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Faith Healing in the Christian Science Church and its Effects on Children

Senior Paper

History of Children and the Culture of Childhood

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“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”

The Church of Christ, Scientist has been a source of controversy since its inception in the late nineteenth century, mainly because the Church utilizes the first amendment right to absolute freedom of religion to protect its practices more than most other American religions do. A main tenet of the Church is healing through prayer, which is based in a belief that physical illness is only an extension of spiritual unrest. That belief leads many members to completely reject most modern medicine. As medicine and science advance, and humans become closer to curing, or at least treating, more diseases, the Church and its practices continue to be criticized as illegitimate, out of date, and sometimes illegal. Parent who are charged with medical neglect after their children die often bear the brunt of this criticism and in some cases, legal charges. These deaths were highlighted in nineteenth-century media, much like they are today. Public outrage usually condemns the parents, but their first amendment right to freedom of religion legally protects their choices. The doctrine of healing through prayer tests two uniquely American ideas: the Christian Science Church itself, which is one of two indigenous religions to the United States, and a belief in an absolute right to freedom of speech. But in the exercise of this right children sometimes die, often from treatable and curable

2 The Church of Christ, Scientist is one of two churches considered to be uniquely American churches. Along with the Church of Latter Day Saints, the Christian Science Church was founded by an American, had its holy text written in English and on American soil, and is based in the United States. The Christian Scientist Mother Church, the First Church of Christ Scientist, is located in Boston. Every other Christian Science Church is titled “First Church of Christ, Scientist” to differentiate it from the Mother Church.
disease. These children, like all children under the age of eighteen in the United States, have no legal, medical, or practical autonomy so their choices are limited in cases of medical need. When addressing this practice as it pertains to children, we enter a complex web of moral and legal issues that test a parent’s right to freedom of religion and the United States’ obligation to protect and provide for children. When the Church was first created in the late nineteenth century, it opened up a debate that continues to thrive in the United States. By focusing on these earlier cases, one can see how little has changed since the Church first grew to prominence. The Church of Christ, Scientist is only one example that tests how far the United States is willing to extend basic first amendment rights, and if the past is any indication, we give precedence to that right to freedom over our belief that the state has a duty to protect children from danger.

The study of religion, children, and faith healing is difficult and often biased. The children whose deaths are noted and published are not alive, and cannot speak on their own behalf. Their thoughts on their parent’s actions are almost impossible to know. The parents accused of neglect and manslaughter believe so staunchly in their religion that their faith remains unwavering despite the death of their children. They don’t regret their choices and believe they did all they could to protect their kids by placing their children’s lives with God and accepting His choices. Scholars and academic writers who are neither believers nor apostates are rare. Most of the Church scholars are, in fact, followers of the faith, making it difficult to find any academic study on the Church that is not tainted with faith. Many of the memoirs about childhoods spend within the Church are written by angry and resentful adults, who can’t understand why their parents could have been so naïve as to never take them to the doctor. Newspapers articles are often written by
journalists who understand little about the theology of the Church. Furthermore, those articles are read by an audience that does not understand the kind of unwavering and concrete faith in a healing God.

To understand the debate around faith healing, one must remember that all religion requires a leap of faith. That leap may be in believing that Christ was resurrected from the dead, that God gave Moses the Ten Commandments atop Mount Sinai, or that the physical is an extension of the divine Mind; but all require an equal leap of faith. All of these beliefs affect the lives of their followers on a daily basis, and none can be empirically proven to be true. We often believe that because a religion has lasted through time it has gained validity, but to understand religion we cannot assume one makes more “logical sense” than any other. When studying people who make decisions to place their children’s health in the hands of God, we cannot judge them, for every person who believes in God makes an equal leap of faith every day. Despite the United States’ Constitutional commitment to religious toleration, we are often a country which lacks practical application of that commitment. In a country where most of the population, (eighty-three percent in 2004) identify as Christian, it is easy to see how a Christian sect which reinterprets the Bible in a radical way can become the victim of intolerance and prejudice. This mistake must not be made when studying religion because it can only lead to biased research and prejudged conclusion.

