this made Lewis realise that his boyhood approach to God, or at least his idea of God, was without love, without awe, and without fear. He had viewed God more as a magician, not as Saviour, thinking that when God had done as he had been asked, he would go away again.

With the death of his mother, Lewis also lost all settled happiness. Despite the many future occasions in his life when he would experience fun, pleasure and even joy, there would still be no more of the old security that he had felt so safe with.

> It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis.[13]

The dullness which had overtaken the young Lewis' life lasted until his early teens, when he came out of the darkness of his loss and grief. He recognised that he had lost his joy for life, but he had also lost the desire for joy in his life. Prompted by 'Siegfried and the Twilight Gods' he was plunged back into the memories of his past, coming with them the almost heart-breaking memory of joy, and the knowledge that the joy he used to have had been lost for years. Now he was to leave that exile and desert.

> . . . and the distance of Twilight of the Gods and the distance of my own past joy, both unattainable, flowed together in a single, unendurable sense of desire and loss, which suddenly became one with the loss of the whole experience . .[14]

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[13] C.S. Lewis, Surprised by Joy; p.27.

[14] C.S. Lewis, Surprised by Joy; p.75.

It was at this stage that Lewis began writing poetry out of a renewed sense of desire for joy.

Lewis' adult experience of grief and loss came with the death of his wife. His reflections upon this experience led him to equate the feelings prompted by grief with fear. He describes the sensation of grief not as fear, but like it, with the same fluttering of the stomach, and restlessness and tiredness. The effect of grief on the adult Lewis were clearly different from those experienced as a child. The child lost his sense of security, his family life, his mother and his father. The adult lost a friend, a lover and companion. The adult Lewis also lost his powers of concentration. He describes how he was unable to be a part of the world though the world carried on around him. He was simply an observer with great feelings of laziness and lethargy. Through his grief experience he searched for God, but felt that each time the door was slammed in his face.

As a child, Lewis suffered the indifference of his father as well as his father's reluctance to talk about his mother. As an adult grieving the loss of his wife, Lewis experienced indifference and reluctance for himself.

> I cannot talk to the children about her. The moment I try, there appears on their faces neither grief, nor love, nor fear, nor pity, but the most fatal of all conductors, embarrassment. They look as if I were committing an indecency. They are longing for me to stop. I felt just the same after my own mother's death when my father mentioned her. I can't blame them. It's the way boys are.[15]

In childhood, Lewis lost his sense of security, in adulthood he lost intimacy and a joint existence. Both occasions were an experience of the loss of joy and the desire for joy,

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15 C.S. Lewis, A Grief Observed, Faber and Faber, London, (1961), p.10.

albeit for different reasons. The fear which Lewis speaks of is more like being suspended, waiting for something to happen. Life is 'put on hold' and one cannot settle to anything. for the grieving child, life goes on, although differently.

Lewis recognised that sorrow is a process not a condition, and it needs history, not a map. He describes grief as a long valley, where any bend may reveal a totally new scene. Sometimes, though, the scene is unchanged and you seem to be back where you started, as if on a circuitous route.

His adult grief led Lewis to the realisation that his loss included the loss of some of his past, event that which he had never shared with his wife because he had not even known her at the time. He returned to former old haunts where as a single man he knew great happiness, but when there, he found that he did not want to go back and be happy in quite the same way. His wife's death had stripped him of his past.

4.2.2. Mourning

There has been considerable controversy over the years as to whether or not children are capable of mourning. Wolfenstein[16] said that children cannot mourn until there is a complete identity formation, which occurs at the end of adolescence when the person is fully differentiated. Furman[17] and others take the opposite view saying that children can mourn from as early as three years of age when object constancy is achieved. Bowlby suggested the earliest age for the possibility of mourning is six months.[18]

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16 M. Wolfenstein, "How is mourning possible?", Psychoanalytic Study of the Child, 21: pp. 93-123., (1966).

17 E. Furman, A Child's Parent dies: Studies in Childhood Bereavement., New Haven, Yale, (1974).

18 J. Bowlby, Attachment and Loss, Volume 3: Loss, Sadness and Depression, Hogarth , London, (1980).

Part of the controversy is concerned with the definition of mourning, or grief. If it involves becoming detached from the attachment object and recognising oneself as a separate entity, then according to Wolfenstein young children cannot mourn because of their limitation in terms of reality testing, object constancy, and the fact that they use regressive coping mechanisms to deal with loss, and readily find substitute objects.

I would maintain that children do grieve from a very young age and that we need to identify a model of grieving that fits children, rather than imposing an adult model. Before exploring this further, it may be helpful to record what has been identified as the grieving process for adults.

4.3 THE GRIEVING PROCESS

4.3.1. Grief

> Grief has been described as . . the normal but bewildering cluster of ordinary human emotions arising in response to a significant loss, intensified and complicated by the relationship to the person or the object lost.[19]

When we experience the death of someone close to us, we experience the process of grief. It is described as a process rather than an event, for grief is not predictable, nor is it prescriptive or the same experience for each person. There are no time limits and there is no defined order through which the process is worked through.[20] Children may

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19 K.R. Mitchell and H. Anderson, All Our Losses, All Our Griefs, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, (1983), p.54.

20 E. Kübler-Ross in On Death and Dying, Tavistock, London, (1973), and On Children and Death, MacMillan Publishing, Oxford, (1993), refers to a structured process of grieving which seems to imply that each person will go through each phase of the mourning and in a given order.

well experience much of the same feelings and emotions that adults do as they mourn, but for children the difference will lie in their interpretation, understanding and expression. Some people may experience all the stages of grief, some may miss one or more stages out and even return to a stage they have previously encountered. Bearing this in mind, the following is a description of the various stages of grief that may be experienced.

4.3.1.1. Shock

This is usually the first reaction to the news of the death, whether or not the death was expected. It is the feeling of stunned, silent bewilderment when even tears may not be shed. There may be the feeling that this is happening to someone else, that the receiver of the news is in some way an observer, as C.S. Lewis described. This initial reaction may last a few hours or a few days. As the reality of the death begins to become clearer, the shock may alternate with feelings of intense despair or sorrow and anger.

Numbness is closely akin to shock. It is the sense of something happening around us, and not being part of it. As has been mentioned, C.S. Lewis[21] speaks of grief in terms of fear, with the same fluttering of the stomach, restlessness, and tiredness with the sensation of being mildly drunk and the lack of concentration that goes with it. Denial, also, is a common occurrence, with the bereaved refusing to accept what has happened, even though they have the evidence to support the death.

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21 C.S. Lewis, A Grief Observed.

4.3.1.2. Anger

After the shock and denial, when the news of the death really sinks in to the conscious and the denial can no longer be maintained, it may well be replaced with feelings of rage, envy or resentment. This can be a difficult stage for other members of the family to cope with, since the anger is often, but not always, irrational, unfocused and inconsistent.

4.3.1.3. Bargaining

If a person has been unable to face the sad facts of the death, and have been angry with others and/or with God, they may feel that they can succeed in entering into some sort of bargain which may postpone the inevitable from happening. This stage may usually be more prevalent as part of the preparatory grief when their loved one is still in the final stages of dying. A fifteen year-old girl stood by the bed-side of her dying mother who was unconscious, pleading and bargaining with her mother, offering to do all manner of things, or change into a better person, if only her mother would get well. Some try to bargain with God, but any such bargain is really only an attempt to postpone what must happen - the death of a loved one.

4.3.1.4. Depression

Having appeared to have been unsuccessful with the bargaining, depression may well set in. Whether the person is still dying or has died, depression is a fairly common experience in the grief process. There is a sense of hopelessness and utter despair that the future will not be as planned, if indeed any future is envisaged at all. With depression comes lethargy and tiredness, and sometimes irritability. Everything

becomes a major effort which drains what little energy exists. This is the experience of the tunnel without a light at the end.

4.3.1.5. Acceptance

This is the stage when the death, or the impending death, is acknowledged. Anger and depression have been worked through and there arrives a sense of seeing a light at the end of the tunnel, that this is not the end of life, but more a new chapter, or a new path on a journey. It is an acceptance that life goes on without the deceased. That is not to say that there are feelings of happiness, but a quiet acceptance of change which was not welcome.

These are the general stages of grief as described by Kübler-Ross. The stages have not been described in detail and it must be re-emphasised that this is a very general description of the grief process.

4.3.2. Childhood Grief

Although children do show symptoms of grief when attachments are broken, the main issue centres around the child's cognitive development. A certain level of cognitive development is required in order to have some understanding of death, because what is not understood cannot be integrated. In order to fully understand death some of the necessary cognitive concepts are those of time (including eternity), transformation,

irreversibility, causality and concrete operation.[22] Piaget suggests that concrete operations are developed only in children beyond the ages of seven or eight.[23]

Current understanding of child development is that a child aged between 18 and 24 months does not understand that a physical object has an existence separate from his or her sensory perception and manipulation.[24] Object constancy is achieved between the ages of two and five years and the child has a better, although incomplete, understanding of death, although it may not be understood as being a permanent state. At this age, children may present many similar symptoms of grief and loss as experienced by adults, but the child may perceive the loss as being their own fault due to their own sense of badness. It is at this stage and age that a child is likely to idealise the person who has been lost.

From the ages of five to seven, there is a better understanding of death and its permanency but a lack in ego skills to deal with the intensity of feelings that are experienced. Above the age of seven, grief in a child or adolescent becomes more like that of an adult, with improving skills of understanding and coping.

Children do mourn, but differences in mourning are determined by the cognitive and emotional development of the child, which are not necessarily prescriptive at any given age. Age is only a general guide. Children between the ages of five and seven are particularly vulnerable as they tend to have a more developed cognitive understanding of death, but lack the skills or capacity for coping in order to defend themselves. It is

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22 J. Polombo, Parent loss and childhood bereavement, Conference on Childhood and Death, University of Chicago, (1978).

23 J. Piaget and B. Inhelder, The Psychology of the Child. Basie Books, New York, (1969).

24 J.H. Flavell, Cognitive Development. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, (1977).

also worth noting that mourning may not end for a child, if indeed it does end at all, in quite the same way as it does for an adult:

> Mourning for a childhood loss can be revived at many points in an adult's life when it is reactivated during important life events. One of the most obvious examples is when the child reaches the same age as the parent who died. When this mourning is reactivated, it does not necessarily portend pathology, but is simply a further example of "working through."[25]

4.3.3. Recognising Grief in Children

One myth relating to common grief has already been offered, that of a predictable and orderly stage-like progression through the experience of grief and mourning. Other myths with particular reference to grief in children are that a child's grief and mourning only last for a short period of time, and that the goal in helping bereaved children is to 'get them over' their grief and mourning.[26] Children will respond to grief in a variety of different ways, just as adults do. It is important that we allow children to express their grief in a way that is helpful and appropriate for them. There is no fixed pattern of grief, nor is there a timetable within which grief may be expected to be completed.

