

THE UNSPEAKABLE SIN

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My Christian upbringing, which I've shed as a rattlesnake gets a new skin but keeps the rattle, was very Old Testament. My Presbyterian God was a Judge and a despot. My Sunday-School milksop Jesus didn't 'suffer the little children,' but was one very pissed off saviour, driving out moneychangers with a whip. I have also remembered, all these years, his strange remark that all sins can and will be forgiven, but the sin against the Holy Ghost.

What did it mean? One of my teachers gave me to understand that it was associated with my habit of 'asking too many questions', after I challenged her assertion that all Communists were evil. I supposed, in the end, the unforgivable sin was the refusal to accept an evident and crucial truth.

From the continuing fury about paedophilia in both the UK, where I am now, and in Australia, where I will shortly be again, I believe that we have another popularly unforgivable sin: paedophilia. Or is it?

A few weeks ago Britain's Channel 4 broadcast a fake documentary about paedophilia in the Brass Eye series, made by Chris Morris. I watched it by accident, snorting as a range of celebrities made fools of themselves in wearing T-shirts that proclaimed, 'I'm talking nonce sense' (say it out loud), or telling us that paedophiles share the same genetic makeup as a crab, and stabbing the offending crustacean. A well-known rap singer claimed that paedophiles are so damnably clever that they can emit stupefying drugs through a TV screen to control children using the Internet, and can even 'feel' such children through the key board.

All hell broke loose, of course, with ministers threatening censorship, litigation and crackdowns on the public TV channel's management, and opinion-makers who had not seen it describing it as sick, and the celebrities whose

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lack of judgement had been beautifully exposed squawking mightily about deception.

Paedophilia has become the unforgivable sin, the great public obsession. But there is a greater one: the maker of this black 'documentary', Chris Morris, had 'trivialised' a terrible crime

Sexual abuse of children is a great crime but it is not a strangers' crime, when it is rare. It is terrible, because it destroys the fiduciary relationship between all children and any adults, and the younger the child, the greater the affront to our notion of appropriate sexuality. The sexual exploitation of children is a terrible breach of trust. They put their hands into the trust of others. That's why the CCTV pictures of Thompson and Venables leading little James Bulger to his death are so dreadful: innocence – his, and theirs – died. That's why the audio tape of ten –year old Lesley pleading to 'Mummy' for help as she was sexually tormented by Bradley, and Myra Hindley's cold 'Shut up!' response, has condemned Hindley to perpetual imprisonment.

Paedophilia is an unimaginable crime: we can't walk around in the shoes of a paedophile though we can imagine ourselves doing almost any other crime. Yet, our fears of strangers are illogical, deep and false. Our children are at greater risk from our own families and friends. The risk that a deviant stranger will abduct our children, is remote: the real risk is from ourselves? We allow children of 12 or 14 to model adult sexuality in fashion photography and music. We incite mobs who pursue the innocent, in the same papers as accept advertisements that sexualise children, and read popular literature portraying children as sexually accessible the moment they attain 16.

There is a very old process at work here: Chris Morris, Channel 4 and the Brass Eye program have been made scapegoats, symbolically imbued with the sins of the community then driven out into the wilderness. We are 'purified', but only symbolically, when we turn out not just the paedophiles, but

those who try to make us reflect upon our response to them and our ambivalence to children.

I did think the satire shocking, because real children were used as mock 'victims,' and because it missed the central issue about their powerlessness. We can only sexually engage with children because we are more powerful than they are, because we fail to appreciate both their unique vulnerabilities, and their right to be treated as moral equals, and with respect: when they are genuinely allowed to say, 'No'.

We'll never see it in Australia. We have the same mockable crew as Britain: shallow politicians, eager celebrities and prune-faced journalists, and our own endless willingness to be titillated by sex and children. It is easy for morals campaigners to make fools of themselves. There is a moral purpose in letting them: making people think. But this involves the commission of a truly unforgivable sin: laughing at the self-righteous. We won't do it. But we should.