The Christian Science Church was founded as part of a religious movement in the end of the nineteenth century that focuses on incorporating religion into a society deeply

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changed by scientific discovery and understanding. The Gilded Age saw a widespread
drift towards secularism and religious indifference, a situation that demanded real
theological creativity.⁴ The Christian Science Church fit the time period perfectly. While
it attracted people who were disillusioned with orthodoxy, it was not liberal— it did not
attempt to incorporate secularism as many churches had done. At a time of spiritual
upheaval, it was not like every other Christian religion; it provided a wholly new
alternative for the Christian faith. It was in this climate that the early Church was able to
survive despite its untraditional interpretation of the Bible and its meaning.

Mary Baker Eddy was born in 1821 in New Hampshire. She was sickly as a child
and grew up spending much of her life in a sickbed. In the early 1860’s she sought help
from Phineas Quimby, a healer in Maine. Because her health greatly improved under his
care, she began to learn more about his approach to healings, which included a focus on
the Bible. In 1866, a month after Quimbly’s death, she fell and severely injured herself.
She looked to her Bible to aid in her recovery, and while reading an account of Jesus’
healings she found herself suddenly well. It is this moment that she refers to as her
discovery of Christian Science. After nine years of intensive scriptural study she
published Science and Health in 1875. In this book she laid out what she understood to
be the “science” behind Jesus’ healing method. As she saw it, his works were divinely
natural and repeatable. She saw healing not as a miraculous event, but as the simple

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⁴ Gottschalk, Stephen. The Emergence of Christian Science in American Religious Life.
outcome of living the principles laid out by Jesus Christ in the New Testament. She officially founded the Church of Christ, Scientist in 1879.⁵

While *Science and Health* is a key religious text within the Church, the Bible is considered cornerstone of its theology. Traditional Christianity, Eddy argued, had obscured the living meaning of the Bible and had reduced Biblical religion to a formalism devoid of spiritual power. “Christianity as Jesus taught it was not a creed, nor a system of ceremonies, nor a special gift from a ritualistic Jehovah; but it was the demonstration of divine Love casting out error and healing the sick, not merely in the name of Christ, or Truth, but in the demonstration of Truth, as must be the case in the cycles of divine light.”⁶ Eddy believed that the miraculous stories of the Bible could not be explained as mythical encrustations of the Gospel message, because they constituted an essential element of that message and were historical realities of the greatest importance. Jesus’ acts were in direct opposition to physical law, and were demonstrations of Science, overcoming the false claims of sense or law.⁷

A basic tenet of the Christian Science faith is the idea that the physical is not real but instead is an extension of the human mind. In this light, sickness and death are fabrications of the human mind.

I learned these Truths in divine Science: that all real being is in God, the divine Mind, and the Life, Truth, and Love are all powerful and ever present; that the opposite of Truth—called errors, sin, sickness, disease,

deaths, --is the false testimony of false material sense, of mind in matter; that this false sense evolves, in belief, a subjective state of moral mind which this same so called mind named matter, thereby shutting out the true sense of the Spirit.  

Because sickness and death are not real, their perceived presence is an extension of spiritual unrest and can only be fixed through a strengthening of one’s relationship with God. “Health is not a condition of matter, but of Mind; nor can the material senses bear reliable testimony on the subject of health. The Science of Mind-healing shows it to be impossible for aught but Mind to testify truly or to exhibit the real status of man. Therefore the divine Principle of Science, reversing the testimony of the physical senses, reveals man as harmoniously existent in Truth, which is the only basis of health; and thus Science denies all diseases, heals the sick, overthrows false evidences, and refutes materialistic logic.” Only by healing the Mind can sickness be cured. Practitioners even went so far as to not ask their patient about their symptoms because they believed this would only strengthen the patient’s claim that their physical problems were real.  

Healing through prayer has a long history in the Christian tradition. Sickness and healing figures are ubiquitous in the scriptures. When physicians appear in the Old Testament, they are often placed to demonstrate their failure to heal in comparison to God’s capacity to heal. The New Testament is full of accounts of healing, but most cures come from Jesus Christ. Many of the Gospels are devoted to depicting the healing powers of Jesus. In the letter of James he says, “Is any one among you suffering? Let him pray. Is

9 Eddy, Mary Baker. *Science and Health with Key to the Scripture*. Boston: The First Church of Christ, Scientists, 1875. 120 Print.  
he cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up.”