There are some common immediate reactions among grieving children: shock and disbelief, dismay, protest, apathy or even an apparent total denial, when the child carries on with the usual activities as though nothing had happened. By denying the loss children are able to hold their grief at a distance as a mechanism of self-protection,

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25 J. William Worden, Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy, Routledge, London, (1995), p.125.

26 A. Wolfelt "Ten common myths about children and grief", Bereavement Magazine, (January 1992), pp.38-40.

enabling them to cope with this new event at their own pace. Other children may well respond immediately with despair and become emotionally exhausted.

After the initial reactions, there may be a wide range of grief responses from children which may manifest themselves in anger, guilt, sadness, anxiety, disturbed sleeping patterns as well as physical symptoms such as bed-wetting and illnesses. As has already been discussed, the child's place in the family unit and its relationship within it is likely to be a clear marker as to how a sense of loss will be dealt with. Healthy grief opportunities for children require an acknowledgement from adults that childhood grief exists. From this will develop the urge to offer reassurance to the child when possible. This is especially important when the loss involves parental separation or divorce. The child needs to feel significant and safe. In the case of loss by death, reassurance may be needed that the surviving child is not going to catch the same disease and die.

4.3.4. Communication

Honest answers to children's questions must be given, albeit in terms that they are able to understand. That may be in the form of a story,[27] but it is important to be truthful and not to say anything which will have to be corrected later in the child's life. How we communicate and the words we use are vital, as the following case study demonstrates:

> **Jennifer - 4 years old**
>
> Jennifer was a healthy, normal four year old who attended nursery school. Four months after her paternal grandmother had died, Jennifer developed an obsession with concerns about dying. Grandmother had died unexpectedly after a short illness. Jennifer had rarely seen her grandmother as she lived several hundred miles away. She and her parents and younger brother had visited

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27 See D. Stickney, Waterbugs and Dragon Flies, Pilgrim, New York, (1982).

grandmother in hospital three days before she died. Jennifer had been told that her grandmother was very sick and that the purpose of their visit was to "make Grandma feel better." Jennifer's first comment to her grandmother was "Please feel better, Grandma." She was very concerned when they left the hospital about whether they had made her grandmother better.

After grandmother's death, Jennifer seemed unaffected, although she was very solicitous towards her grieving parents. Jennifer and her brother stayed with family friends for four days while their parents attended the funeral.

Over the course of the next few months, Jennifer repeatedly asked why her grandmother had died, since she had tried to make her better. Any mention of death, dying or illness provoked specific questions about her grandmother's death and about being dead. Her parents had answered her in terms of "going to heaven to be with God." They had tried to reassure Jennifer that her grandmother had liked Jennifer's visit to the hospital and had been very happy to see her.

Jennifer began to ask if she would die and became tearful and clinging when told that everyone had to die one day, but not usually until they are old. At nursery school Jennifer had wept uncontrollably when the class pet hamster had died just two months after the death of her grandmother, and she was most perplexed when the dead hamster was replaced with another hamster the next day. Jennifer had asked if she would get a new grandmother.

Both parents had tried to answer Jennifer's questions as openly and honestly as possible, but the persistent questioning had become irritating and so they told Jennifer they did not want to discuss death and dying any more, especially since talking about her grandmother's death made her father sad.

Some time after this, Jennifer demanded a night-light and began going into her parent's bedroom once or twice each night "for no reason."[28]

Choice of words is important when speaking with children. Jennifer took her parent's words literally when going to visit in the hospital and became understandably distressed when grandmother not only did not feel better, but died. Jennifer's natural need to query death and dying was not adequately dealt with and so led to her obsession with the subject.

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28 O.J.Z. Sahler and E. R. McAnarney, The Child from Three to Eighteen, Mosby, St Louis, Toronto, (1981), pp.79-80.

Very often a good means of enabling a child to express their thoughts and feelings is through the medium of artwork. By drawing or painting pictures children may be given opportunities to express their understanding, their anger or any other emotion, through not only what they draw or paint, but through the colours they choose to use as well. Activities such as clay modelling or other model-making may also be an invaluable aid in helping children to express their grief. Imaginative play and specific games may also help the grieving process. The use of storybooks is a good way of helping children relate to what has happened and of encouraging them to talk about their own experience. The use of scrapbooks and photograph albums is another way of allowing children to remember and keep alive their memory of the person or object that has been lost.

Keeping open the lines of communication with children is vital if they are to be helped to express their grief. When talking with children about death it may be helpful to do so in terms with which they are most familiar, such as the many deaths they witness in nature.

> Look in the woods. See those plants that are dying. Most of them will be dead before long. But look there. Other shoots are beginning to come up. Nature constantly renews itself. It's the same for people. Living and dying are part of human unfolding. Four billion of us are here on the planet Earth. someday we will be no more. All things have a life-span - our bodies, trees, flowers, animals, and plants. Yet there will be other people, trees, flowers, animals, plants to inhabit the world. Everything that is alive is the renewal of something that died, cell for cell. These are the cyclic rhythms of nature - night and day, phases of the moon, seasons, lives of insects, seeds, plants, animals, people.[29]

In exploring our understanding of death in this way with children, there is also a need to give a clear understanding of the value and beauty of life. Some children have attempted suicide in the hope of joining the deceased in paradise.

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29 E.A. Grollman, Talking about Death: A dialogue between parent and child, Beacon Press, Boston, (1990), p.45.

4.4 Theological Reflections

Death reminds us that life is precious and so when we come to explore the place of God in life and death we begin to ask big questions about God. For the Christian the answer is 'love'. Because we love we will experience grief at some stage in our lives. Grief is a consequence of human love. When the person we love is no longer there for us to love and care for, the one answer that can usually help is that love overcomes the finality of death. Death is the ultimate challenge to the power of love to overcome life's limitations.

> Who can bear to look at this picture [of death]? Only he who can look at another picture behind and beyond it - the picture of LOVE. For love is stronger than death. Every death means parting, separation, isolation, opposition, and not participation. Our souls become poor and disintegrate insofar as we want to be alone [in our grief], insofar as we bemoan our misfortunes, nurse our despair, and enjoy our bitterness, and yet turn coldly away from the physical and spiritual needs of others . . .
>
> . . . Love overcomes separation, creates participation . . . . love is the infinite which is given to the finite.[30]

Love in grief is a powerful force. Our grief can turn inwards, or we can turn outwards and find there is someone there to love us - God. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says:

> Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.[31]

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30 P. Tillich, "Love is Stronger Than Death.": New Being, Editor Charles Schribner, (1955).

31 Matthew 5:4.

Although we may recognise the necessity to actively grieve, there may be times when we choose not to grieve. To choose not to grieve may be detrimental to our emotional and spiritual well-being. If we take those words of Jesus at face value, then we understand that if a person does not mourn, they cannot be comforted. Those who do mourn can be blessed because they can be comforted. when we put on a brave face, or attempt to bury our grief we deny the opportunity for the care that can bring comfort.

Whilst the activity of grieving may be optional, the feeling response of grief is not. Theologically and pastorally it is important to recognise each individual's freedom to grieve. Christian discipleship requires us to be sorrow-bearers. We bear the grief of others because we profess to be followers of Jesus who also suffers, and who reveals God as one who suffers. Consequently, we cannot avoid or ignore sorrow or those who grieve. Our Christianity embodies Christ's compassion for the world and so we willingly bear the sorrow of others, we bear one another's burdens. We are not embittered or broken down by all this sorrow-bearing because we live in fellowship with Christ. Our sorrow-bearing is carried out in the strength of him who bears us up. Sorrow cannot wear us down because we are comforted by Christ. The basis of that comfort is love.

When children experience grief, it is important that we help them to express their grief in a manner which is both helpful and healthy, based upon love. When children are valued as individuals, they are recognised as human beings who have needs. Those needs include being enabled to express their feelings and emotions about matters which upset them or confuse them, such as death. When we approach the subject with love and respect for the child, we give them the freedom to grieve in the way which is most appropriate for them in their situation and age.

4.5. SUMMARY

I have now examined the process of grief and how, historically, our culture has influenced our attitude towards death and continues to do so. Psychologically we form attachments to the significant people in our lives from a very age and so considerations of death and the grief process are of great importance as we seek to help bereaved children.

I now consider loss experiences which children may encounter through parental divorce and separation, and also through abuse, and I explore some of the ways in which we may draw on our knowledge and experience of spirituality to guide children towards a sense of healing.

CHAPTER 5
CHILDREN AND LOSS

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 5

5.1. CHILDREN AND LOSS

It is my aim at this point to identify some of the types of loss, other than death, which may be experienced in childhood, to discuss some of the effects of these losses and to suggest ways in which we may help children to cope with them.

5.1.1. Developmental Loss

5.1.1.1 Infancy and Early Childhood

As discussed in the previous chapter,[1] separation and loss are something we experience from birth. The birth event may be seen as the first experience of loss, followed by the weaning process when the child develops the ability to consume food other than milk. Many such developmental losses are regarded as insignificant, but I would suggest that unless such losses are resolved in childhood, it will significantly impair their ability to cope with loss in adulthood. Resolving such losses in childhood helps to provide opportunities for experiencing personal growth and developing strength of character.

Bowlby's[2] research has clearly shown that from as early as the age of six months, children develop strong attachments to those involved in the primary giving of care, and that they also experience grief when separated from them, however briefly. Bowlby also indicates that he believes children are capable of resolving their losses if they have a reasonably secure relationship with their primary care-givers, usually the parents, prior

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1 J. Bowlby, Attachment: see note 5 in chapter 4.

2 J. Bowlby, Attachment and Loss Volume 1: Attachment and Attachment and Loss Volume 2: Separation, Anxiety and Anger, Hogarth, London, (1973).

to the loss. In order for them to share in the family grieving they must be given information about the loss as accurately and as soon possible.

Having established that children do grieve, we must be careful to appreciate that their losses differ from adults in several ways. Children, not being fully developed, are less able to cope with loss than adults because their experience is lacking and they generally do not have sufficient cognitive skills to deal with them. Accordingly, they have less ability to make sense of their experiences. Not having control over their circumstances and environment is another factor when considering the needs of grieving children. Children are dependent on adults for these things and so it has to be the responsibility of the adults to anticipate and fulfil the needs of the children. If children are able to make sense of and express their needs, these may often be overlooked or vetoed by adults, especially if the adults are also grieving. A child's experience of loss may seem so trivial to an adult that the loss is not given the importance it deserves. The loss of a treasured doll can be of great significance to a child. If such a loss is not acknowledged and the child is not encouraged or enabled to express their grief, they are denied the opportunity to mourn and thereby the means to resolve their grief.

