

# Opinion & Analysis

## Child abuse just the latest low point of a cruel species



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What possible point can there be in a species that preys on its youngest and most helpless members?

VAN DIEMEN'S land was the final destination for many luckless Irish convicts in the 19th century. When the first European settlers arrived in 1772, the indigenous Tasmanians, who had been isolated for centuries, were totally defenceless. Within 50 years, their numbers had been culled from around 5,000 to just 72.

During that time, the entire native population had been coerced into forced labour and sex slavery. Children were surplus to needs and were generally clubbed to death. A common practice when males were killed was to cut off their heads and tie them around the necks of their wives. Males who were not killed outright were instead castrated and worked to death. At one point, the government paid a bounty on each "skin" handed in by white settlers. The last indigenous Tasmanian died in 1869.

Nearly three centuries before the Tasmanians' fateful encounter with colonial Christians, the indigenous population of the Canary Islands, the Guanches, were the first entire people to be exterminated by modern Europeans. Their population of around 80,000 was enslaved and brutally worked to death in a little over a century on Spain's newly established sugar plantations.

"The good Christian men and women who colonised Tasmania did not let their belief in the sanctity of life stand in the way of their

drive for Lebensraum," wrote philosopher John Gray. Morality, he suggests, plays a far smaller part in our lives than we would like to think.

Between 1917 and 1959, in excess of 60 million people were killed in the Soviet Union. This was public policy; most of the killing took place in plain view. Entire rural populations were deliberately starved to death. There was no possible way of hiding atrocities on this scale; city dwellers could see the ragged, emaciated women and children who staggered away from their villages dying of hunger. Instead of being shocked or outraged, people shrugged and looked away, thankful it was not them.

This, given the oppressive nature of Soviet power, is understandable. What is far more difficult to fathom was that, despite abundant evidence from survivors, outsiders also deliberately chose not to see what was going on.

"The facts were too uncomfortable for western observers to admit", suggests Gray. "For the sake of their peace of mind they had to deny what they knew or suspected to be the case." Contrary to our fond notions, conscience, he adds, "blesses cruelty and injustice – so long as their victims can be quietly buried".

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Human history is written in the blood of the defenceless. The European conquest of the Americas and Africa is a litany of atrocities

Americas and Africa is a litany of atrocities. One mundane example is King Leopold of Belgium, who inflicted a reign of terror on the people of Congo. Under his rule, enslavement and especially mutilation were endemic. Children who displeased their Belgian masters had their hands cut off.

Belgium has now engaged in what one writer calls "a Great Forgetting". The

country's Royal Museum for Central Africa has whitewashed all mention of Leopold's "secret society of murderers".

Fear, wrote philosopher Bertrand Russell, "is the parent of cruelty, and therefore it is no wonder if cruelty and religion have gone hand-in-hand". Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the gross sadism of the medieval inquisitions presided over by the Roman Catholic church. One device employed by the Spanish Inquisition was known as "the pear". It was forced into the vagina of female victims and then slowly expanded by twisting, causing excruciating, usually fatal, internal injuries – and sexual gratification for the torturers.

The Dominican Order was the Vatican's favourite inquisitors, with the infamous Tomás de Torquemada a member of that order. The Dominicans also ran St Mary's School for Deaf Girls in Cabra. Compared with some of the psychotic sadism presided over by the Christian Brothers, life under the Dominicans seems to have been almost benign, involving just routine cruelty – neglect, bullying, hunger and humiliation, and only sporadic sexual assaults.

Over the last 15 months, this column has focused mainly on the existential threats we as a species face, as well as the onerous burdens our rapaciousness is placing on other living organisms. In the last seven days, I've found

myself asking not "will we survive?" but instead "should we survive?" What possible purpose can there be in sustaining so atavistic a species, that preys not just on the earth itself, but also on its own youngest and most helpless?

Philosopher Immanuel Kant put it thus: "Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing can ever be made." The three unifying strands – power, sex and class – that together wove this dark tapestry were effectively explored by Fintan O'Toole in this newspaper last Saturday.

Listening to spokespeople for Cori and the individual religious dis-orders and their various apologists this week, it remains clear that protecting the assets and wealth of these diseased, dysfunctional institutions is the overriding priority of the orders. Were it otherwise, they would by now have handed over the criminals in their midst to the authorities, gone into voluntarily liquidation and placed all their assets – personal and institutional – in a fund for survivors.

The more we humans repudiate the life we share in common with other animals, the greater our distress and dysfunction becomes. It is when we believe we have left our animal nature behind that humans, John Gray suggests, "show the qualities that are theirs alone: obsession, self-deception and perpetual unrest".