It is with this passage that many Christians, the Church of Christ, Scientist included, support an argument that the scriptures contain specific guidance for healing— one that notably omits any role for physicians or medicine.

While many members of the Church today were born into the faith, in the late nineteenth century, the church grew mostly from new converts. An article from The New York Times in 1888 explains how one particular convert, Mrs. Mary E. Martin, came to the faith. Mrs. Martin had a malignant growth that a doctor agreed to perform surgery on, but the procedure was too expensive and too costly. When she was close to death a friend of hers, a Christian Scientist, called upon her to ask her to recognize the fact that God was “omnipotent and omnipresent.” Later she awoke in the nights and heard the words “God is omnipotent and omnipresent. I do not make you suffer, neither do I make sickness.” It was at this point she found herself healed. This kind of conversion is typical for the Church of Christ, Scientists at this time. Many of its believers have converted after a successful healing, or when they are ill and see success in other cases. The Church documents much of its success and lets these successes be known. These cases are then used as evidence that healing through prayer, at least in the manner the Church teaches it, is a historically proven fact. This later becomes important as parents

use this historical evidence of success to bolster the credibility of their choices when confronted in and outside of court.

In the case of young children, healing was often a responsibility of the parents to maintain faith and prayer for their children’s health. If these children died, a healer blamed the parents for their failure to have faith. But if the child lived, the healer claimed it as a success. In an article on June 19th, 1889, the Los Angeles Times reported the case of a seven year old boy who had died of diphtheria while under the care of a Christian Science healer. His mother had originally thought he had contracted pneumonia, and was disheartened when she learned he had diphtheria, a condition she considered more dire. The newspaper interviewed the healer who claimed that “if Mrs. Whiteman (the boy’s mother) had not lost hope when the child was diagnosed with diphtheria instead of pneumonia, the child would certainly have gotten well.” The healer, Mrs. Faloy, was asked whether she could affect cures and “unhesitatingly replied that she could and if the person had faith, and would take the treatment, which consisted solely of intense inward prayer, she could cure anything from a broken limb to insanity...distance was no obstacle in the way of treatment. She could cure a person in Arkansas, Europe, or Los Angeles.”

In few of these cases were the desires of the child even mentioned. Like today, these children had very little control over their treatment. In one article from 1908 the coroner actually questioned the Christian Science healer about the child’s ability to choose Christian Science healing methods at the age of ten. When asked what method of

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treatment the child wanted to pursue, the healer claims the child wanted a Christian Science healer. And when asked if a girl of her age was “competent to judge for herself” the healer replied that “yes, competent to express her desires, but it was up to her parents to say whether that choice should be granted.”15 This article exposes another difficult area of children’s welfare and health care law: at what age can they make their own medical decisions? And at what age should their choices be more valid than those of their parents? These questions are ethical grey areas and depend largely on who is asked, but legally the United States does not give children medical and legal autonomy until age eighteen.16 Children effectively have no rights to make their own choices about whether they see a Christian Science healer or a licensed medical doctor.

Public reaction to these deaths and this new church tended to be negative. In an article describing the death of a boy in 1889, the last paragraph of the article says “there is no doubt that ‘faith healing’ has taken a strong hold on the East Side, from all indications the superstition is growing worse every day, and the worst part of the whole thing is that there is no way by which the matter can be reached by law.”17 Major newspapers were far from unbiased in expressing their disapproval of these deaths. During these attacks Mary Baker Eddy was aware of the public perception of the Church’s healing practices. She wrote, “because Divine Science wars with physical science…the old school still opposes it. When the Science of being is universally

understood, man will be his own physician.” She understood this lack of support to be a natural part of the process, because, according to Eddy, man had to recognize the Church’s radical teachings before they would make sense.

