WHEN DID WE SEE YOU NAKED?

Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse

Why should Jesus be recognised as a victim of sexual abuse? How has the sexual abuse in the mistreatment of Jesus remained hidden in plain sight for so long?

Timely and provocative, this book brings together an international group of leading scholars from a range of disciplines to address this question - how has the sexual abuse of Jesus remained hidden in plain sight? - and explore what implications and applications it might offer to victims and survivors of sexual abuse, their communities, and to the Church.

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When Did We See You Naked?

Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse

Edited by

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Contents

List of Contributors xi
Foreword by the Rt Revd Dr Eleanor Sanderson xv

Introduction: Acknowledging Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse 1
Jayme R. Reaves and David Tombs

Part 1: Biblical and Textual Studies

1 Crucifixion and Sexual Abuse 15
David Tombs

2 Covering Up Sexual Abuse: An Ecclesial Tendency from the Earliest Years of the Jesus Movement? 28
Michael Trainor

3 ‘He Never Said a Mumbalin’ Word’: A Womanist Perspective of Crucifixion, Sexual Violence and Sacralized Silence 46
Mitzi J. Smith

4 Family Resemblance: Reading Post-Crucifixion Encounters as Community Responses to Sexual Violence 67
Monica C. Poole

5 Knowing Christ Crucified (1 Corinthians 2.2): Cross, Humiliation and Humility 91
Jeremy Punt

6 Jesus, Joseph and Tamar Stripped: Trans-textual and Intertextual Resources for Engaging Sexual Violence Against Men 110
Gerald O. West

Part 2: Stations of the Cross

7 This is My A Body 131
Pádraig Ó Tuama
Part 3: Parsing Culture, Context and Perspectives

8 Conceal to Reveal: Reflections on Sexual Violence and Theological Discourses in the African Caribbean
Carlton Turner

9 ‘Not pictured’: What Veronica Mars Can Teach Us about the Crucifixion
Rachel Starr

10 Jesus is a Survivor: Sexual Violence and Stigma within Faith Communities
Elisabet le Roux

11 Why Do We See Him Naked? Politicized, Spiritualized and Sexualized Gazes at Violence
R. Ruard Ganzervoort, Srdjan Sremac and Teguh Wijaya Mulya

12 The Crucified Christa: A Re-evaluation
Nicola Slee

13 Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse: A Womanist Critical Discourse Analysis of the Crucifixion
Mmapula Diana Kebaneilwe

Part 4: Sexual Abuse, Trauma and the Personal

14 Jesus: A Critical Companion in the Journey to Moving on from Sexual Abuse
Beth R. Crisp

15 Surviving Trauma at the Foot of the Cross
Karen O’Donnell

16 ‘This is My Body’: A Womanist Reflection on Jesus’ Sexualized Trauma during His Crucifixion from a Survivor of Sexual Assault
Shanell T. Smith

17 Seeing His Innocence, I See My Innocence
Rocio Figueroa and David Tombs

Acknowledgements
Acknowledgement of Sources
Index of Biblical References
Index of Names and Subjects
Seeing His Innocence, I See My Innocence

ROCÍO FIGUEROA AND DAVID TOMBS

Exploring responses to Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse

The article ‘Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse’ (1999) drew on Latin American liberationist hermeneutics for a reading of biblical texts with attention to both past context and present context. As a new reading of crucifixion, it focused on presenting textual and contextual evidence for recognizing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. It is not until its final pages that the theological and pastoral implications of this recognition are addressed. Drawing on the parable of judgement (Matt. 25.31–46), it affirms the Christological connection between the suffering of the naked Christ and the suffering of those who are tortured and abused. This connection might offer a liberating and healing approach to those who continue to struggle with the stigma and other consequences of sexual abuse.

This chapter focuses on how this pastoral response might be developed further, in response to survivor suggestions. It offers findings from qualitative interviews undertaken during 2019 to explore responses to naming Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. The participants are five female survivors of sexual abuse in Argentina, France, Germany, Peru and the Philippines. Four interviewees are former nuns, and the fifth is a current nun. They are referred to here by the pseudonyms Dina (Germany), Franca (France), Lilian (the Philippines), Lucía (Argentina) and María (Peru). The participants discuss their responses with particular attention to the difference that seeing Jesus in this way makes to them personally as a survivor, and the difference they believe it might make to the wider Church.

Of course, Jesus’ experience of crucifixion should not only be seen in terms of sexual abuse or sexual violence. There was more to crucifixion than that. Recognizing sexually abusive elements in Roman crucifixions, and naming them properly for what they were, is not to limit the understanding of Jesus’ crucifixion in any way. Rather, it is to ensure that sexual abuse as a historically important element is included in the overall understanding of the passion.

Our questions here were informed by two previous studies we had undertaken with a small group of male survivors of church-related sexual abuse in Peru. The first study involved eight participants and investigated
the impact of sexual abuse with particular attention to its impact on their spirituality and faith. This highlighted their feelings of betrayal and lack of trust, and the damage done to their faith in God and in the Church. The second study, which is much closer in purpose to this current study, explored responses to a reading of Jesus as victim of sexual abuse. Five of the seven participants in the second study had also participated in the first study. We asked whether they saw Jesus being a victim of sexual abuse was significant for them as survivors, and whether they saw it as important to the wider Church. Two findings from the work with male participants were specifically illuminating. First, the findings demonstrate that individual survivors respond to the abuse of Jesus in different ways. Two of the male survivors said it would not be helpful, and another said it would probably not be helpful, but the other four found it positive. This variety suggests that any proposals for a pastoral approach should be made tentatively and require further research. Further work should be undertaken into how Jesus’ experience can be addressed in the most helpful way, and also into what should be avoided. Second, their responses indicated that Jesus’ experience of sexual abuse should be seen as important for everyone within the Church, and not just survivors. In fact, both the earlier study and the findings presented here suggest that the issues are of even more pressing relevance to the wider Church than they might be for survivors.

