

**Clergy Sexual Abuse as a Betrayal Trauma: Institutional Betrayal & a Call for Courageous
Response**

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Abstract

A robust body of literature exists for child abuse as a betrayal trauma, with a long-term sequela of consequences for victims, while being a significant social and public health concern. Less widely known are the impacts of clergy sexual abuse as a betrayal trauma and a unique spiritual wound. Betrayal trauma theory and institutional betrayal is explored in relation to clergy sexual abuse in the context of American religious landscape. Institutional betrayal is postulated to be an exacerbator of betrayal trauma for clergy sexual abuse victims. Individual and institutional factors for religious betrayal trauma and institutional betrayal are discussed. Recommendations for individual and institutional change and a call for courage on both fronts are made.

Keywords: clergy sexual abuse, betrayal trauma, institutional betrayal, religiosity

In the opening moments of an American Professional Society for the Abuse of Children (APSAC) webinar entitled, *When Faith Hurts*, Victor Vieth shares with the virtual audience a story of a survivor of sexual abuse by a religious authority. The little girl who had been sexually abused by her religious father, asked the forensic interviewer, “Am I just sort of wondering, am I still a virgin in God’s eyes?” Vieth poses the question, “How do we, as a multi-disciplinary team of child welfare professionals, respond to a query such as that?” An overview of the current religious landscape in United States will be conducted to frame the available evidence on clergy sexual abuse as a unique betrayal trauma as proposed by betrayal trauma theory (Freyd, 1999). A further discussion will be conducted regarding the impact of institutional betrayal on clergy abuse survivors and the call for a courageous response, resides herein (Freyd, 2020).

Religion in the United States

In God We Trust?

While the religious landscape in the United States is changing at a rapid pace, 65% of American adults in a random digit dial survey still identify as Christians when asked about their religious status. Over the previous decade, Americans who self-identified as Protestant decreased from 51% - 43%, while Catholics saw a smaller reduction in the faithful from 23% to 20% in the same time frame. Evidence suggests a broad-based trend toward disaffiliation, and a reduction in religious attendance across socioeconomic, racial, and political divides. Of those who are losing their religion, the exodus of the unaffiliated appears to be highest among millennials (Pew Research Center, 2019b).

Loss of Faith in the Faithful

Nearly two decades after US officials in the American Catholic church adopted a zero-tolerance policy for sexual abuse (Cooperman, 2002), widespread institutional abuse has been

the subject of ongoing investigations and received prolific media attention (Office of the Attorney General, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2019a). Meanwhile, 79% of U.S. adults surveyed by random digit dial, believe that media reports on sexual abuse by religious authorities reflect an ongoing problem in the church. Americans appear to be equally divided on their appraisal of which denominations experience an ongoing problem of abuse by religious authorities. Just under half (48%) of all US adults surveyed believe that sexual abuse is more prevalent among Catholic clerics; whereas the other half (47%) believe that clergy sexual abuse is of equal prevalence in other denominations (Pew Research Center, 2019a).

Christians Lack Unity

Catholics and Non-Catholics (Protestants, other & none) differ in their views on clergy sexual abuse. The majority (69%) of Catholics believe that sexual abuse is an ongoing problem within their denomination, but only 33% believe abuse to be a problem that is uniquely acute in the Catholic church. Of non-Catholics, 81% believed that abuse was an ongoing problem in the Catholic church, whereas 51% believed Catholicism was uniquely embroiled in sexual abuse scandal, while only 44% believed that abuse was equally prevalent across faith persuasions (Pew Research Center, 2019a). When it comes to the view on their side of the stain glass window; implicit bias seems to discolour individual and institutional perspectives (Project Implicit, 2019).

Prevalence of Pastoral Predators

Pedophile Priests?

In an ethnographic study, of over 3000 in depth interviews with Catholic clergy, the late Richard Sipe postulated prevalence rates of sexually deviant clerics in the Catholic Church at 6-9% (Sipe, 1990). Later evidence collected by investigators who interviewed Catholic Bishops, suggests that 2% of clerics are pedophilic, whereas a further 4% are ephebophilic (John Jay

College of Criminal Justice, 2004). These statistics are thought to be underestimated due to a reluctance on the behalf of bishops to be forthcoming about abuse reports (Doyle, 2020). A second mixed methods investigation (retrospective in nature) suggests that less than 5% of priests are pedophilic (Terry et al., 2011). Sipe's original estimate of 6% is congruent with more recent data suggesting a prevalence rate of 5.1% sexual offenders among Catholic priests (Dreßing et al., 2019). In a convenience sample of sexual offenders, Bottoms et al. (1995) found that just over half (54%) of religious offenders were Catholic. Using mixed methods research of abuse victims, it appears that the majority of Catholic victims are boys at just over 80% (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004; Terry et al., 2011). In a non-probability sample of predatory priests in a Canadian treatment center for violation of celibacy, some 80% report victimizing adults, rather than children (Terry et al., 2011). Sipe's estimates of 6-9% of clerics offended against minors, he further postulated that approximately four times as many clerics offended against adult women and two times as many against adult men (Sipe, 1994, p. 134).