As the Church grew to prominence in the 1880’s and 1890’s, newspapers throughout the country carried sensationalist stories of criminal prosecutions of members of the Christian Science Church. Many of these cases were against the practitioners left to care for sick children. In 1893, Ezra Buswell faced charges in Nebraska for practicing medicine without a license after a child left in his care died of cholera. The indictment claimed he was “falsely, unlawfully, craftily, and wickedly” attempting to deceive and defraud people. In his trial, Buswell offered this explanation of his healing methods, “We treat them as a mother treats her child that is frightened at some object it fears, by showing them that God is love, and, in understanding the all presence of love, there is no fear.” Even the judges in some of these cases expressed disapproval if they felt parents were not punished severely enough. In one case from January 1898 a judge writes, “I think a monstrous wrong has been done in the death of this child. I don’t think the penalty is sufficient. If this woman is going to be turned loose on this community, I am going to let a higher court do it. I would fine her $1,000 if I had the power…” One article in The New York Times went so far as to blame the spread of diphtheria on Christian Science parents who refused to allow their children to be treated by conventional doctors. The

article reports that health officials believe that “the Christian Scientists have been meeting in a body at the bedside of diphtheria patients, going from one house to another and carrying the disease into places where the children had not been exposed.” 21 From the documents left from these cases and their press coverage, no one except the religious community was happy about the punishments levied against the parents and healers, if they were punished at all. Many of the newspaper articles were blatant about their distain for the Church and its teachings. Some went so far as to call healers “spiritual quacks” and write, “in the spring the fancy of certain emotional and weak-minded persons lightly turn to quacks and quackery of one kind or another.” 22 This biased journalism obviously affected public opinion as much as it reflected public option.

Common law tradition in the United States has always allowed adults the right to choose or refuse their own medical care. While adult Christian Science sometimes die from lack of medical care, it is within their legal right to do so. Unlike those adults, children lack a complete knowledge of the reality of death. Those children also lack any real autonomy. They cannot make informed decisions for themselves, so their parents and caregivers must decide for them. Traditionally, the First Amendment has been interpreted rather broadly to protect the rights of the parent, and not the child. Judges’ decisions almost always come down to the actions, rights, and wills of the parents, and rarely considered the life of the child. Despite that fact, child safety and neglect laws state the definition of neglect to be “Any act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation,”


parents' rights to religious freedom trump these protection laws. The two seem to run in opposition with each other when concerning whether or not parents should be forced to provide medical attention to their sick child, if that attention does oppose their religious beliefs. For many parents, taking a child to a healer constitutes the only medical attention they consider valid. For Christian Scientist parents, they are providing their children with the necessary care needed. In their eyes, taking a child to a physician is both futile and unnecessary. To them, a Christian Science practitioner and prayer is the only way to cure physical illness, so that is what they do. These parents are not neglecting to give their child treatment; they are just providing care that is not recognized by many people in the United States as valid. This further blurs the line between what is appropriate care and neglect. In a country that fervently protects an individual's right to freedom of religious thought, which in this case encompasses medical care. Whose concept of what constitutes care is given legal authority? All of this creates a murky and convoluted legal process, which is forced to define religious freedom, neglect, child's rights, necessary medical treatment, and parental duties. When simplified the legality of this course of action is based on who's right is greater- the child's right to live or the adult's right to freedom of religion. Traditionally and commonly, courts have sided with the parents.

Legally, the federal and state governments have been reluctant to take any clear stand on whether healing through prayer constitutes medical neglect. It was not until the early twentieth century that child welfare laws became a serious part of public policy. Expanding police powers to include more stringent regulations on the relationships

between parents and children, local and state governments began enacting statutes against crimes such as abuse, neglect overwork, and unnecessarily cruel punishments. States even created juvenile courts that were specifically designed to address concerns over children’s welfare. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these developments generated a series of legal conflicts between parents, clergy, and state authorities that sought to regulate religious practices that put children at risk. Out of these early conflicts came several trends.