To build on the earlier interviews with male victims, we wanted to speak to a group of female victims. We prioritized speaking to nuns for two reasons. First, in 2019 the sexual abuse of nuns in the Church had attracted global attention, and we wanted to learn more about their experiences. Second, a 2013 study by Gloria Durà-Vilà, Roland Littlewood and Gerard Leavey had interviewed a group of contemplative nuns in Spain who had experienced sexual abuse within the Church. Some of the abused nuns had stated that they found it consoling to reflect on the suffering of Jesus. They had ‘felt that Jesus was with them while they were being abused, and was himself undergoing the abuse as well’. We wanted to explore this further. The contemplative nuns had seen a connection with the suffering of Jesus, but appear to have understood Jesus’ suffering in a more general way, rather than as a form of sexual abuse per se. For our study, we wanted to name Jesus’ own experience more explicitly as sexual abuse and then to ask our participants their thoughts on this.

Michael Trainor’s book *The Body of Jesus and Sexual Abuse* is an important landmark in biblical work on this issue. It offers a detailed book-length discussion of the presentation of sexual abuse in the four Gospels. As a biblical scholar, Trainor draws on textual criticism alongside his pastoral experience, as both an Australian Catholic priest and an educator, to discuss the portrayals of sexual abuse in the different Gospel accounts and to reflect on their significance. Yet, despite Trainor’s book, there is still much work to be done on the historical side. The longstanding silence around Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse has proved to be resilient. Detailed scholarly works on crucifixion published in recent years, which offer sig-
significant advances in scholarship on other questions, nonetheless typically neglect to address any sexual dimension in the stripping, the mockery and the cross.\textsuperscript{17} As a result, when Jesus is described as a victim of sexual abuse it still requires careful explanation. In many cases it is received, at least initially, with scepticism and even hostility. There is still a need to repeatedly restate and explain the historical and textual evidence for why Jesus should be seen as a victim of sexual abuse.\textsuperscript{18} Within the academy, the Church and wider society, the sexual abuse of Jesus typically remains ‘hidden within plain sight’.\textsuperscript{19} Further scholarly work to clarify and confirm the historical and textual insight that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse is therefore needed. However, this should take place alongside a consideration of how and why this acknowledgement makes a practical difference.

As the subtitle to Trainor’s book indicates – ‘How the Gospel Passion Narratives Inform a Pastoral Response’ – he is concerned with how his investigation might serve a positive pastoral purpose in his own Australian context.\textsuperscript{20} He asks: ‘what can authentic discipleship look like in one who has experienced sexual abuse, feels hurt and anger towards the church institution and its leaders, and struggles to believe in a God who cares?’\textsuperscript{21} Trainor recognizes that survivors respond in different ways, and he is aware that some survivors argue against an identification of the abuse of Jesus with their own sexual abuse.\textsuperscript{22} However, he believes that for others Jesus’ experience can sustain and give hope, and can also help the Church to listen to the stories of others who have been hurt and abused.\textsuperscript{23} Fortunately, these two areas of research, the historical and the pastoral, can support and illuminate each other.\textsuperscript{24} Other research is underway on the historical and textual grounds for understanding Jesus in this way; in this chapter the focus is more directly on the practical issue of why this matters.\textsuperscript{25} Taking up Trainor’s commitment to a pastoral concern, our chapter considers how Jesus’ experience of abuse might be addressed in a way that could be helpful to survivors and transformative for the wider Church.\textsuperscript{26}

Over the years, a number of important questions have been asked about why the acknowledgement of this disturbing insight should matter. To what extent, if at all, might the acknowledgement of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse really offer a sense of healing or hope? How can the dangers of a naive valorization of the suffering of Jesus be avoided? How might contemporary survivors of sexual abuse respond to Jesus as a victim? What positive meaning might it have for them? What relevance does it have to victim-blaming and stigmatizing attitudes in the wider Church?

Three developments in the social landscape since 1999 add to the urgency of responses to these questions. First, the extent of sexual abuses within churches has become much more widely known. These abuses were already known in the 1980s and 1990s, but became much more widely publicized especially in the light of coverage by the Boston Globe newspaper in 2002, followed by subsequent revelations in many other countries around the world.\textsuperscript{27} Second, the prevalence of sexual violence during wars and political conflicts has been much more clearly documented and discussed.\textsuperscript{28} Churches
and faith organizations have shown a growing leadership at a global level in understanding and addressing conflict-related sexual violence, and in recognizing the devastation it leaves behind. While the majority of this violence is directed against women and girls, there is also now much wider recognition that men and boys are often also targeted. Third, the #MeToo movement, taking on mainstream attention in 2017, publicized the extent of sexual harassment and sexual assault in wider society and has also shown how often these issues are normalized, trivialized, ignored and silenced.

There can no longer be a question that a strong pastoral and theological response is needed to sexual abuse and sexual violence in its many different forms. If this response is to be adequate it will need to be courageous and honest. It must be willing to confront difficult issues, stigmas and taboos, and not fall back on platitudes or abstractions. The churches need a clear-sighted sense of the problem and an understanding of how its legacies continue to affect the lives of survivors long after the abuse itself.

The indirect impacts of abuse, as well as the often more obvious direct harms, also need to be considered. The indirect impacts include the victim-blaming and stigma. These are referred to as a ‘secondary victimization’. Many survivors report that they are left to carry these additional burdens with little help or support from the churches. In fact, in many cases, churches can reinforce the stigma and victim-blaming attitudes that add to the problems faced by survivors and contribute to isolation and abandonment.