5.1.1.2. Later Childhood and Adolescence

The older children become the greater is their experience of life and of loss. Their interpretation and understanding of events becomes clearer as does their ability to make sense of their experience. Even at this stage their ability to cope with loss and to express their grief will be largely dependent upon how they were enabled and encouraged to deal with loss and grief as infants.

Generally, children between the ages of five and ten have developed sufficient cognitive skills to distinguish between a temporary loss and a permanent loss.[3] They and adolescents experience loss and grief in very similar ways to adults, although their expression of grief may be different. They may cry and sob, and show signs of yearning and searching for the absent parent. Anger is more apparent in ten to twelve year olds, with demonstrations of hostility towards the parent they see as being responsible for the divorce. Adolescents have the added difficulty of feeling that they are not children and yet neither are they adults. They tend to be embarrassed about expressing what they see as childish feelings and yet still do not possess the maturity to deal with loss and grief as an adult would. This sometimes produces added tensions of frustration and anger for them. They may refuse to see one of their parents, or resort to physical violence while at the same time showing signs of mental bewilderment in their schoolwork. A sudden awareness of their parents' sexuality may undermine their belief in parental stability and make them feel unloved. Alternatively, some adolescents will respond by taking on extra responsibility and increase in maturity and independence.

Puberty is another period in the life of children which may be considered as a loss experience. It is a necessary change over which there is no control, being an essential progression towards adulthood. For many children, particularly girls as they begin to menstruate, it may be distressing. It is essential that at such times children have the support of caring adults who are sufficiently close to them to enable them to resolve their feelings of loss. Although such experiences of comfort offered in distress will be rarely remembered, they will be integrated into the children's experience and so provide a firm foundation for their ability to cope with losses in the future.

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[3] A. Dyregrov, Grief in Children:A Handbook for Adults, Jessica Kingsley, London, (1992), p.11.

5.2. EXTERNAL LOSS

Other types of childhood losses occur which cause children to grieve. There may be a great variety of such experiences, such as being cared for by a childminder while parents are working, starting school, changing schools, moving house, the break-up of friendships, serious illness or hospitalisation and the death of a pet. This list is not exhaustive. Children may react to such events differently, depending upon their parent's or primary care-giver's attitude to loss in childhood. A common feeling of loss in a child occurs when a sibling is born. The older child has to come to terms with the fact that they are no longer the centre of attention and that time spent with parents has to be shared and even occasionally sacrificed.

5.2.1. Major Loss Events

I will now examine two specific losses in the life of children which are either becoming more prevalent or prominent in society. This is in no way to belittle the losses previously mentioned, but merely to highlight current trends and the associated experiences of loss and bereavement.

5.2.1.1. Parental Separation and Divorce

Whatever our opinion is regarding what the family is or should be, recent years have seen dramatic changes in the incidence of parental separation and divorce. Such changes in the composition and circumstances of families has serious consequences on the levels and distribution of income within families, particularly with the greater instability of the family unit that is being experienced. There has been considerable research into the changing nature of family life which has demonstrated the changes

since 1960, with statistics revealing that cohabitation is very common, with fifty-eight per cent of women marrying for the first time between 1985 and 1988 having previously cohabited with their husbands, as compared to thirty three per cent of those marrying in the late 1970's, and only six per cent of those marrying a decade earlier.[4] The number of children born outside marriage nearly doubled in the eight years to 1988, totalling some 177,000.[5] Divorce rates doubled during the 1970's to twelve per thousand marriages, but they have remained fairly constant since then.[6] By 1991, nineteen per cent of families were run by single parents,[7] of which ninety per cent were headed by mothers.[8] Approximately 150,000 couples and 150,000 children experience divorce each year.[9]

With statistics such as these, there is clearly an increasing need to recognise the loss experienced by many children when their parents separate and become divorced. Traditionally, the family has been a source of security and role models. The instability of the family due to marriage break-up has seriously threatened the existence of a safe arena for children to learn and develop. Many children are now experiencing the trauma of the loss of a parent and the loss of security of what has been until now a solid unit within which to grow and develop. Many children find themselves at the centre of custody battles, having to share their time between parents and often not being given any choice, or any understanding of their emotions and sense of loss. Very often the loss of a stable family environment will be accompanied by further losses: loss of income resulting in reduced opportunities for buying commodities such as food, toys,

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4 International Year of the Family UK, Factsheet, 1, unpublished paper.

5 K. Kiernan and M. Wicks, Family Change and Future Policy, Family Policy Study Centre, (1990).

6 Social Trends, HMSO, (1994), p.24.

7 K. Kiernan and M. Wicks, Family Change and Future Policy

8 L. Burghes, One-Parent families: Policy Options for the 1990's, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, (1993).

9 Lord Chancellor's Department, Looking to the Future:Mediation and Divorce, HMSO, (1993).

clothing or holidays; the need to move house or schools; loss of contact with other family members; loss of free time in order to fit in visits with the estranged parent and the loss of family pets.

5.2.1.2. The Effects of Parental Separation and Divorce upon Children

Often being long drawn-out events, separation and divorce prompts different reactions among children according to their age, personality, the relationships they have with each of their parents, the presence or absence of brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, grandparents or other significant people in their life.[10] Children will observe and be affected by the impact and consequences of separation and divorce among their friends, family and neighbours.

Separation and divorce is likely to be a continuous process of change and adjustment for all concerned, including the children. The effects of these changes will affect the children involved, as will the insecurity which accompanies such change. It is therefore important to ensure that children are given as much information about what is happening as soon as possible.

More often than not, children are separated from their fathers when a marriage breaks up. It is generally acknowledged that there is a unique bonding between a mother and her children and separation from the mother, unless under extreme circumstances, is not recommended for the sake of the well-being of the children. Bowlby has written at length on the responses of young children to separation from their mother or mother

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10 A. Mitchell, Children in the Middle, Living through Divorce , Tavistock, London, (1985), and J.S. Wallerstein and J.B. Keely, Surviving the Break-up: How Children and Parents Cope with Divorce, Grant McIntyre, London, (1980).

figure[11] and as would be expected, the results from his research reveal varying reactions between different age groups. The reactions are fairly consistent with those of the loss of a father, but when the mother is absent, there seems to be the likelihood of intense and extreme reactions. Whether the loss is that of a mother or a father, it is clear that such loss will deprive any children of either a feminine or male role model, and their development is likely to reflect such loss.

> Father-absent boys appear to be more feminine, that is, more dependent and less aggressive, than father-present boys, especially if the child was younger than 4 years of age at the time of separation . . . .
>
> Father absence appears to be positively correlated with aggressive acting-out or antisocial behavior, perhaps as a reaction formation or an overcompensation for the more feminine type of passive behaviors that boys have learned from their mothers.[12]

I do not propose to dwell any further on the differences in reactions between the loss of a mother or a father, but rather to concentrate on the general reactions to the loss of a parent or parent-figure.

In the absence of a parent, babies may show distress by crying and evidence other physical symptoms. Toddlers aged two and three may be confused and frightened. At this age they have not developed the skills of communication and understanding to be able to know or express their feelings in a manner that is likely to be understood. They may well feel a sense of rejection. Children, particularly in the ages five to seven, may feel guilty, thinking they are to blame for the situation and so may behave exceedingly well in the hope that the absent parent will return. Alternatively, they may react in the opposite way and behave very badly in the hope that their parents will come back

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[11] J. Bowlby, Attachment and Loss Volume 2: Separation, Anxiety and Loss.

[12] O.J.Z. Sahler, The Child from Three to Eighteen, p.97.

together in order to sort out the behavioural problem. Such behaviour, either good or bad, is not likely to be a conscious decision on the part of the child, but one that is made subconsciously in line with their personality and upbringing.

> All children of divorce consider themselves or their actions pivotal factors on the break-up of their parent's marriage regardless of whether their presence or activities contributed directly to the disintegration of the nuclear family. The wish for the reunion of the biological parents is very strong and often persists into adolescence.[13]

Some children appear to be unmoved by the situation, masking their hidden sadness. Children of all ages may regress in their behaviour, resorting to bed-wetting, baby talk, possessiveness and sleep disturbances. What is very common among children under such circumstances is a state of anxiety concerning the loss. The children may be afraid of being left alone and so cling to the remaining parent. As Bowlby indicates,[14] the loss leads to sadness, anger and anxiety in the children. Often the intense feelings of sadness are demonstrated in the form of anger, bitterness and resentment towards the remaining parent. The children may experience a depression and if issues remain unresolved, it may have long-term damaging effects upon them.[15]

Living through the experience of separation and divorce is a learning process and for the children who are separated from one of their parents, it is a continual and repeated loss. The 'lost' person continues to exist somewhere and if there are regular visits with the 'lost' person, the children's experience of loss is repeated after each visit. Such emotional pain and bewilderment can have the Johne effect as a wound which never

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13 O.J.Z. Sahler, The Child from Three to Eighteen, p.97

14 J. Bowlby, Attachment and Loss Volume 2: Separation Anxiety and Anger, p.22

15 J.S. Wallerstein and S. Blakeslee, Second Chances, Corgi, London, (1990).

heals. It is therefore essential to consider the very real needs of children in such circumstances, to understand their fears and anxieties and to make an attempt to be helpful and honest with them.

5.2.1.3. Communicating with Children

When encouraging children to express their feelings concerning their losses, we should, perhaps, note the observations of Fraiberg:

> Children hate being questioned. Furthermore not one of these questions can be honestly answered unless our youngster knows just what sort of person we are. If we give him time, he will find out what he wants to know about us . . . this junior interviewer can find out more about us in fifteen or twenty minutes than we can find out about him in the same amount of time.[16]

A child suffering the loss of a parent needs the opportunity to talk, often with an impartial third party. The comments above make it clear that we must be careful to ensure that we do not bombard the children with questions. Rather, we should create an atmosphere where they feel comfortable, able to ask their own questions and develop a trusting relationship with the third party.

How a child may talk or interpret their feelings will largely depend upon their age, skills and communication ability. Having established a comfortable environment for the child, it is often helpful to provide drawing and painting equipment as a simple starting point in making contact with the child. It is a safe and unthreatening environment.

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16 S. Fraiberg, "Some Aspects of Casework with Children I: Understanding the Child client." in E. Holgate (editor) Communicating with Children, Longman, (1952), p.62.