Protestant Predators?

Information on prevalence rates for Protestant communities appears limited to insurance reports while empirical research remains sparse (Denney et al., 2018; Terry et al., 2011). Only 3% of all known clergy sexual abuse incidents (as investigated by the second John Jay College Report) were ever reported to law enforcement, suggesting a dark figure for the prevalence of clergy sexual abuse (Terry et al., 2011). At this time, the empirical data among non-Catholic clergy abuse prevalence rates does not exist in the research. Known Protestant offenders are typically married, white, middle aged, and have higher than normal levels of narcissism (Denney et al., 2018). A review of the available literature suggests that in both Protestant and Catholic

persuasions, clerical sexual offenders are overwhelmingly male (Denney et al., 2018; Dreßing et al., 2019; John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004; Tallon & Terry, 2004).

A convenience sample of Canadian Presbyterian ministers, who took an embedded Narcissistic Personality Disorder diagnostic tool, demonstrated a higher prevalence of narcissism (31.5%) than in the general population (Ball & Puls, 2015). Narcissists seem to enjoy religious leadership roles, as fervent religiosity/spirituality appears to fuel narcissism (Sandage & Moe, 2012). Researchers from Germany found that narcissistic pedophiles who committed hands on offenses were six times more likely to reoffend (Eher et al., 2010). It may be of interest to the reader that in a recent non-experimental study of religious sex offenders, over 80% had some official employed role in the church, whereas just under 20% were volunteers (Denney et al., 2018), suggesting that staff screening procedures may require additional screening and supervision.

The scant studies that have examined Protestant prevalence rates of some form of sexual misconduct have varied widely from 1-38.5% (Chaves & Garland, 2009; Francis & Stacks, 2003; Meek et al., 2004; Seat et al., 1993; Thoburn & Baker, 2011; Thoburn & Whitman, 2004). A large-scale study which surveyed adult victims of childhood religious abuse found that “nearly all reported abuse by religious professionals (94%) was sexual in nature” (Bottoms et al., 1995). Bottoms et al. (1995) found that 39% of religious offenders were non-Catholic (27% Protestant, 12% Fundamentalists). A survey of non-Catholic clergymen report that 76.5% know of a colleague who has engaged in sexualized relationship with an (adult) congregant (Blackmon, 1984).

Within Group Similarities.

Pastoral sexual predators share common characteristics across faith persuasions. When matched for offense type with non-clerical sex offender controls, 70.8% of clerical offenders were found with paraphilia's, a number not dissimilar to non-clerics (Langevin et al., 2000). Notably, there were more similarities than differences in non-clerical and clerical offenders, however, clerics exhibited less anti-social personality typology (Langevin et al., 2000). Researchers found that highly educated clerical sex offenders “had a longer delay before criminal charges were laid, or lacked criminal charges altogether, and they tended to use force more often in their offenses” (Langevin et al., 2000, p. 1).

Catholic Focus & Lack of Empirical Evidence on Other Religions

Mainstream news media has brought clergy sexual abuse into the spotlight thereby increasing public awareness (Weatherred, 2015). However, research on clergy abuse is less developed than reporting. Exploratory/descriptive analysis of available media and investigative reports demonstrates a focus on religious sex offenders within the Catholic domain, rather than on sexual abuse survivors across faith persuasions (Denney et al., 2018). For over twenty years there has been advocacy efforts for an offender registry within the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) denomination to no avail (Brown, 2009). There remains an alarming paucity in empirical evidence across faith platforms despite media, investigative grand jury, and survivor reports that suggest that sexual abuse by religious authorities knows no denominational barriers (Denney et al., 2018; de Weger, 2020; John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004; Office of the Attorney General, 2017; Rashid & Barron, 2019; Terry et al., 2011).

Religion & Sex Offending

Most US adults surveyed (57%) do not believe that sexual abuse of children occurs more often in religious settings (Pew Research Center, 2019a). This belief is juxtaposed to the 93% of

non-incarcerated sex offenders who self-report being religious or very religious (Able & Harlow, 2001). Adult sex offenders who self-report engaging in continuous religious practice from childhood to adulthood, committed the highest number of heinous crimes against the youngest victims, challenging the notion that religiosity and spirituality is a deterrent for sexual offending (Eshuys & Smallbone, 2006). Researchers have found that religious affiliation provided a unique individual and institutional cover, fostering the cultivation of a dual life necessary for the sexual predation (Chaves & Garland, 2009; Denney et al., 2018; McLaughlin, 1994; A. Salter, 2003; M. Salter, 2018a; Shupe, 1995, 1998, 2007, 2008).