Following a summary presentation of the findings, a discussion section explores how the interviews might contribute to a more proactive and theologically grounded pastoral response to sexual abuse. We suggest that attention to the innocence of Jesus may challenge the victim-blaming that survivors often face in the wider Church. One of the most striking responses from participants was the significance of Jesus’ innocence. In the words of Maria, ‘the beautiful thing is that Jesus was innocent’ because ‘Seeing his innocence, I see my innocence.’ We had not anticipated this particular response, but it shows how survivors might find value in acknowledging Jesus as victim of sexual abuse in creative and even unexpected ways. For some survivors, an identification with Jesus’ innocence can help to resist destructive social and psychological pressures to self-judgement or self-blame. For the wider Church, this recognition might offer insight into the prevalence of victim-blaming and negative judgements.

The interviews encourage the conviction that the acknowledgement of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse serves a positive role. However, identifying with the suffering of Jesus should not be seen as a simple or straightforward solution. It carries risks of misunderstanding and misappropriation and will need careful expression if it is to make a constructive contribution to the Church’s response to sexual abuse.
Interview findings

After receiving ethics approval, we conducted structured individual interviews with our five participants. The five participants now range in age from 35 to 70 years old but the sexual abuse took place when they were young adults or minors. Three of them were abused by priests as young adults during their religious life, and the other two experienced child sexual abuse by relatives. The abuse incidents disclosed ranged from penetrative sexual abuse (four participants) to non-penetrative sexual touching (all participants). We are very grateful to all the participants for their willingness to be interviewed. They were generous in their readiness to reflect on our questions and to share their thoughts with us and with a wider audience.

Prior to the interview, the participants agreed to read about sexual abuse in the crucifixion of Jesus. The reading was an abridged version of the ‘Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse’ article, which had been shortened in 2019 for publication in the Brazilian theological journal *Estudos Teológicos*. The abridged version, entitled ‘Crucifixion and Sexual Abuse’, was provided to the participants in English, French, German or Spanish. Participants were asked to prepare for their interview by reading this work, or alternatively by reading a two-page summary, which was provided alongside it.

Each individual interview generally lasted for about 40 minutes. Most were held over Skype but one of the interviews was written. The interviews sought information on the impact of vocation and faith on participants’ response to sexual abuse in general, as well as their more specific responses to seeing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. However, for brevity, it is only the questions relating to Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse that are presented here. The questions on their responses to Jesus as victim were grouped under four headings:

1. Whether the participant had previously viewed their abuse in light of the suffering of Jesus.
2. Whether the reading on crucifixion and sexual abuse was new to them, and whether they felt it was persuasive.
3. The significance (if any) that understanding Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse had for them.
4. Their views on the significance of this for the wider Church.

Previous identification with Jesus’ suffering

This area of questions asked about any previous connection participants had made to the suffering of Jesus prior to their participation in our project. Only one participant, Franca, had made no connection between her own suffering and the suffering of Jesus. She said:
During the period of abuse, I made no connection between Jesus’ sufferings and my own experiences. And when I started to free myself from my abusers, I went through a long period (15 years) of rejecting the mystery of the Incarnation and the person of Jesus, because I had been abused in Jesus’ name.

The other four participants had each made some form of personal connection between their abuse and the suffering of Jesus, but they differed in how they saw this. For two of the participants (Maria and Lilian), the connection to the suffering of Jesus was positive and helpful, for one (Dina) it was mixed, and for one (Lucia) it was negative. As in the study of the Spanish nuns, those who made a connection to the suffering of Jesus saw this in terms of generic suffering, and had not thought of Jesus’ experience in terms of his own sexual abuse.38

Maria had set her suffering alongside the suffering of Jesus. Her response shows the powerful effect that Jesus’ innocence as a victim can have. His innocence had reinforced her own sense of innocence, and had helped her to resist feelings of shame and guilt:

One positive thing that helped me in the process of healing was the Cross of Christ. The idea of an innocent Jesus suffering for us helped me to understand that I was innocent. I felt guilt and shame. I felt powerless. Putting my experience alongside Jesus’ experience helped me to assimilate it in my life.

For Lilian, although the image of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse did not provide an answer to the question of why she suffered, nonetheless the sense of Jesus being with her in suffering had brought her great comfort. Like Maria, she saw particular significance in his innocence:

I saw how Jesus was mistreated, being innocent, and what he suffered during his life. Jesus was whipped; they spat at him; they used words that were very abusive and abused him as a person and they insulted him; they humiliated him. Jesus is an innocent person.

I asked the question why me? Why has this happened to me? The answer that came to me was the picture of the crucifixion. God cries for me; God also suffers with me. For me this is a great consolation.

Dina’s response was more mixed. She had identified the suffering of Jesus with her own suffering, but she did not find Jesus’ response to be helpful. She gave her response as both ‘Yes and No’. On the one hand, Jesus’ suffering was very present in her community’s spirituality. This made it easy to identify her own suffering with the suffering of Jesus. Yet on the other hand, there were differences that created difficulties. Jesus’ suffering was seen as heroic, and he was seen as accepting it and suffering in silence. This suggested that Dina should also suffer in silence. She said: ‘The only feeling
that I could allow was to bury it and not complain.’ Dina also struggled with Matthew 5.39 where Jesus calls on followers to turn the other cheek. While this made sense to her as a response to a striking on the cheek, did this mean that Jesus expected you to allow someone to rape you again? She said:

He would never say that. So, it made me think: what is the difference between striking on the cheek and sexual abuse? Somehow, I think it is not right to be silent, but I couldn’t find any encouragement from Jesus to help me to speak out and defend myself. At least I understood Jesus’ suffering, and I also suffered, so in one sense he was close to me, yet his suffering was so different to mine. At the same time my identification with Jesus helped the abusers to keep me silent.