Kroll[17] suggests encouraging the child to draw whatever comes into their mind, leaving the child free to choose and connect ideas in any way they choose. That can then be used as the basis for a discussion. The medium of art is one through which most children are able to communicate their innermost feelings at a stage in their lives when they are unable to formulate or express them verbally. Similarly, the playing of games provides a means of exploring issues of closeness, distance, trust and loyalty.

> Such issues were of crucial importance both in the context of parental separation, and in terms of the child's wider world - even though the family appeared to be shattered, it was often reassuring for the child to be enabled to recall and count all the other significant people in their lives, so that they felt less alone and more secure. Issues of reliability and safety could also be explored - who can I rely on most? Who makes me feel most safe or least safe?[18]

Addressing issues directly can be very difficult for children, so indirect methods of communication are often helpful, such as suggesting conversations between toys or objects in the room, or by making telephone calls on a toy telephone. Children are usually good at, and enjoy, using their imagination and so will often be happy to play in this way and at the same time reveal their feelings and emotions. Kroll describes one such event in her work with children of divorcing parents:

> Andrew and Kathy chose to use alternative means of communication at a stage when they seemed ready to express some of the anger they were feeling towards both their parents. Both children decided to tape their voices, initially saying light hearted things and then playing them back, but subsequently using the

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17 B. Kroll, Chasing Rainbows - Children, Divorce & Loss, Russel House, Lyme Regis, (1994), p.53. Brynna Kroll trained as a Probation Officer and then moved into more specialised work with children.

18 B. Kroll, Chasing Rainbows: Children, Divorce & Loss, p.60.

machine to shout into, as though listening to the shouting confirmed for them some sense of their own power. Kathy also taped herself saying "No! No! No!" a litany that became a theme for that particular session, in which she appeared to be determined to drown out the sound of any discussion about the reality of what was happening in her family.[19]

5.2.1.4. Lifestyle Changes

It is a common feature for children to take on the role of the absent parent, either because that is what is expected of them, or that is what they expect of themselves. Adult concerns and worries seem to be transferred to some children, leading to the feeling that they are somehow responsible for the behaviour and actions of the absent parent. Such emotional stress can lead to physical ailments, particularly psychosomatic symptoms. Problems at school, poor concentration, tiredness and tension in their relationships with others are all symptoms of this stress. How children react to separation from a parent may partly depend upon the extent of present parental conflict rather than past conflict. It can be difficult for children to understand that they are still loved by both parents even when the parents no longer love each other. Contact with both parents is to be encouraged in most situations, and how the access is managed will be crucial to the well-being of the children. A child who is denied access to a parent may feel rejected by the absent parent and perhaps become prone to emotional problems and depression. This sense of loss could be intense and possibly permanent.

The loss of a parent inevitably leads to the loss of the lifestyle previously enjoyed. Routines will change and there may be financial repercussions causing the necessity for both parents to spend less time with the children. The children may also be subjected to overindulgence by well-meaning relatives in their efforts to compensate for the loss. Such overindulgence may then be used by the children as an unsound emotional crutch.

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19 B. Kroll, Chasing Rainbows: Children, Divorce & Loss, p.68.

In some cases, the loss of a parent may well also lead to the loss of the family of the absent parent, thus compounding the sense of loss for the children further.

Whilst remarriage may return a gender balance to the family unit and provide the missing role-model which is lost when one parent leaves, remarriage is not necessarily the solution to the problems experienced by the children. Remarriage brings with it potential problems and aggravations, especially if there are very young children who hold the conviction that their parents will eventually be reunited. Children may resent the intrusion of a third party taking over the role of the absent parent. They may resent having to share their mummy with someone else. Even more likely is resentment to the introduction of the new partner's children. Patience and understanding are necessary to overcome such difficulties.

5.3 INNER LOSS

Separation is not the only cause of loss for children. They may also experience a wide range of inner losses such as loss of identity, loss of confidence and loss of self-esteem, which may or may not be linked to external events. The cause of such losses may be varied:

> Take, for example, the case of Jamie, who at seven couldn't remember which of three surnames he was using that particular week; or Donna who after seven burglaries at her home in six months refused to sleep alone or let her mother out of her sight. Luke at the age of 15 suffered a tremendous loss of self-esteem and expectations when he failed to do as well in his exams as he had hoped.[20]

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20 B. Lindsay and J. Elsegood, (editors) Working with Children in Grief and Loss, Baillière Tindall, London, (1996), p.59.

Articulation of such inner losses is often difficult for the child and may be presented in the form of behavioural difficulties or physical symptoms.

5.3.1. Child Abuse

This is another form of inner loss for a child which is extremely difficult for a child to articulate and is very often only evident through behaviour and physical appearance or symptoms. It is an emotive subject which requires sensitivity and patience.

5.3.1.1. What is Child Abuse?

A formal definition of 'Child Abuse' may be that it occurs when any avoidable act, or avoidable failure to act, adversely affects the physical, mental or emotional well-being of a child. It is something that should not have happened, even if it was not deliberate. An example of an avoidable and deliberate action is if a child is struck with a hand or instrument. If an angry parent picks up and shakes a fractious child so vigorously that it unintentionally causes the child to have a brain haemorrhage, that is considered to be an avoidable act and does not lessen the cruelty to the child even though it was not deliberate.

Failure to act is also a cruel form of abuse. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children may deal with more referrals of neglect than almost all the other categories of abuse with which they have to deal, which are physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and leaving a child alone.

We may see pictures of children in Romanian orphanages and be horrified by the apparent neglect, yet rarely do we see such pictures of children in our own country,

despite the existence of a great many instances of children being subjected to squalid living conditions and neglect. The NSPCC have recorded many such cases, such as that of a three year old girl who was timid and inadequately dressed, thin and underweight for her age. She had no toys to play with and did not know what play was. She did not know that she had a name - her parents only ever called her "Oi! - Oi! You!" She came to believe that her name was Oi. It transpired that the girl's mother had been divorced and had remarried. The child's stepfather had resented and rejected her and as he was a strong and cruel man with a temper, the mother was so frightened of him that she dare not show that she cared for her child at all. Abuse, then, may be physical or emotional and executed in many forms.

Bullying is another form of abuse, with many victims in recent years being driven to suicide, unable to escape from the horror. A child abused at home may become withdrawn and isolated as a result, and will have been identified by other children at school as being in some way different, because they are not sociable. It may be interpreted as snobbery, aloofness or indifference, but they then tend to become targets for bullying, which compounds their horror of living. The victim may be used as a scapegoat, getting into trouble through no fault of their own. It may then become a vicious circle, especially if the abused child's parents are not prepared to intervene at school. The child will then learn tolerance of pain and injustice, and because they have learned to believe that it must be their own fault, they make no attempt to defend themselves, so inviting increased incidences of bullying. Bullying is not harmless fun, it is far more serious than that.

Bullying may be meted out by school teachers too. If a child being abused at home as not been able to keep up with homework, they may become the targets of abuse by teachers through, for example, having to suffer humiliation in front of the rest of the class. It should be noted that victims of bullying are not necessarily victims of abuse at home.

5.3.1.2. Loss Resulting from Abuse

That which is lost as a result of abuse will depend upon the type of abuse inflicted, but generally the loss may include such as self-esteem and the ability to create lasting relationships. The following account of John's life reveals clearly the extent of loss due to abuse (the name has been changed to protect his identity).

John is now approaching retirement age and lives reasonably happily in rented accommodation. As a child he was raised in an orphanage and was very happy until around the age of five. His first five years are recalled as ones in which he knew love and affection. Then he was taken to live with his new mother. John had never known what it was to have a mother and all began well, even though it was not an ordinary home - there were other lodgers, since it was a boarding house. After the first few months of being reasonably happy, John returned home from school one day to be told that he could no longer sleep in the 'boarder's' room and he was given the attic with no bed and no food. He resorted to street begging in order to stay alive.

John's adoptive mother was inconsistent with her attitude towards him. She loved him and she battered him. Two years later, John returned home from school just a few minutes late and was punished by being struck by his mother. In the course of the attack a pan of boiling water was knocked over and fell onto John's leg, which was permanently damaged thereafter. The doctor saw John in a boarder's room, but his mother was sitting across the other side of the room scowling at him. He knew that if he told the doctor what had happened he would receive another beating, so he remained quiet.

The beatings became a regular occurrence until, at the age of eleven, John was removed from his mother following an anonymous report received by the authorities with regard to the beatings. John's new home was to be a mental institution for adults. He lived

behind locked doors and barred windows as though he were in prison. If he failed to fold his clothes in a certain way he would receive yet more beatings.

John was moved to another ward where the attendants would use their fists in order to make their 'patients' do what was required of them. On one occasion, John asked a question, only to be struck in the face for speaking first. The abuse continued in the form of cold baths followed by being wrapped in a wet towel and then being beaten. The wet towels stopped the bruising to prevent others from seeing what had happened. It was not uncommon to see staff in bed with patients. As John became older and wiser, he learned how to avoid it sometimes, but not often.

It was twenty four years before John was released and he felt disorientated and vulnerable. He had moved from a world where he had made no decisions for himself to one where he had to survive on his own. He began to have what he called the 'wrong sort of sexual urges towards children'. He knew it was wrong and he was concerned that other children did not have to suffer what he had suffered or that they should turn out like him. John tried to commit suicide, twice. At that time suicide was still a crime so John was again hospitalised, where he was treated with a new drug which was unbearably painful, but it did work.

Since that time John has been much happier but feels bitter at what he had to endure through no fault of his own. Nothing can compensate for those lost years of his childhood and early adult life. Although John now has his freedom he is sometimes still afraid and lonely.

John's story is just one of thousands and is typical of the experience of abused children. Their experience causes them to lose self-esteem and a sense of self-value. Normal relationships with others, both adults and children, are severely affected as they experience a lack of love, trust and security, as well as losing educational opportunities,

and with sexual abuse, they lose the natural childhood ignorance of sexual awareness. The abused child loses a normal and balanced life. To develop and grow healthily, children need a secure homebase from which to do and learn normal things in an environment of trust and safety. Abused children lose this. Abuse tends not to occur as a single event, it is usually an on-going situation and the repetition leads the child to a heightened sense of fear, vulnerability and a continued sense of loss of freedom.

It is impossible to quantify or describe adequately the extent of the loss experienced by abused children. It is commonly referred to as a loss of childhood. Such is the damage to their development that they sometimes have overwhelming feelings of fear and distrust which destroy their capacity for play, imagination and spontaneity, leading them to live lonely and isolated existences. Often the abusers deny the opportunity for the child to develop friendships out of fear of the abuse being revealed. The abused may isolate themselves out of a sense of shame and the stigma of what has happened to them. Often the abused children who find sufficient courage to speak out are met with disbelief or made to feel that it was their own fault, that they must have done something to invite and encourage the abuse.