There was general confusion over how statutes that governed medical practice, child neglect, and manslaughter could be applied to religion based cases. Common-law doctrines regarding manslaughter, which seemed to permit defenses based on religious beliefs, only complicated the matter. But as the legal issues were being sorted out, there was a growing public belief that failure to provide medical treatment to a child, even when the caregiver sincerely believed prayer was a valid substitute, should result in criminal sanctions for the child’s parents. Often when parents were tried for criminal neglect or manslaughter, the cases failed because existing criminal law failed to provide a clear framework for prosecution. In a few cases, such as in the case of Benjamin Jewell in 1913, the judge placed concrete definitions of what should be considered manslaughter. The judge advised the jury to disregard that the parents were Christian Scientists and only consider whether the “child was so ill that any reasonable person would have called in a doctor, and if they thought that and the deaths had been accelerated by want of medical

aid, then it was manslaughter. But this type of specific instruction was rare. When these cases were successfully prosecuted, trial or appellate court judges repeatedly justified imposing lower than normal sentences on parents by mentioning that their actions had been rooted in a sincere belief that prayer would help their children, a decision that was rooted in love. The frequent imposition of these lenient punishments shows that many judges believe that the parents were legally guilty, but did not bear moral responsibility for the deaths of their children. This trend only furthered the complications surrounding religion based medical neglect cases.

What constitutes neglect and what doesn’t seems to be the most difficult legal boundary to define. When most people think of neglect, they think of a failure to care for someone vulnerable. If that is the definition the court apply to these cases, then these parents are not guilty of neglect. Christian Scientist parents did not sit idly by while their children suffered. They called a health practitioner. They paid that practitioner an amount similar to what medical doctors charged. They stayed up at night and sat with their children, applied cold rags to their fevered foreheads, and sang them to sleep. They did not sit and watch them die. The only real difference between Christian Scientist parents and any other American family is the type of practitioner they called in. Where one family believes in hard medicine’s ability to heal, the other believes is the Divine Mind’s power to heal. It must also be remembered that these parents viewed licensed medical doctors as pointless. For them, calling a normal doctor would be useless, something that

would only be a waste of critical time. If the courts decided whether or not to convict these parents based on whether or not they neglected their children, then parents are not guilty of anything more than caring for and protecting their children in an unorthodox way.

As the Church grew rapidly in the late nineteenth century, newspapers throughout the country began printing stories of criminal prosecutions involving members of the Church of Christ, Scientist. Along with this notoriety came attention from the American Medical Association (AMA) and The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), both of whom started a campaign to delegitimize Christian Science healers as valid medical practitioners in the 1880's. At this time, huge advancements were made in medicine and the healing profession was maturing along with it. As the nineteenth century progressed, growing numbers of aspiring doctors attended medical schools that provided clinical instruction to meet the increasingly strict standards for a medical education. Because of this, many AMA members worked to keep nonconformist healers, especially ones who did not practice scientific medicine, from hurting their professional reputations. This included attacking Christian Science healers. The Journal of the American Medical Association often ran editorials attacking the Church and its methods. The JAMA was so concerned about this growing church that they rallied states to enact legislation to criminalize Christian Science healers. They encouraged states to require that these healers pass exams and register with the state before they could begin practicing. Christian Scientists viewed this as a serious threat to their church and claimed

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these laws infringed upon their religious liberties. Most of these attempts by the AMA failed, as they lacked legislative support and governors vetoed the few laws that were passed. By 1910, the AMA campaign to criminalize Christian Science healers had fizzled out.

Between the first part of the twentieth century and the 1970’s very little legal action was taken to further clarify this issue. Serious legislative history was not made until 1974 when the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act was passed. The act established a federal requirement for every parent or legal guardian to provide a child with any necessary medical service or treatment except when it conflicted with religious beliefs. The act went so far as to prohibit a state from finding abuse or neglect in cases where a parent or legal guardian “relies solely or partially upon spiritual means rather than medical treatment, in accordance with the religious beliefs of the parent or legal guardian.” Since its passage, thirty states have ratified the act, including California. This law clearly prioritizes a parent’s right to freedom of religion over a child’s right to necessary medical treatment. Many Church advocates argue that a child is receiving medical care, just not through traditional western medicinal practices. For many believers, these children are adequately being taken care of.