Lucia also identified a connection to the suffering of Jesus, but she did not see it as helpful, at least not at the time:

Each time during my time as a nun when I suffered something painful, or the abuse itself, I thought that Jesus suffered worse than me, and I had to offer my own suffering without complaining so much … You couldn’t complain because we asked God to suffer in this life and live in purgatory so it was good that these things were happening.

Both Lucia and Dina felt that if they suffered as Jesus suffered this meant that they therefore should not complain. They were expected to carry suffering in the same way as Jesus bore his cross. Rather than being helpful, Jesus’ suffering worked to silence them as victims and suppress their cries for help.39

Response to the reading

The second area of questioning was their response to the reading, and how plausible they found the suggestion that Jesus was a victim of historical sexual abuse. Their answers to this question shared much in common. It was a new reading to most, with the exception of Franca who had come across it some months earlier. Furthermore, they all found it persuasive, and felt it allowed them to understand Jesus’ suffering in a fuller way.

Lucia said: ‘I believe that it is persuasive … I never thought about it and it really touched me.’ In a similar way, Lilian said it was new and persuasive:

I think that the only type of abuse that I knew was the one I went through and when I thought about Jesus I just thought about the insults and the crucifixion. The idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse is quite persuasive.
Maria also said that it was both new and persuasive, and explained:

Sincerely I felt like: ‘it makes sense’. At an intellectual level I thought it makes sense because these things happen. Why didn’t I think about it before? When people are humiliated in a crucifixion or in a torture of that type, shame and sexual abuse happen.

Dina also saw it as convincing. She also commented on the strangeness of nobody having thought about it before.

It is very clear that the stripping of a prisoner before execution was a humiliation and sexuality was involved. My first reaction is that it is a very interesting idea, it somehow makes sense and nobody has thought about it.

The participant who had previously heard that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse was Franca. A few months before the interview she had heard the idea when listening to a lecture on the internet. Franca explained that in Matthew 27, when Jesus is handed over to the soldiers, it is said that they ‘mocked him’ (verse 29). ‘Mocked’ is the expression used in Judges 19 to refer to the rape of the concubine.

For Matthew, Jesus is delivered to the soldiers and they stripped him of his clothes, even if it is not explicitly stated, there is a kind of rape in the passion of Christ … When you throw a person, man or woman, in the middle of an unaccountable gang, who knows what could happen? I think that the passion of Christ echoes many stories of suffering.

For all the participants, the historical evidence and the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse made sense and was clearly persuasive. They did not see sexual abuse as bringing a forced or false external perspective on his experience. Rather, they saw it as helping to recognize and name Jesus’ experience for what it was. Maria registered her surprise that she had not thought of it before. Dina commented on how strange it is that this is not more widely recognized or discussed, and saw it as a result of a victim-blaming culture:

It is so strange that Jesus has not been considered a victim of sexual abuse: I think that it is because we have this whole victim-blaming culture and the idea that victims of sexual abuse have actually done something to provoke it. Picturing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse makes it entirely clear that a victim is innocent.

In terms of their emotional response to the article, Lucia and Franca reported that thinking of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse provoked strong emotions. Lucia said: ‘I felt the same emotion as when I watched movies about his passion: a feeling of powerlessness, a rage (‘bronca’) that Jesus
suffered like that.’ Franca said: ‘Jesus lived through the sexual abuse of so many children, so many men, so many women, including those who claim to be his disciples. This is a great comfort for me, a great consolation.’ Dina spoke of her wish to know more: ‘I also see Jesus and the Gospels as an object of study and research.’ Lilian described a shift in her feelings:

First, I had a feeling of resistance. I felt that Jesus’ abuse was different from mine. But then I considered that the feelings were the same: feeling humiliated and people staring at him.

Maria spoke of her conflicted emotions. On the one hand, she felt it strengthened the bond between her own suffering and that of Christ, and says, ‘I identified more with Christ.’ If Jesus suffered sexual abuse she felt he could better identify with this human experience. On the other hand, however, this was also upsetting. It created a conflict for Maria because she recognized it as dehumanizing experience:

I didn’t want anybody living through an experience like that. I would not like him going through something like that because it is horrible [she cries]. The abuse deprives you of your own humanity and your own dignity. It is humiliating and it is horrible. Physically it is horrible. It is psychologically and spiritually very painful.

During the interviews Lucia, Maria, Franca and Lilian had a strong empathy towards Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. They expressed compassionate concern for what had happened to him. Lucia spoke of her rage that Jesus suffered in this way. Franca spoke of Jesus as present in the suffering of others, not just her own suffering: ‘Jesus lived through the sexual abuse of so many children, so many men, so many women, including those who claim to be his disciples.’ Maria said she found it hard to relate to God’s power. By contrast, she felt a closer connection with the suffering of Christ.

But a Christ who has suffered, who has been humiliated makes me feel that he is more connected with me. We have lived the same things. He understands what I have gone through. And I understand a little bit of what he lived.

Thinking of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse gave her new insight into his suffering and his humanity.

The abuse dehumanizes. Someone steals your humanity and the autonomy that you have over your own body, over yourself … Knowing this side of Christ’s suffering was a relief … Jesus didn’t give up just his divinity but his own humanity.

