

Not all children are physically brutalized, but at home, and later in school, the great sword of 'must and must not' falls swiftly and repeatedly upon the head of every child. All are measured and trimmed against the yardstick of normality, and hemmed in on every side by boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

I speak here, not of intentional cruelty, but of the adult task of shaping the minds and wills of children, and of conditioning their responses in a manner which permits them to function successfully within their natal culture. Such grooming, though painful, is essentially and inescapably human.

But all of this turns ugly when the well-being of vulnerable children is superceded by the needs of frightened caregivers.

It turns ugly when the program of socialization and indoctrination is designed to protect the fears, and buttress the fantasies, of the adults-in-charge, and to perpetuate through child-rearing, a world where they don't have to face their own demons.

This is Herod territory, and you don't have to be a deranged dictator, a sociopath, or a pedophile to go there. Indeed, the danger to children is often the greatest where the compulsion to raise the perfect child is the strongest, and where parents, teachers, politicians and clergy have the clearest idea of what constitutes a well-raised boy or girl. It can sound quite proper, even righteous, but give it a good scratch and you will discover the Herod-fear.

A great and terrible irony in all this is that, in all the world, one of the greatest assaults on innocence has been by Christian church leaders; those who presume to speak in Jesus' name. The Roman Catholic Church has declared for centuries that all infants, from the moment of conception, exist in a state of sin, deserving eternal punishment. Astonishingly, the very institution which trumpets a 'right-to-life' theology, passes the sentence of death on every fetus. It can abide no innocence, not even in the womb.

Herod killed babies to ensure the continuation of his power. Surely the church declares children iniquitous, and worthy of perdition, for the same reason.

Herod disguised his fear behind a feigned interest in the announced child. Many parents, clergy, and teachers carry out their wounding in the name of love, and out of their own unexamined need to have the child fit-in, even though the 'fitting' entails a rigorous, even Procrustean, curtailment of childish wonder and inclination. Unlike Herod, most of them stop short of physically slaying the little ones, but the crushing out of the threatening tendencies and unique gifts is pandemic.

The massacre continues.

But occasionally, by one means or another a child survives, and the whole world shudders with the fresh energy, and gets intoxicated on the new wine.

And wonder prevails.