The pain and damage of abuse inflicted more often than not is carried with the child into their adulthood, where they continue to have low self-esteem and difficulty in forming permanent relationships. Relationships are a deeply significant part of a child's development of their opinions and sense of self. If the feedback they receive through relationships is largely negative, their whole experience of relationships becomes distorted. If they are told repeatedly that they are ugly, or bad, or that it is their fault, then they will come to believe it. To say or believe differently is to invite yet more abuse, so how can they tell anyone? They try to avoid conflict, as that triggers off more abuse, so they do not then learn how to resolve conflict.

One child who was constantly abused by her mother, and who came to believe that it was her fault, that she was bad, arrived at a point where if her mother was not hurting her, or if other children were not hurting her, then she would hurt herself. This child described a clear image of how bad she was, saying that other people had blood, but she was full of nasty green pus, full of mess and badness.

Sexual abuse may often lead to difficulties with sexual relationships. The victims see themselves as ugly or bad, and they sometimes become aggressive and self-destructive. This is the result of the inner anger they feel but may not be able to identify. Abuse promotes confusion and distortion in the minds of the abused, making them feel generally unacceptable.

The effects of abuse upon children may be such that the victim carries their injuries, both physical and emotional into adulthood, sometimes with the result of physically being unable to bear children of their own. Others often choose not to have their own children out of fear of perpetuating the vicious circle of abuse. It has been reported that the vast majority of those who abuse have themselves been abused.[21] Abuse is a vicious assault upon the whole person, and very often the only form of expression and action left open to the abused is from learned behaviour, and so they treat others in the way in which they themselves have been treated.

Not all adult survivors of abuse avoid having children. Many do have their own families and have normal relationships with them, often because they want something better for their children than they had experienced themselves.

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[21] Dr Gwyneth Boswell, of East Anglia University's School of Social Work, completed a study on child abuse in 1995 which was reported in the Times newspaper, revealing that "a huge majority of violent and murderous children have suffered abuse or loss themselves." The report also refers to the case of James Bulger, murdered by two young boys in 1993, saying that one of his ten year old murderers had been systematically bullied by his brothers. The report shows that 91% of all violent or murderous child offenders have experienced abuse or the loss of a loved one; 29% suffered sexual abuse; 40% suffered physical abuse; 57% suffered loss through death or separation of a parent, relative, carer or friend.

It is apparently quite common for the cause of a marriage breakdown to stem from childhood abuse of one of the partners. For some adult survivors of abuse, homosexuality may be the only means for them to feel safe within a loving, sexual relationship. Their feelings of low self-esteem and value are often reinforced by a prevalent attitude in society biased against homosexuality.

Losses recognised as being the result of abuse include such normal activities as cuddling, laughter, playing, trust, having good memories, having something to look forward to, knowing what it is like to be a virgin, and sharing childhood memories of family life. The ultimate loss is the realisation that one has lost one's childhood and there is no opportunity of going back to try again. There can be no replacement for those things which have been lost, no compensation for a lost childhood.

> You must grieve for the loss of your feelings. You must grieve for your abandonment. You must grieve for the past, and grieve for the present, for the damage you now have to heal, for the time it takes, for the money it costs, for the relationships ruined, the pleasures missed.[22]

Eating disorders are a symptom of inner unrest and are frequently linked with childhood abuse. It is possible to identify the link through the language used by the sufferer. Moira Walker quotes an example from a bulimic client who was sexually abused by her father:

> I just force food in when I don't want it. I can't stop myself. Its almost being done to me. I can't control it. I just stuff it in, and I can almost be vomiting, but I carry on. Then, when I make myself sick I can feel enormous relief just to get rid of it.[23]

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22 E. Bass and L. Davis, The Courage to Heal: A guide for women survivors of sexual abuse, Harper & Row, New York, (1988).

23 M. Walker, Surviving Secrets, Open University Press, Buckingham, Philadelphia, (1992).

The loss incurred by a child through abuse is irreplaceable. The damage done is permanent and the effects become apparent through their behaviour both in childhood and adulthood. It is emotional scarring, for what has been done can not be undone.

> Confrontations with violence challenge one's most basic assumptions about the self as invulnerable and intrinsically worthy and about the world as orderly and just. After abuse, the victim's view of self and world can never be the same again: it must be reconstructed to incorporate the abuse experience.[24]

5.4 HEALING THROUGH SPIRITUALITY

As discussed in chapter two, spirituality could be said to be the means through which we express ourselves in relationships and not necessarily through the medium of religion. Sanford[25] suggests that all spiritual systems are based on the belief in a power which is greater than ourselves and that having faith in that greater power makes us better people. Spirituality has been a source of healing for adult survivors of child abuse, and this notion of healing is expressed by the physician, Bernie Siegel:

> Spirituality means the ability to find peace and happiness in an imperfect world, and to feel that one's own personality is imperfect but acceptable. From this peaceful state of mind come both the creativity and the ability to love unselfishly, which go hand in hand.[26]

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24 "The Victim to Patient Process: The Disconfirmation and Transformation of Abuse", American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 56, (1986), p.360.

25 L. T. Sanford, Strong at the Broken Places, Random House, New York , (1990), p.165.

26 B. Siegel, Love, Medicine and Miracles, Harper Row, New York, (1986), p.178.

Many survivors of abuse find safety and healing in their spiritual beliefs. They gain a sense of a just world which did not exist for them as children. Among those for whom this is so, a common comment is that nature is safer than human beings and has a sense in which it is "giving," "healing" and "nurturing," such as the sea gently lapping and caressing, cleansing and soothing. For some it may be plant life which guides them to a deeper sense of self-acceptance and value. There is a variety of cactus that jumps and attacks if its roots are stepped on. One survivor likened that to her father who hit her for no apparent reason. Likening her experience with the cactus helped her to not take the violence so personally and to attempt to stay away from the roots.

Forgiveness is another aid in the process of healing and may involve forgiveness by the abused for their abuser, but very often the forgiveness needed is self-forgiveness. Survivors of abuse often need to first forgive themselves for being helpless and innocent before they can begin to forgive others. Self-forgiveness can allow and encourage the survivor to develop self-compassion and remove self-blame and negative feelings.

> Forgiving is not forgetting. It is remembering and letting go.[27]

Rituals can be a help in healing, as Sanford explains from the following case study:

> Joan's African-Portuguese culture is rich with rituals. As she neared the end of her therapy she bought a doll who resembled her to symbolise the little girl who had killed her mother: "I put her in a box, with a letter to my mother, telling how much I loved her and missed her. I buried the doll at my mother's grave site, with a ceremony, leaving behind my guilt and torment."[28]

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27 C. Black, It's Never Too Late to Have a Happy Childhood: Inspirations for Adult Children, Random House, New York, (1989).

28 L. T. Sanford, Strong at the Broken Places, p.174.

Involvement in organised religion can be an added trauma for some of those who are abused. If the Church focuses on sin and punishment it may lead the abused to believe that they deserve to be mistreated as a form of punishment for their sins. Childhood abuse and neglect are not heaven-sent, the experience of abuse is not a vehicle for instilling purpose into the lives of people. To give meaning to it is to excuse it. The natural question to ask is "Why did it happen?"

> Pain is the price we pay for being alive . . . When we understand that, our question will change from 'Why do we have to feel pain?' to 'What do we do with our pain so that it becomes meaningful and not just pointless, empty suffering? How can we turn all the painful experiences of our lives into birth pangs or into growing pangs?' We may not ever understand why we suffer or be able to control the forces that cause our suffering, but we have a lot to say about what the suffering does to us, and what sort of people we become because of it. Pain makes some people bitter and envious. It makes others sensitive and compassionate. It is the result, not the cause, of pain that makes some experiences of pain meaningful and others empty and destructive.[29]

That is one way of looking at suffering which helps to put a positive tone into the painful experience. It does not excuse the pain caused nor does it give a reason for the pain, but simply highlights what may be considered to be a good way of dealing with the experience to ensure, as far as is possible, that healing takes place.

By helping children to explore and develop their spirituality, we provide them with a valuable tool towards self-help and healing. It is another means of expression through which children may be enabled to communicate their feelings and emotions.

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29 H. Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People, Pan, London, (1981), p.64.

5.5. SUMMARY

Having dealt with some considerable losses within the lives of children, we could be forgiven for believing the situation to be hopeless. The guide to healing through spirituality is a reminder of the hope that exists within the Christian faith. It is important that we attempt to communicate this hope to children in a manner in which they are able to comprehend. The next chapter examines the Christian hope of resurrection.

CHAPTER 6
RESURRECTION TO ETERNAL LIFE

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 6

6.1. RESURRECTION TO ETERNAL LIFE

When trying to cope with substantial loss in life, it is a common feeling to be overwhelmed to the point of losing all hope for the future. For the Christian, the hope lies in the resurrection to eternal life. What do we mean and understand by 'Resurrection' and 'Eternal Life'? Can we speak of the resurrection of the soul or the body? I shall highlight some suggested ideas, discussing how resurrection and eternal life may be associated with the Communion of Saints and then discuss how and what language we might use in our attempt to help children to understand the notion of life after death.

6.1.1. Immortality

The doctrine of life after death is often understood to be central to Christian theology. Grace Jantzen asks if we need immortality and suggests that belief in immortality is not so central to Christian thought and practice as is often believed. She goes on to say

> . . . a rich Christian faith does not require a doctrine of life after death in order to be profound and meaningful.[1]

6.1.2. Motives For Belief in Immortality

Jantzen offers the idea that there may be three motives for our wanting immortality and so for propounding theories in favour of it.

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[1] G. Jantzen, "Do We Need Immortality?", Modern Theology, 1:1, (1984), p.33.

1. Self-Interest

There is the obvious desire for the continuance of any sort of existence, where life after death is seen as a paradise where suffering and pain do not exist, where happy reunions take place. This has a superficial correlation with the Hedonistic doctrine that pleasure is the principal good. There are scriptural references which suggest this idea of a pain-free paradise. The book of Revelation refers to the "heavenly city"[2] and Jesus speaks of there being many mansions in his Father's house.[3] He also speaks from the cross to the robber also being crucified:

> Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.[4]

Immortality is sometimes used as an explanation which aids us in giving some significance to this life, in that it provides the opportunity of continuing projects, which death interrupts. But that is not so much an argument for immortality as an argument for its desirability. Indeed, it could be suggested that if immortality provides us with the opportunity to complete unfinished projects, it could detract from the sense of fulfilment and focus of our lives before death. Fulfilments are concerned with aiming towards goals in life which enable us to achieve our ambitions. Our lives tend to be guided around the choices we have which may lead us to this fulfilment. If the fulfilment is to be achieved in a life after death, then it may seriously affect the way we live our lives now. This sense of immortality reduces the significance and urgency of the choices we

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2 Revelation 21[2].