Maria said it was easier for her to have a relationship with Christ when she understood him this way.
Assessment of its value for participants

The third area of questioning was around whether participants felt the idea was helpful or unhelpful to them. Three participants (Franca, Lilian and Maria) said that recognizing this aspect of Jesus’ experience was helpful for them. Franca explained the positive value she saw in it:

Yes, this thought is a help, a comfort, a source of consolation for me. This in no way devalues my own painful experience, quite the contrary ...

Knowing that Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man, has really been the bearer of all our sufferings and all our diseases, even in the intimate and almost unspeakable area of sexuality, becomes, in my view, a source of comfort for the victims of abuse – especially for those who have been abused by priests and religious.

Franca also suggested that it ‘could also, perhaps, help the victims who still suffer in silence, to speak. It can help them realize that they are not culpable.’ Lilian also saw it as positive:

I suppose that when you know that someone has gone through the same pain that you had experienced it is a kind of strength that you gain, knowing that Jesus suffered. You have a reason to live. You have a reason to stand up.

Maria said it helped her to see herself in a new way. At one level, she already knew her own innocence, but there are times when she is troubled by doubts and a temptation to self-blame.

Despite saying to myself ‘You are not guilty’, one part of me, in my innermost part, maintains my guilt and leads me to accuse myself, ‘You could have done something to avoid the abuse.’

She found that reading the article offered her reassurance on this. She explains:

And then I have the experience and the knowledge that Jesus was innocent. That makes it easier to believe that I am innocent. It has been a beginning. Reading it has been like a relief. It is not just on a theoretical level. There is an emotional level that helps me to go into my heart. I love Jesus. I don’t blame him. I don’t say to him, ‘You had to do something. You could have avoided it.’ Seeing his innocence, I see my innocence.

Although Maria saw it as helpful personally, she acknowledged that other survivors might not find it helpful. Some might not feel that Jesus experienced the same as they experienced, because the abuse was different for them. However, speaking for herself, Maria felt a strong connection:
I have been raped and my reaction is that I feel Jesus’ solidarity and I feel solidarity for him, and it feels good. Spiritually, I feel that I know Jesus better, that I understand Jesus more. I feel that he can walk with me more closely because he knows what I have gone through. Sincerely, I don’t care to what extent he was abused because it is enough for me that he lived through some abuse and he can understand. That is how I feel. For someone who has suffered abuse it is a positive and deep way to interpret your own experience.

For Dina the answer was more mixed. She saw it as especially helpful for other nuns, seminarians, or other men who have been abused. And for people who have a strong faith and a strong connection with Jesus. However, when speaking about her own situation, Dina said that at an earlier time it would have helped her to resist guilt or blame, but she no longer struggles with this.

I think that the idea would have been very helpful for me back then. Now I feel that it makes no difference to me. I have realized that it was not my fault and whether or not Jesus was abused doesn’t make a difference. It would have made a big difference back then.

Lucia did not see it as helpful, at least not at the present time. She also doubted that it would be helpful for the network of survivors of church abuse to which she belongs. She described the gap between their current faith outlook and what they once believed as ‘a huge abyss’. In view of this, she said, ‘At this stage I don’t think that anyone will be touched, or I don’t think that this idea will help them in their process of healing.’ Instead, she suggests, ‘We need to re-read and re-interpret our own story.’

The different answers to this question reflect the different ways that survivors respond to their experience and what they each find meaningful. To sum up, Franca, Lilian and Maria each said that the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse was helpful for them. Dina said that it would have been very helpful in the past but she has no need of it now. Lucia said she did not find it helpful, and nor did she see it as likely to be helpful to the survivors with whom she worked.

Significance for the wider Church

The final set of questions was on the significance of this reading to others. The focus of this final area of questions was on whether the participants felt it was helpful to the wider Church rather than to other survivors. It is striking that all our participants indicated that viewing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse would be positive for the wider Church. Even Lucia, who did not find the idea helpful for herself and doubted its relevance to the network of survivors she knew, said:
ROCIÓ FIGUEROA AND DAVID TOMBS

For the Church, of course. Because it can be a topic that usually is silenced. It would be like an alert … Imagine a prayer saying, ‘Lord, you who were manipulated in your own sexuality, protect us’ … I think it would be very helpful.

Franca said, ‘It would be good if this idea is more valued and published in theological education and exegetically.’ She suggested that it might prompt a more compassionate response, and help to address misplaced blame.

And it could also, perhaps, convince the members of the hierarchy of the Church that the victims are not blameworthy. Perhaps this idea would also help combat the ever-present tendency of the hierarchy to bury all these abuses in silence? And it would help the ‘good Christian people’, shocked by these revelations likely to harm the image of the Church, to walk towards the truth that alone can liberate us. It might also be an incentive for church members to take the suffering of victims seriously.

Maria suggested that recognizing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse might actually have even more value for the wider Church than it does for survivors:

I think it would be more useful for those who have not been victims. I think there is a culture within the Church and also throughout society which fails to recognize victims of sexual abuse as victims. I think that if the people of the Church identify Jesus as a victim of abuse, they would be more able to see Jesus in those who are victims and love us more [crying].

She described the additional harm to survivors that comes from the negative attitudes in the Church.

I see such horrible things. That lack of identification with the victims by clergy, priests and bishops is so painful. They identify more with the perpetrators. Many of the perpetrators have been priests and the priests are ‘other Christs’. But if you see Christ in this light, as a victim, it would be easier for them to feel solidarity with the victims, to be more understanding and be on their side.

Dina agreed that it could make a positive difference to the Church. However, she saw some risks in how it might be appropriated by church leaders:

I do see a danger here. Yes, it could be good if the wider Church owned this idea. But, on the other hand, I see that if the church leaders (who have been covering abuse for so long now) appropriate the concept that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse and preach about it, the danger is that they could use it as a way of further silencing the victims: for example, like saying Jesus was the perfect victim. Perhaps there is a risk that church
leaders could devalue survivors’ stories with the icon of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. That might happen.