Public support of efforts to repeal religious exemptions were tested more recently in Massachusetts in 1986, when David and Ginger Twitchell were prosecuted for manslaughter after their son died of a bowel obstruction. As the case made its way through the courts in the early 1990’s, lawmakers began to consider ways to change child

neglect laws and repeal the religious exemption clause. But repeal activists had to first face the Christian Science Church, which was headquartered in Boston and held wide political power through powerful lobbyists in the capital. Church officials claimed repealing the law would “make criminals out of good families.” They continued to argue that Christian Science parents were not neglectful, but caring parents who adopted an approach that had been proven and was legal under the State and Federal Constitution.

While the governor of Massachusetts originally backed the reform legislation, he vetoed the amendment when it reached his desk for approval because it “wasn’t necessary.”29 In this case, as in many similar cases, public opinion was not enough to repeal the law. And in theory government officials and prosecutors have a duty to devote themselves to defining the rule of law and make sure citizens uphold it, irrespective of their personal beliefs. But what exactly is legal and what is not depends who you ask. And once again the biggest problem in challenging the legality of these deaths, is the legal and ethical ambiguity of the entire situation.

Much of what we know about the childhood of Christian Science believers comes from memoirs written later in their lives. The children who live to write their stories are the lucky ones, the children who never were sick enough to need serious attention. It must be remembered that most Christian Science children were lucky; the media, both in the nineteenth century and now, can make the problem of untreated children seem monumental, when in fact most Christian Science children lived relatively healthy lives. Most of these authors write about what it was like to never be given an aspirin for a

headache or a Band-Aid for a cut knee. In her memoir Barbara Wilson writes, "Whatever bruise or scrape I’d sustained went unregarded, though with her practiced maternal eye my mother had ascertained it wasn’t serious. She didn’t touch or kiss it. There was no baby talk, no ‘did my baby get a boo boo? Kiss and make all better now.’ I heard instead the Lord’s Prayer or the Twenty-third psalm or the Scientific Statement of Being I heard the comforting circular reasoning of Christian Science: ‘God loves you. God wouldn’t want to hurt you. Therefore, you don’t hurt.’”30 Many of these children remember their childhood with bitter resentment directed their parents for inflicting this pain on them. In his memoir, Thomas Simmons writes “Although instantaneous healings were part of the lore of Christian Science- I heard about them regularly in Sunday School- I do not remember being instantaneously healed of any ear infection, or even being at all. I remember hours and hours of unrelieved pain…my mother was an immensely kind woman, it seems grotesque to suggest that she was also cruel…but from an early age, however, we all knew that we were suffering unnecessarily, cruelly.”31 Anger towards their parents and toward the church is common among Christian Science apostates. Many of these adults struggle with their parents’ decisions about their medical treatment.

We will never know how the children who died felt. Assuming they would disagree with their parents is dangerous, as is assuming they believed whole-heartedly in the Christian Science doctrine. Because they died as children, they were never given the chance to develop fully their own ideas on God, healing, prayer, and death. Arguably,

they were too young to understand such concepts and that is why their parents hold that right to make choices for them. But in a situation as serious as a life threatening illness, is it still morally prudent to eliminate their autonomy completely? This question continues to be debated among legal scholars, medical experts, religious leaders, and the general public. This problem is uniquely American in nature. In no other country is the freedom to practice whatever religion one chooses applied so absolutely. And in no other country is that right given at the sacrifice of its youngest citizens. As Americans we must decided to whom to do we give favor when distributing liberties: the child or the parent? What expense are we will to pay to protect children? And for whom are we willing to risk our right to freedom of religion? If a study of Christian Science healing and children illuminates any problem, it is how to treat children when they are too young to make their own medical decisions and how old exactly “too young” is. The Founding Fathers placed so much importance on freedom of religion that it is one of the first natural rights asserted in the Constitution; but also in that document is the God-given right to life. And for many of these children, that right was taken away before they could even begin living. In the end, we must still decide what we value more: a parent’s right to freedom of religion or a child’s right to life. Each is a double-edged sword; by limiting freedom of religion, we allow the opportunity for everyone’s religious liberties to be stripped away when the majority views it necessary, and the Constitution was intended to protect the minority that is often forgotten. But allowing these children to die seems to sacrifice our most vulnerable and powerless minority, children.
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http://www.childwelfare.gov/can/defining/federal.cfm