3 John 14[2].

4 Luke 23[43].

make, but that in itself does not mean that we must put forward the theory of life after death in order to make sense of the notions of fulfilment and meaning in life.

2. Morality

Kant would argue that immortality is necessary as an assumption of practical reason. This life involves both happiness and virtue. We often find a disparity between the two in this life, and so it is necessary to propose a theory of immortality that redresses this imbalance. To do any other, Kant would suggest, is to say that the universe is ultimately unjust. The latter point, especially from a Christian standpoint, would seem to be an obvious statement. There is much to say that the universe appears to be unjust, but even if it is, that does not make morality irrelevant:

> Any act of intrinsic worth is still worthwhile even if it will never receive any happiness in reward; furthermore, morality retains its meaning even if we are all going to perish.[5]

If one were to say that nothing in this life is meaningful if there is no life after death, then that would be to say that nothing in this life is worthwhile for its own sake and that everything is a means to an end. Kant would not have accepted either of these points.

To bring in the point concerning self-interest, a possible argument in support of the requirement for immortality might be that if the point of this life is even partially about moral development, and none of us develops fully in this life, then it would seem to be desirable that this development be completed in the next life.

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[5] G. Jantzen, "Do We Need Immortality?" Modern Theology, p.37.

Another aspect for the yearning of immortality may be the desire for perfection in virtue. This is partly how one of the more positive theories concerning purgatory came about. It was seen as a place of moral purification and advance, rather than proportionate punishment for sins committed during earthly life. Whilst this might be a good motive for desiring immortality, it does beg the question: 'How many people crave immortality because they want to become better?' More life, in whatever form, does not automatically mean an improvement in morality; there is just as much scope for deterioration in morality. Indeed, if moral growth is valued, then in the absence of immortality there becomes an urgency for moral improvement which might not exist if there were endless time.

3. Religious

Christian theology speaks of God's love for his people and his creation, but it does not imply that there is automatic salvation. We have the responsibility for freedom of choice which inevitably leaves open the option of doing wrong and being subject to the consequences.

It is sometimes suggested that death is the enemy to be overcome, the worst of many evils in this life. If death is to be overcome, that would seem to imply immortality. Certainly, there would appear to be some weight behind an argument that understands that God loves and values each of us, so how could we even think that he would allow us to perish? The Christian faith is about relationship with God, a loving relationship. If we translate that to our human relationships, then it would be unthinkable that we would allow our friends to perish if it were in our power to save them. There are many lovely things in this world which do perish, such as flowers, yet we can read that God created them and delights in them. If that is so, it may be that we, who God loves, will also perish one day. How are we to understand that? Does God really love us, or does

he not after all have the power to save us? We understand that salvation is related to our sinfulness, but should we think of salvation in terms of death? I would suggest not. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus says:

> Are not three sparrows sold for a farthing? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your heavenly Father's knowledge.[6]

This could be interpreted that, firstly, Jesus does not deny that sparrows fall, and secondly, the logical interpretation seems to be not that we will not die, but that our death will not go unnoticed. If God does allow some things which he values to perish, why should that not be so for human beings? Is it really true to say that because we are valued there must be immortality? John's gospel certainly implies a notion of eternal life as something which is in our possession now, and not something which is of a limitless quantity; it is not something that happens after death but in this present lifetime.

It would not be a fair conclusion to say that if there is no life after death then there is no point to religion. This returns to the point which says that which is morally valuable is valuable for its own sake rather than for the reward it might bring. Similarly with trust in God. It is still worthwhile, even if it cannot go on forever. No loving relationship is pointless simply because at some point in the future one of the parties in the relationship will die, so why should our relationship with God be any different? There is great value in our relationship with God, even if, ultimately, there is no immortality. The relationship is still worthwhile. This is not to say that there is no life after death, nor that it is irrational to hope for it, but perhaps it is presumptuous of us to assume that immortality is guaranteed by the requirements of morality and religion? Personal

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6 Matthew 10 29.

Christian faith bases its commitment to a relationship with God upon trust, trust that the relationship will continue in love. How and in what form that relationship continues is open to debate. Is it merely in fondness of memory after death or is it a continued relationship within a recreated form of life? Whilst Christians may look for the hope of resurrection to eternal life, that is not the primary factor in coming to faith. The resurrection hope is certainly central to Christian faith, for it is based upon the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. That is the Easter celebration. Paul certainly seems to place great emphasis and importance on the resurrection of Christ:

> If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it be true that the dead are not raised . . . .
>
> If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.[7]

6.2. RESURRECTION

So what is 'resurrection' and 'eternal life', and why do we hope for it? Jantzen has suggested some ideas, but perhaps we should continue our exploration with something a little more basic. What is it about death that urges us to look for an existence beyond death? Is it that we are afraid of dying, or that we are afraid of death? It is probably both. When asking people about their fears of death, a typical response is that they are not afraid of death, but of dying. We may witness some terrible deaths, painful tragic deaths, which lead to blessed relief when death arrives. We do not want to have to submit to the indignities of disease and injury. Death is then seen as a release from suffering and pain. What is it that makes death so dreadful that we live our lives

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[7] 1 Corinthians 15 [14-18].

avoiding having to talk about the eventuality of our death? It is not so much that we know that we are going to die, or that we know there is some form of existence after death. We are afraid because we do not know. The fact of death is known, but the mystery of death is not and there is a common fear about that which is not known.

The Christian faith is based on the certain hope of there being life after death, but what sort of life are we referring to? Clearly our bodies do not survive, so is it right to speak of the immortality of the soul? Is survival after death a matter of the continuation of our self-awareness? If so, then that discounts any notions that eternal life is merely in the memory of the living survivors, such as the difference a person has made in their lives continuing to make that difference in the world after their death - Shakespeare, for instance. It also discounts another common idea that we are 'absorbed into the Infinite', because that leads to the cessation of self-awareness. There is, perhaps, a sense of self-awareness when we sleep. It is interesting that death is very often likened to sleeping. St Paul spoke of Christ as

> . . the first fruits of them that sleep.[8]

We could say that because we dream when we sleep, we have experiences and so have self-awareness. But now that we know the medical reasons for dreaming, that argument does not hold. We dream because the body gives stimuli to the brain. Dreamless sleep may be compared with death, but that has nothing to do with survival or self-awareness.

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8 1 Corinthians 15 20.

6.2.1. The Continuation of the Soul

Another thought is that the soul and body belong to different worlds. This has been a common argument since at least the time of Socrates, who died in 399 BC. Here, the soul is independent of the body, and has little to do with the brain, which is a part of the body. The two are held together in life, but death releases them to go their natural and separate ways.

> When death attacks a man, the mortal portion of him may be supposed to die, but the immortal retires at the approach of death and is preserved safe and indestructible.[9]

This implies that the soul does not depend upon the body for its continued existence and that what happens to the body is of no concern to the soul. Death liberates the real self from the body, which has been a temporary association during earthly life.

Our modern knowledge of the brain, however, cannot give unqualified support to his idea. We know that what affects our body affects our soul: indigestion may affect our temper; brain damage may affect our personality - an ageing brain may be subjected to senile decay. We must be clear, though, about the relationship between the brain and our consciousness. It may be that the brain is merely an instrument through which our consciousness is transmitted, in which case, if the brain is destroyed the personality is not destroyed. Is it rather that the mechanism for the physical expression of the personality has been destroyed?

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[9] Socrates, as reported by Plato in 'Phaedo', 106e (translated by B. Jowett, The Dialogues of Plato, Clarendon Press, 4th edition, revised 1953). The same idea underlies the 'Wisdom of Solomon' in the Apocrypha: see 9 [15], "a perishable body weighs down the soul', and 15 [8], "this man who . . . returns to the place whence he was taken, when the living soul that was lent to him must be repaid'.

6.2.2.1. Near-Death Experiences

There have been many reported experiences of people either seeing or hearing someone who has previously died, usually fairly recently. These may be explained medically, sometimes as part of the reaction and process of grief. The bereaved person may still be living their lives as though the deceased were still living, or their grief may produce chemical imbalances which make them hallucinate. However, not all such experiences can be so easily explained. There have been occasions when the deceased has passed on a message to the living, something which they could not possibly have known at the time, which proved to be true. Indeed, it has been known for someone to see an 'apparition' of someone whom they had thought to be alive, only to find out later that the person had died at approximately the time of the appearance.

Out-of-body experiences when a person is close to death are also becoming more widely reported. It seems they can happen when the body is under severe stress or shock as well as extreme illness. Again, many of these experiences may be explained by both psychologists and physiologists. The apparent orientation of one's body in space largely depends upon the sensory impressions given by the three semi-circular canals within each inner ear. Their influence can be experienced by spinning around with the head at different angles. Other disturbances to these sensory cues may induce a temporary feeling that the centre of origin of our consciousness has a different orientation from the rest of the body. Changes in blood pressure within the inner ear can have the effect of a floating feeling. People with a vivid optical imagery may well visualise their bodies from a hovering position. Such is the vividness of the sensation, they quite naturally believe they have had an out-of-body experience.

Whilst the medical explanation may be persuasive, it cannot explain how individuals who have had out-of-body experiences have been able to describe people or events while they were unconscious and out of their bodies, that they could not have otherwise

possibly known about. One lady is reported to have been brought into hospital in a coma, never having been into that hospital before. During an operation on her, she experienced herself watching the operation and later, on awakening from the coma, she was able to describe in great detail how the operation had been performed. On another occasion, a young girl was taken to an operating theatre, and was aware of the nursing staff and doctors. She was given a general anaesthetic and during the operation, a nurse with an unusually shaped hat came into the theatre to assist, and left before the operation was completed. Some time later, the young girl was talking about the operation and the nursing staff and mentioned the lady in the funny hat. She was not sufficiently articulate to describe the hat, so she drew an accurate picture of the hat instead.

How are we to understand experiences such as these, which cannot be explained by our existing medical knowledge? Is there indeed some truth in the theory that our consciousness is somehow separate from our brain, and can continue to exist without it? Could it be that this sort of experience does not have to be restricted to those times when we are close to death? If so, that might explain the apparent appearances of Jesus to the disciples after his death, as on the Emmaus Road and in the upper room. There is no support to link current near death, or out of body experiences with the appearances of Jesus after his death and before his ascension. Any link must be tenuous.