To counter this risk, she suggested that survivors rather than the Church should take the lead in charting the way forward:

I would prefer if the individual survivors appropriate this image of a victim of sexual abuse first, they should own it and then take it to the Church.

Lilian also agreed that it could help the Church, because ‘if the Church sees Jesus as a victim, people would have sympathy for those who are victims’. However, like Dina, she warned that this also involved dangers and risks. Lilian stressed the need for great care when raising the idea with victims.

To sum up, the first area of questioning asked whether participants had made an identification with the suffering of Jesus at the time of the abuse, or in the aftermath. Four of the participants made some form of connection and one did not. For two of the participants the connection was helpful, for one it was mixed, and for one it was negative. The second area was whether the reading of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse was new to participants, how they saw the evidence, and how they responded to this reading. The idea was new to them, with one exception. The historical evidence appeared persuasive to all of the participants. It provoked a range of emotional response, including empathy for Jesus. The third area was the significance they saw in the idea for themselves as survivors, and whether it was helpful or unhelpful. Three of the participants saw the idea as helpful for them. One replied that it would have been very helpful to her when she was abused, but it made little difference now. One stated that it was not personally helpful to her and nor did she see it as likely to be helpful to the survivors with whom she worked. All of the participants said that it was significant for the Church and offered an opportunity of positive change, albeit with some risks and dangers.

Discussion

The interviews offer survivor perspectives on how acknowledgement of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse might help the Church to develop its pastoral approach. It is not possible to discuss at length all of the issues that the participants address. Instead, the discussion will focus on three points: the impact of Jesus’ innocence; the relevance of these issues to the wider Church; the danger that Jesus’ victimhood might be misappropriated.

First, acknowledging Jesus as innocent can help to address victim-blaming. Lilian and Maria both indicated that the innocence of Jesus was important to them. It reaffirmed and reinforced their own innocence. Likewise, Dina said, ‘Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse makes it entirely clear
that a victim is innocent.’ Furthermore, Dina suggested that victim-blaming may help to explain the widespread silence on Jesus’ own experience. She seems to suggest that, in the conventional view, Jesus cannot be named because he cannot be blamed. The consequence of this is that Jesus’ sexual abuse has gone unnamed and the narratives have been distorted. Dina’s comment suggests that there is much more at stake in Jesus’ innocence than may first appear. Recognition or denial of Jesus as a victim is connected to deeply embedded cultural assumptions about blame, shame, guilt, innocence, purity, as well as masculinity, power, vulnerability and bodily integrity. Acknowledgement of Jesus as victim of sexual abuse is likely to require a radical rethinking of attitudes rather than just a minor adjustment. This makes the naming of Jesus as a victim all the more important, especially for the wider Church.

The blame and stigma associated with sexual abuse help to explain the reluctance of the Church to confront the obvious. The perceived impurity of sex makes a discussion of Jesus in relation to anything sexual extremely difficult. Because the mistaken assumption that victims are to be blamed is so widespread, and the stigmatizing of victims is so prevalent, viewing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse can scarcely even be suggested. A common reaction to the suggestion that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse is to assume that if this were true, then Jesus would inevitably be less worthy and less pure. The implication of this line of thinking is that this would conflict with his status as a saviour.

It is seen as offensive, even blasphemous, to associate Jesus with anything sexual in this way. In keeping with this outlook, despite being a victim of sexual abuse the default response encourages attitudes of blame and judgement. These assumptions and negative attitudes match the blame and stigma that sexual abuse survivors often report as being directed against them. Either explicitly and overtly, or indirectly and through judgemental silence, both wider society and the Church frequently convey blame and stigma against survivors. Opportunities for the recognition of these dynamics may prove to be where the idea has its greatest transformative potential.

One of the critical conversations that the acknowledgement of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse should therefore open up is around widespread negative attitudes to survivors. These attitudes are close to the surface in many churches but are rarely named or critically examined. On the contrary, they are often denied or disowned if they are considered in the abstract. They therefore remain hidden most of the time. They can usually stay beneath the surface, but they readily emerge as a backlash that dismisses the claim that Jesus was sexually abused as self-evidently offensive.

The experience of Jesus can play a crucial role in exposing these dynamics. Resistance within the churches to seeing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse reflects the confusion that still exists within churches and within wider society on where blame should rest in relation to sexual abuse. Recognizing that Jesus was a victim disrupts the circular reasoning of victim-blaming, and exposes its mistaken assumptions. Exposing and confronting this con-
fusion, and the harmful behaviours it sustains within churches, should be a pressing priority for the Church as it seeks to affirm the irreducible dignity of all people.

The innocence of Jesus can thus strengthen survivors when they encounter negative and judgemental responses from others, or experience low self-esteem or self-blame. Of course, the innocence of victims should be recognized on its own terms without need for anything more to be said. However, within the Church the experience of Jesus can further support this truth. Saying the innocence of Jesus can make a difference is not to suggest that the innocence of survivors can only be recognized in light of the innocence of Jesus. The innocence of survivors is something that the Church should already fully embrace, and public statements are often made to this effect. Nonetheless, even though articulating the innocence of survivors should not be new or necessary, connecting the innocence of survivors to the innocence of Jesus can make the innocence of both more meaningful to some in the Church. It offers insight into how victim-blaming can undermine a survivor’s sense of self even though the blame is obviously misplaced. A clear and uncontested statement of innocence can be an important support in reinforcing the truth.

Second, all the participants agreed that recognition of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse is important for the wider Church and not just for survivors. Even Lucia, who felt that Jesus’ experience was not directly helpful to herself, nonetheless saw it as important for the Church. Here, our interviews with both male and female survivors point in the same direction. Jesus’ sexual abuse should not be seen as only a concern for survivors but as a concern for the whole Church. This raises important questions for future work. Why has the Church kept silent? Why has it ignored this important element of crucifixion for so long? Why is it not more widely addressed?

Third, some participants voiced concern that Jesus’ experience might be misappropriated by the Church. For example, the troubling association of Jesus’ suffering and silence was noted. Concern was also voiced that survivors’ actual experience might be displaced by an abstract icon of Jesus’ experience. Another danger might be in how the experience is related to resurrection. From a theological perspective, reflection on Jesus’ experience of crucifixion will be incomplete unless it also addresses resurrection. However, some interpretations of cross and resurrection may be unhelpful for survivors of sexual abuse. As feminist scholars have noted, there are potential dangers in presenting the cross as the glorification of suffering. Attention to the cross and identification with the suffering of Jesus can be positive and offer helpful resources, but it also carries risks and is open to misinterpretation. Some in the Church may wish to move too quickly from crucifixion to resurrection, and offer a cheap message of reassurance that denies the reality of suffering. A theology of resurrection has integrity only if it presents the full and painful truth of crucifixion. A message of resurrection cannot be a simplistic solution that evades what really happened, nor should it minimize the damage of abuse. Rather, a theology
of resurrection must be reconsidered in the light of the actual experience of Jesus attested in Scripture. Survivors of sexual abuse must be fully heard in this process. This will be challenging work. Survivors do not always share the same views or the same experiences, and should not be seen as a uniform group. What some might find positive might be irrelevant, or even negative, to others. Further work therefore needs to be done to investigate how and when the acknowledgement of the sexual abuse of Jesus can be helpful to survivors. A pastoral approach must include a commitment to listening to diverse experiences and avoid essentializing or over-simplifying the full range of experiences and views.

Conclusion

More work clearly needs to be done on how Jesus’ experience of abuse might best help survivors, but there are several directions suggested here. The participants all agreed that recognizing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse should be a concern for the whole Church and not just a concern for survivors. Furthermore, the participants warned against a number of risks and dangers that need to be avoided. In particular they warned against the superficial misappropriation of Jesus’ experience to turn attention from, or undermine, the lived experience of abuse. Significantly, the innocence of Jesus might offer a resource to resist self-blame and confront victim-blaming by others. It might expose and challenge victim-blaming attitudes in the wider Church that continue to shape the lives of survivors many years after the abuse may have finished.

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SEEING HIS INNOCENCE, I SEE MY INNOCENCE


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ROCÍO FIGUEROA AND DAVID TOMBS


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SEEING HIS INNOCENCE, I SEE MY INNOCENCE


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ROCIÓN FIGUEROA AND DAVID TOMBS


Notes


2 It investigated the dynamics of state terror and sexual abuses in Latin American torture practices in the 1970s and 1980s and used these as a vantage point to re-examine Roman crucifixion practices that might shed light on the biblical narratives. It sought to illustrate the value of reading from present to past as well as from past to present. A guiding hermeneutical principle was that state terror and sexual abuse are not just relevant current concerns that the crucifixion narratives might address, but recent reports on torture provide an insightful lens through which to see the first-century context and the biblical text in new ways. Understanding the use of torture for state terror and the prevalence of sexual abuse in torture practices provides new insights into what is clearly present within the texts but is often unrecognized or ignored. Attention to torture practices helps to re-read the texts on the stripping and exposure of Jesus as an instrument of sexual humiliation and as a form of sexual abuse. Torture reports also raise the possibility of further sexual assault, which may have taken place in the praetorium. In the intervening years, torture reports from Sri Lanka, Libya, Syria, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Myanmar and other contexts have underlined and reinforced this understanding of sexual abuse and prisoner mistreatment as a global issue.


4 Tombs, ‘Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse’, p. 109. William Cavanaugh’s excellent work on torture and Eucharist had only recently been published. Had there been more opportunity it would have been useful to further explore Cavanaugh’s insights on torture and the body of Christ. Even though Cavanaugh does not give sustained attention to sexual abuse within torture, his work demonstrates the practical difference that addressing torture can make to an understanding of Christ, the Church and liturgy. See William Cavanaugh, Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998).

5 The initial findings were published in a longer discussion paper as Rocío
Figueroa and David Tombs, ‘Seeing His Innocence, I See My Innocence: Responses from Abused Nuns to Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse’ (Dunedin: Centre for Theology and Public Issues, University of Otago, 2020).

6 In this context, the term ‘nun’ is used for brevity for religious sisters and consecrated women who belong (or formerly belonged) to Roman Catholic orders, congregations, or new religious communities. Technically the term ‘nun’ refers to women belonging to enclosed orders, but we use it slightly more inclusively, extending it to all orders. The common denominator in this more inclusive sense is that all of them made the vows of celibacy, poverty and obedience within a religious community. Unless stated otherwise, we use the term nun for all five of the women.

7 On viewing sexual violence as a form of power and control, see Liz Kelly, Surviving Sexual Violence (Cambridge: Polity, 1988).


10 Five of the group had also featured in Pedro Salinas, Mitad monjes, mitad soldados: Todo lo que el Sodalicio no quieres que sepa (Lima: Planeta, 2015), and we used the same pseudonyms for them in our studies.