6.2.3. The Resurrection of the Body

If the resurrection of the soul causes us problems, the resurrection of the body gives us equal if not greater problems. What happened to the body of Jesus after his death? Who moved the stone away from the tomb? There have been many theological discussions and arguments surrounding this subject. St Paul teaches us that it is not our flesh which is to be raised. If we read 1 Corinthians $15^{35\text{-}38,\ 42\text{-}44a,\ \text{and}\ 50\text{-}53}$, we see that Paul refers to the metaphor of a seed. We do not sow the plant which comes out of the

ground, but a bare seed. God clothes this seed with a body, as he sees fit. The death of the seed and its resurrection into the form of a plant is a parable of the truth of resurrection. Just as the plant is different from the seed which was sown, so our new bodies will be different from our earthly bodies. As with the seed and the plant, there will be some relation between the old and the new even though a transformation takes place.

There is a sense in which 'body' not only means an individual, but also a corporate body. This dual meaning can also be applied to the phrase 'The Body of Christ'. It may mean the physical body of Jesus, but it may also mean the corporate body of his followers. This leads on to the belief that the resurrection of the body is not simply an individual resurrection, but also a corporate resurrection, and we have no fear that we shall be alone in the life to come.

6.3. THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

> It is not good for the man to be alone.[10]

Scripture leads us to understand that God wants us to live our lives in community, not in isolation. Community and companionship are important and Christians have difficulty in believing in a life after death which is an impersonal absorption into the Absolute. Christian faith includes a belief in the communion - the community, the companionship - of the Saints. Our lives are shared lives. To some extent we live our lives through other people, through those with whom we are closely attached, and they live their lives

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10 Genesis 2[18].

in us. It is fear of the severance of these relations that gives a sting to death, for when a loved one dies, there is a part of us that also dies.

> For I wondered at others, subject to death, did live, since he whom I loved, as if he should never die, was dead: and I wondered yet more that myself, who was to him a second self, could live, he being dead. Well said one of his friends, "Thou half of my soul:" for I felt that my soul and his soul were "one soul in two bodies;" and therefore was my life a horror to me, because I would not live halved. and therefore perchance I feared to die, lest he whom I had much loved, should die wholly.[11]

It is easy to understand the concern of people that they shall meet their loved ones again after death. It is difficult to see how resurrection to eternal life can have any serious meaning unless it means a permanence of relationships, for without them, Augustine suggests, we are not complete. The question then is, 'In what way are our relationships continued in the life to come?'

As has already been said, our individual existence tends to have more meaning within a corporate existence, we live in our neighbour and they in us. Such relationships constitute community and enrich the common life. The life of a community has a greater permanence than that of an individual. Our life's experience carries with it the experience of many previous lives, just as our experience will be carried by others' lives. In that sense, the continuity of corporate life is not immortality, but perhaps a substitute for it.

This corporate existence and continuity leads us to the desire to have some sort of continuation of our relationships after human death, for our closer relationships have led to love, and if we have understood anything of the truth of the Incarnation, it is that God

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11 Augustine, The Confessions of St. Augustine, Airmont, New York, (1969), iv, 6, pp.50-51.

comes to us in human love and in human need. It would therefore seem perfectly natural for us to want to be able to expect to be reunited with our loved ones in heaven. Our general notion of perfection in this sense is likely then to suggest that perfection will only happen when all generations are reunited, and until then heaven cannot be perfect.

The death of individuals may be considered to be insignificant with greater emphasis being placed upon the resurrection of the whole body of Christ, so giving a different interpretation of bodily resurrection. In this sense, then, 'Body' means the corporate nature of humankind, and the perfection of resurrection involves completion of the body as a heavenly body. The resurrection of the body presumes the communion of saints. Just as our individual existence consists of our past, present and future and that our identity is to be found within community through our relationships, then in much the same way, the existence of community consists of past, present and future. We carry individual and corporate experiences from the past, through the present to the future. It is these life experiences through relationships that make us the people we are. That is how we are able to say that when an individual dies, something of them lives on in the lives of others.

It is in this sense that Christians have been able to say that they are one body with all the history of God's people, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. From generation to generation the community experiences the mighty acts of God. The experiences of the Israelites as a community also belonged to the experiences of individual Israelites. Over the years, the individuals look back over their lives and know that future generations themselves will have their own experiences of God and that one day God's Kingdom will be apparent throughout His creation and all shall inherit everlasting joy and life. The individual life is a close part of the corporate life both past, present and future. This is not a doctrine of the immortality of the soul, it is more an understanding that immortality belongs to the community. This is the general background of the Christian idea of eternal life.

> The New Testament writers always assume that the Christian Church is continuous with the Israel of God in all ages. Called in Abraham, elect in Isaac and Jacob, redeemed through Moses, taught by the prophets, disciplined by the judgements of God, Israel has now entered upon a new and glorious phase of its age-long history, and moves on to its final consummation. It is the highest privilege of the Gentiles that they are made shares in this age-long history of the people of God - sons of Abraham, fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of faith.[12]

The Jewish belief was that when the Kingdom of God was revealed, the faithful would pass into the life of the age to come. There would no longer be a succession of generations in time, but that life eternal would be now. Indeed, Jesus himself said:

> 'The Kingdom of God is come upon you.'[13]

This would lead us to the awareness that the age to come has arrived, and this seems to be assumed by the writers of the New Testament. God's promises have been fulfilled and eternal life is here, and not as it was imagined by the Jews. It is a new quality of life that exists now. It is in this sense that we can then say that there is a oneness between this mortal life and the life eternal. For the Christian, life is lived within the family of God and the home of that family does not only exist in this world. This returns us to the matter of relations both between ourselves and with those who have died. The individual has identity and personality through personal relations, which of necessity are in the context of community. The community develops an integrity and continuance of life through those personal relations. The community may exist in both a physical and a spiritual sense because of the personal relationships which develop within the

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12 C.H. Dodd, New Testament Studies: The Communion of Saints, MUP, (1953), p.149.

13 Matthew 12^{28}; Luke 11^{20}.

community. The spiritual life of the community transcends its material basis and is enhanced by the contributions made by the individuals who form the community. These contributions are made possible by the community which embodies them, and so the spiritual heritage of the community is developed which consists of its true life. That is not to say that there is a corporate soul, that is perhaps simply a metaphor. A community cannot exist without individuals, and so there must be spiritual values and a valuing of individuals. Any community which under-values its individuals denies and undervalues itself.

> That community is most fully one, and most fully alive, where the highest freedom of the individual is at the same time the power which binds the whole. In such a community each member makes his contribution to the common store, and is himself upheld and borne along by the tides of a life larger than his own. The humbler, weaker individuals are lifted above their own level by their membership in the society, and the pride and self-sufficiency of the strong are corrected by this communion with the humble.
>
> Such a community possesses not only unity in itself but also continuity and relative permanence in time. That continuity is given in an endless chain of human generations. The generations overlap. At any given moment in its life there is a communion among its members, in which past, present and future meet; for every member is contemporary with others who belong to generations not his own.[14]

The community consists of both old and young people. The old bring their memories and traditions from the past and the hopes for the future of the community lie in the young not simply as ideas, but as a determining force which will move the community on, and build it up. Inevitably, tensions between generations can develop, and where this happens the community is weakened. If it continues, it may ultimately lead to collapse. For a healthy community to live and to grow there must be interaction between generations and also an interchange which can lead to a stable and rich life

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14 C.H. Dodd, New Testament Studies: The Communion of Saints, p.152.

which holds the best of the past and embraces the opportunities of the future. Each individual brings with them some element of the past and the future through their experience of life, and so have some understanding of the values of the past and the future. It is in this way that the history of the community lives in the individual. From our present understanding of the history of humankind, the future is finite for human existence, for not only will individuals die and cease to exist, but the end of time as we know it is also likely to cease to exist and the human race will cease to inhabit this earthly world. This means that communities will also cease to exist, together with all the values, the wealth of experience and skills that have been accumulated. Thus at the end, all human relationships will cease, unless, that is, there is something within the complexity of our human relationships and existence which transcends time and physical change.

6.3.1. The Christian Church

Fellowship within the Christian Church is not determined by nationality, heredity, geographical areas, culture, or economy. As the Scripture says,

> There is no longer Jew or Greek,, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.[15]

The Christian Church says that there is something within this life which transcends time and physical change. Faithful worshippers of the Christian Church share fellowship

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15 Galatians 3^{28f}.

with the past generations, with the prophets and saints. Despite the many divisions in the Christian Church, the Christian community does stand apart from other societies, notably for its universality and the length and continuity of its history. This sense of unity and of universality reaches beyond anything that we have yet realised in this earthly life. The Christian community is constituted by the dependence of its people upon the grace of God. Relationships within the community are determined by the divine love revealed in Jesus. It is the Christian's belief that each is the object of God's love and that their relationship with each other is to be based on that love.

The very basis of Christianity, the meaning of the Church, is that the Christian understands:

> . . . with all the saints, what is the breadth and length, and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.[16]

That which exists in and by the love of God is imperishable and so has eternal life. In this way we can now see that the perfect community is that which lives within the love of God, a people who are the objects of God's love and who love each other with that same love. This is the eternal source of life shared among them. The life of the Christian exists in love. It is a condition that Christians live out that love by living in community with each other, within the love of God which is the source of all life and experience. Within such a community of love, individuals are free to be themselves, yet still can participate in community life. The scope for this sort of fellowship is universal for the love of God is offered to all. Our existence within history now has added meaning. Our life may be finite within history, but

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[16] Ephesians 3[18f].

. . eternal life is mediated in history.[17]

This can be supported by Scripture:

> Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.[18]

The living God is God of the living, and since we are told in St Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter eight, that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus then, God is both God of those who live within historical time and also of those who have passed beyond historical time. It is therefore possible to consider the possibility of a reciprocity of relations between the community in historical time, and the community in the life hereafter. We are what we are largely due to our past. Experience and progress may make us better than our ancestors, but we can only be better than they because of what they did and experienced. We have received from them, and we are still able to give to them. When planning for the future, we have hopes for the future which in some sense releases us from the restrictions of time. However, hope can be an empty hope if we do not experience its fulfilment. If the Christian belief is true, then the future not only pays tribute to the past but also receives from the past. In this earthly life we are bound by time and space, but in the life beyond our lives touch the eternal order where those of past generations dwell and also draw upon the many experiences of earthly life.

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[17] C.H. Dodd, New Testament Studies: The Communion of Saints, p.155

[18] Luke 20^{38}.

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, in his sermon on Christian Perfection, describes how in this earthly life we can achieve Christian Perfection, that is, holiness, but only in degrees. Not until we leave this earth to join the Communion of Saints do we achieve perfection. All die in their imperfections. The Communion of Saints are not made perfect without us, but individual imperfections are overcome. Death liberates us from our limitations that we may be made perfect by communion with those who have gone before us. It is the communion which is perfect and which is bound together within the love of God.