13 Durà-Vilà et al., ‘Integration of Sexual Trauma in a Religious Narrative’, p. 38.


15 Michael Trainor, The Body of Jesus and Sexual Abuse: How the Gospel Passion Narrative Informs a Pastoral Approach (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014). Other important work on the issues include Elaine A. Heath, We Were the Least of These: Reading the Bible with Survivors of Sexual Abuse (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2011); Wil Gafney, ‘Crucifixion and Sexual Violence’,
ROCÍO FIGUEROA AND DAVID TOMBS


16 See Michael Trainor’s chapter in this volume for further detail.


20 Trainor, _The Body of Jesus and Sexual Abuse_, p. 6. In November 2012, the establishment of a Royal Commission of Inquiry to investigate institutional responses to allegations of child sexual abuse was announced. The Commission (which ran January 2013–December 2017) was in its early stages as Trainor’s book was written, and sexual abuses in church settings are a key concern for his work; Trainor, _The Body of Jesus and Sexual Abuse_, p. 245.

21 Trainor, _The Body of Jesus and Sexual Abuse_, p. 247.

22 Trainor, _The Body of Jesus and Sexual Abuse_, pp. 9–11.

23 Trainor, _The Body of Jesus and Sexual Abuse_, p. 275.


Prügl and Maria Stern eds, Sexual Violence Against Men in Global Politics (New York: Routledge, 2018). For wider literature on law and policy on conflict-related sexual violence, see International Review of the Red Cross 96:984 (Summer 2014).

29 Since 2010, Tearfund and other faith agencies have worked to engage and resource faith leaders and faith communities to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence. In partnership with the Anglican Communion and UNAIDS, they have launched an international coalition called ‘We Will Speak Out’ (www.wewillspeakout.org), which has included significant attention to sexual violence during conflict.


34 University of Otago Human Ethics Committee, Approval 13 September 2019, Reference 19–112. We are especially grateful to Dr Tess Patterson, Department of Psychological Medicine, University of Otago, for her assistance with the ethics approval and for her advice as consultant on the project.

35 The abridged version was first created in English, and then translated into Portuguese for publication in Brazilian Portuguese as David Tombs, ‘Crucificação e Abuso Sexual’, Estudos Teológicos 59:1 (June 2019), pp. 119–32. It was then translated into Spanish, French and German to facilitate the interviews, and published under Creative Commons as David Tombs, Crucifixion and Sexual Abuse (Dunedin: Centre for Theology and Public Issues, University of Otago, 2019), http://hdl.han
The use of the abridged article, rather than the fuller version, was to reduce the time we were asking participants to offer us, and also to reduce the overall cost of the translation work. In the 2018 interviews with male survivors it had only been necessary to translate the article into Spanish, and the full article was used for this. Since the group of nuns spoke French and German, as well as Spanish, it was more practical to use the newly abridged article to reduce the translation work. We do not believe that the use of an abbreviated article makes a significant difference to the responses offered, but it should be noted that the version was slightly shorter for the nuns than it had been for the male survivors.

The Skype interviews were recorded on a digital audio system. The transcripts of the interviews were anonymized and the pseudonyms were assigned to maintain the confidentiality of the five participants. The interviews were then translated into English.

The answers to the next question confirm that Maria, Lilian, Dina and Lucia had not thought of Jesus suffering sexual abuse prior to their involvement with the project. On the Spanish study, see Durà-Vilà et al., ‘Integration of Sexual Trauma in a Religious Narrative’.


The lecture by Father Philippe Lefebvre OP was part of the conference ‘Violence in the Church, Violence by the Church, Violence in the Eyes of the Church: What Perspectives, Particularly for Europe and Francophone Africa?’, Strasbourg, 5 April 2019.

See further David Tombs, ‘The Stripping and Mocking of Jesus: Reading Crucifixion as a Text of Terror’ in Terror in the Bible: Rhetoric, Gender, and Violence, Robyn Whitaker and Monica Melanchthon eds (International Voices in Biblical Studies Series Atlanta, GA; Society of Biblical Literature Press, forthcoming).

The women were much more explicit in voicing concern for Jesus than the participants in the previous study. This difference may, however, be because the interview questions in the previous study did not focus in the same way on emotional response.

We did not want to ask our participants to speak for other survivors, as this would place an unreasonable burden upon them. However, in answer to the previous question about their own experience as survivors, some of them also commented on whether they saw it as helpful or unhelpful to other survivors. These answers were included in the previous section.


45 For example, we did not attempt further discussion of the similarity or dissimilarity of Jesus’ experience and the experience of the nuns, nor the significance of Jesus’ gender as a male victim for the experience of the nuns as female victims. On the complexity of responding to male victims alongside female victims, and how male victims in conflict-related sexual violence might be best understood from a feminist perspective, see Louise Du Toit and Elisabet le Roux, ‘A Feminist Reflection on Male Victims of Conflict-related Sexual Violence’, European Journal of Women’s Studies 22:4 (2020), pp. 412–27.

46 For an insightful perspective on men’s experience of conflict-related sexual trauma and its meaning, see Ruard Ganzvoort and Srdjan Sremac, ‘Masculinity, Spirituality, and Male Wartime Sexual Trauma’, in Interdisciplinary Handbook of Trauma and Culture, Yochai Ataria, David Gurevitz, Haviva Pedaya, Yuval Neria eds (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016), pp. 339–51.


48 On the dangers of silence and the virtue of speaking out, see further Edwards and Warren, ‘#MeToo Jesus: Is Christ Really a Good Model for Victims of Sexual Abuse’.


See especially Heath, *We Were the Least of These*.

WHEN DID WE SEE YOU NAKED?

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EDITED BY JAYME R. REAVES, DAVID TOMBS AND ROCÍO FIGUEROA

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