6.3.2. The Undeveloped Soul

This may then help with the problem of undeveloped or ignorant souls. Whilst many have seriously considered the doctrine of reincarnation as a way through this problem, it is not easy to see how any continuity of experience could be maintained if each time a new life begins it does so without any knowledge of the previous lives. If the doctrine of the Communion of Saints is to be followed, then from the description of the reciprocal relationships between earthly and eternal lives, it can be understood how the undeveloped and ignorant can still achieve the life eternal and perfection within the communion. For the love of God is offered to all. The love of God is the very basis of all life and relationships, and so just as a child is nurtured by its parents, teachers and society, so the child absorbs the life and discipline of society. Society on earth is not perfect and so there will be failures, but if the Christian notion of the Communion of Saints is true, then the whole family of God both on earth and in heaven have responsibilities, and so earthly failures cannot be final.

There have been many great biblical characters in the past, e.g.. Gideon, Samson, and David, but they were certainly not perfect, and cannot be made perfect without us. In their 'heavenly' life they draw upon the experiences of the love of God of those who

followed after them. So the undeveloped soul may still have the possibility of fulfilling its destiny within the wider community. Again, this is what John Wesley is suggesting, for we are all imperfect, we all are undeveloped to one degree or another. Our hope of eternal life does not rest in our individual perfection, but in our participation within a community which is capable of perfection, corporate perfection. That perfection is possible because the community lives within the love of God.

The Christian Church imposes certain conditions to membership of the Communion of Saints, based on biblical references:

> If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.[19]
>
> Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.[20]

Only those who are dead to this life and who have denied themselves will attain eternal life. It is a way of life, both here and hereafter. A life lived within the love of God within the communion of saints. Adolescence represents the death of one order of life or relationship and the birth of a new one, for a child ceases to be a child and reaches maturity. The child is no longer dependent and subject to parental authority, but has matured into an adult and with that receives a great deal of independence and responsibility. If the child's attitudes and relations continue into adulthood, then social relations will be wrong. Childish ways have to be renounced. This is, in a sense, what

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[19] Romans 6^{8}.

[20] John 12^{25}.

it means to die to self and to rise again. It is a death and resurrection. The resurrection is to eternal life.

6.4. THE RESURRECTION HOPE

Ultimately, the Christian carer of children suffering loss or bereavement must keep their sights on the Christian hope of eternal life. The Christian view of life beyond death holds in balance the attitude that death should not be welcomed or feared.[21] Death is understood by many to be a destructive force because it involves the physical destruction of the body, so ending the physical security we have in this earthly existence. However, death may be seen as God reclaiming life[22] which requires the leaving of one life to join another as part of a journey. This is the resurrection hope. Resurrection may be experienced after death, but it may also be experienced in this life in the form of a person being released from their prison of fear, anxiety, sickness, pain, etc.

Much of this chapter has been concerned with the views of the apostle Paul and his belief that eternal life is already present,[23] but mention should also be made of the implications taken from John's gospel which support the belief that eternal life is not just something which commences upon our physical death, but is something which we are already experiencing in this life. Lindars explains that John records a parable in chapter five.[24]

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21 E.g. Mark 14^{32-34} and Hebrews 12^{2}.

22 See Psalm 104^{29}.

23 2 Corinthians 5^{17} and Colossians 3^{1}.

24 John 5^{19-47}.

> to argue that God's Son is his agent for the eschatological acts of the general resurrection (v.21) and the judgement (v.22), and therefore should receive the same honour as the Father (v.23). As the son is identified with Jesus, faith in him makes available now the state of salvation which is due to follow these acts (v.24). He does not say that these acts will not happen at all.[25]

We have, then, the concept of 'now, but not yet' and eternal life meaning that life belongs to the coming age. Lindars explains that the Hebrew word for the phrase 'the coming age' means 'lasting state' and so may refer either to a period of time or to eternity. 'The coming age' may then be understood to be the kingdom of God, which includes the here and now, and which places emphasis on his eternity.

John has clearly shifted the emphasis of eternal life away from the future without denying it altogether. He is, though, more concerned with the present life in a deep and rich sense.[26] This earthly, physical life is part of the eternal life insofar as it belongs to the coming age and so salvation to eternal life belongs both to this life and to the life eternal.

Some may suggest that quite a different implication can be taken from the book of Revelation, which concentrates predominantly on the future. We must remember, though, that this book was written to a particular situation, being written to Christians who were overly concerned with the present.

Hope is the element which all people, including children, thrive on for a future. Resurrection to eternal life is the Christian's certain hope. How we enable children to express and live through their suffering is crucial if we are to promote the coming of God's kingdom and to recognise the love and care of God for all people. To grow to a

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25 B. Lindars, John, Sheffield Academic Press, (1990), p.71.

26 See John 10^{10}.

maturity which has a balance, receptive, sensitive and understanding approach to life in all its complexities, children need guidance in their experiences of loss and bereavement. The hope of resurrection to eternal life is a difficult concept to explain to children and is probably most helpfully explained by looking at nature. The example of a caterpillar being transformed into a butterfly is an obvious example. Doris Stickney has written a children's story based on the life cycle of water bugs and dragon flies[27] which helps children to understand something of the essence of dying to one form of life and being born to a new life with a new body in a very different environment, which does not enable a return to the former life or environment.

6.5. SUMMARY

By examining our theology of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and all that is implied for us as a result, we gain an understanding of unity between past, present and future with regard to our relationships with others. This gives rise to the notion of the Communion of Saints and so hope for the future. A difficult concept to communicate to children, but important if we are to guide them towards wholeness and healing of their life's experiences of loss and bereavement. I therefore conclude this thesis by linking our theology and understanding of spirituality, in relation to experiences of loss and bereavement, as a guide to healing and wholeness.

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[27] D. Stickney, Water Bugs and Dragon Flies.

CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION: A GUIDE TO HEALING AND WHOLENESS

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 7
7.1. CONCLUSION: A GUIDE TO HEALING AND WHOLENESS

7.1.1. Interpretation of Loss

The experience of loss in life, especially loss through death, inevitably raises the question "Why?", particularly if this is the first loss experience. Children are not immune to loss or to the instinctive reaction. Suffering, tragedy and death raise philosophical and theological questions. The degree of suffering seems to be random and may be considered to be unfair, so how do we reconcile such suffering, death and loss of any description with God, who we are led to believe is a god of justice and of love? We may be led to think that either God is not good or that he is not almighty, for if he were, would he not stop the suffering and loss? If he has the power to stop our suffering, is it that he chooses not to? Children ask the same questions in their own way: "If God loved Jesus, why did he let him die?"; "Why did God let my baby sister die?"; "Is it my fault, is God angry with me and this is his punishment?". The Old Testament view of suffering as punishment for sinfulness seems to be inherent among many people from a very young age.

Whatever our interpretation is concerning our perceived reasons for the experience of loss, the fact remains that loss and bereavement are experiences that human beings have throughout their lives, commencing in childhood. How we deal with these experiences in adulthood will largely depend on how they have been handled in childhood. Children who are encouraged to talk about their feelings and to express their emotions are enabled to work through the process of loss or bereavement in a healthy way. Our children do matter. They form an essential part of family life, contributing towards the development of our culture and spirituality. When having children with this awareness of their value, we understand that having children is a vocation and that they are a gift,

not a given.[1] In recognising the value to be found in our children we offer them respect for the unique individual people that they are, respecting their various stages of development, their viewpoint, feelings, growth towards independence, their need for love and security and also their need for self-respect and respect for others. In offering children our respect in this way we are aiding their spiritual development as discussed in chapter two.

7.2. Spiritual or Religious?

Despite a low proportion of people attending church in this country, it would appear that the majority are religious, if we are to accept the findings of a survey undertaken in 1986.[2] It may be helpful to distinguish between 'spiritual' and 'religious' in our attempt to understand how we, and especially how children, relate to 'spiritual needs'.

7.2.1. Spiritual

When concerned with infinite realities and ultimate meanings, we are concerned with the spirit of people. This is distinct from any religious framework within which these concerns might be expressed. Spirituality may be seen as a state of spiritual health which may include spiritual dis-ease.

Spiritual health may be understood to be the integration of spiritual values and beliefs which help us deal with questions of infinite reality and meaning satisfactorily. Spiritual dis-ease may be considered to be that state where such integration does not

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[1] See chapter 1.3.3. and 1.3.3.1.

[2] J. Libby, God Watching - Viewers, Religion and Television, IBA, (1986).

lead to a satisfactory conclusion. Consequently, those values, attitudes and practices which are our spiritual strengths may be described as those which support spiritual health. Our spiritual weaknesses are those elements in our lives which lead to spiritual disease.

'Spiritual' deals with ultimate issues and values which affect our lives. It is these concerns which are essential in the search for meaning in our lives. This search may be prompted not by our wanting to understand suffering, but to understand suffering without meaning.

7.2.2. Religious

To be religious may be said to be putting spirituality into practice within a specific context, such as attending worship at church, receiving Holy Communion and praying.

> Religion is the practical expression of spirituality through a framework of beliefs often actively pursued in rituals and religious practices.[3]

When our experience matches our beliefs, or our views of how life should be, then we might expect to understand that we are experiencing spiritual health. Conversely, disease, or spiritual pain, may occur when our views and our experiences of life are in conflict and do not match.

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[3] D. Langford, Where is God in all This?: A study of the spiritual care of the terminally ill, Countess Mountbatten House (Education), Southampton, (1993), p.6.

7.3. Towards Healing and Wholeness

Whilst the majority of people, and especially children, may not analyse their reactions and feelings in terms of being spiritual or religious, they do tend to question their experience both consciously and subconsciously, thus raising to their conscious the inevitable question "Why?".

Spiritual pain may involve emotional and psychological aspects of a person's make-up, those things which help us to know our identity and worth as a person. In a child this may be fairly basic and undeveloped and may be largely determined by the way in which they are reared as well as by their own experiences of life.

As children become more aware of loss and bereavement, they develop their ability to question, wanting to ask such questions as "When the time comes for you to die, grandma, will you be able to choose - can I come with you?". How adults respond to such questions plays a vital role in the development of a child's healthy understanding and expression of life and death.

In this thesis, I have shown that by valuing and recognising the importance of children and their spirituality within the context of loss and bereavement, we are able to apply our understanding of theodicy and the many losses which affect children, to guide them towards the Christian hope of resurrection to eternal life. To achieve this it is essential that we understand and respect the needs of children, including the need for hope, and that we enable a mutual interaction at a meaningful and helpful level of understanding.

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