Clerical Cognitive Distortions

Not only do clerics (Shupe, 2008) use their religious position of authority to abuse children, they also use cognitive distortions related to religion/spirituality to justify sexual abuse to themselves and to their victims (Bottoms et al., 2015; McLaughlin, 1994; Shupe, 2008; Swindle, 2017). Christa Brown's married Southern Baptist youth minister (2004) told her as a minor child,

“We are already married in God's eyes... It's preordained... I have prayed long and hard about this Christa. God wants you to be a helpmate for me. He wouldn't make me feel this way if He didn't intend for you to be with me.” (p. 11).

Sexual abuse victims may often pray to God for the abuse to stop, even as a religious offender may feign approval for the abuse from the Almighty (Bottoms et al., 2015; Capps, 1992; McLaughlin, 1994; Sipe, 2016). Sex offenders self-report that Christian communities are some of the safest places for sexual predation. Most Christians tend to naively believe the best about others, providing easy access to victims for offenders (Salter, 2003; Vieth, 2020).

Leaving Religion

Sexual abuse scandals have long rocked the Catholic church (Dreßing et al., 2019), and more recently the SBC denominations (Downen et al., 2019), leaving a wake of victims, and betrayed bystanders. It appears as if Americans are paying attention. In a random digit dialing phone survey, 92% of American adults surveyed indicated that they had heard a little (34%) to a lot (58%) about recent reports of sexual abuse by Catholic religious officials (Pew Research Center, 2019a). Evidence does suggest that media reports of scandals has reduced regular attendance and donations within the Catholic denomination (Pew Research Center, 2019a). The biggest Protestant denomination in the US (SBC) is currently experiencing its twelfth year in its decline of membership (Loller, 2019). Of adult victims surveyed who experienced childhood religious abuse and have later left their religions, 76% were clergy sexual abuse victims (Bottoms et al., 1995). Individually and institutionally, clergy sexual abuse costs have been incalculable. Reverend Thomas Doyle (2018) states that since the Protestant reformation, the clergy sexual abuse scandal has been the most devastating event to rock the Catholic church. Using a secondary data set and regression modeling, researchers have suggested that American society is set on a similar secularization trajectory as Europe (Brauer, 2108). Yet other researchers suggest that the intensity of American evangelicalism is “becoming more exceptional over time” and only those who are ‘moderately religious’ are leaving faith communities (Schnabel & Bock, 2017). This has important implications for future research. In response to an increasingly secular American society, evangelical religious communities may become more insular and radicalized. It is important to highlight that religious fervor is a common characteristic among self-reported religious sex offenders.

The Cost of Losing Faith

New epidemiological evidence suggests that regular engagement in religious activity, prayer and meditation has positive health outcomes on adolescents that include reduced substance use, delayed onset of sexual activity, reduced number of sexual partners and increased overall life satisfaction (Chen & Vanderweele, 2018). While the long-term health benefits from faith participation may be well established (Koenig, 2012), the loss of the same has also been explored (Dreßing et al., 2019). The impact of child sexual abuse, psychopathology/distress, and physical health later in life is well established (Bak-Kimek et al., 2014; Freyd et al., 2005). Strong evidence supports that clergy sexual abuse victims “experience serious consequences for their health and social functioning” (Dreßing et al., 2019, p. 1). Clergy abuse victims report subjective feelings of greater harm due to the religious nature of abuse (Bottoms et al., 1995, 2003, 2015; Folger & Shiperd, 2008; Swindle, 2017; Walker et al., 2009a).

Spiritual Impact of Child Sexual Abuse

While the impact of clergy sexual abuse is physical, emotional, and psychological in nature, perhaps the most devastating impact is spiritual in nature (Doyle, 2009). In a 2009 meta-analysis of 34 studies with just over 19,000 children, a decline in spirituality was observed both during and after child sexual abuse (Walker et al., 2009b). Many survivors report some facet of “religion related or religion-based abuse” (Walker et al., 2009b, p. 141). Religious rules, spiritual artifacts, holy writ, prayer, and hymns (Walker et al., 2009b) were used to justify criminal conduct committed against victims — traumatically twisting and sexualizing the sacred (Finklehor & Browne, 1985; Swindle, 2017).

Children who have been sexually abused by clerics report an increased impairment in their relationship with the Almighty than those who are abused later in life (McLaughlin, 1994). Abuse victims report struggling with feeling of grief, shame, self-blame, anger, despair and

doubt, while simultaneously also report praying more and have spiritual experiences (Lawson et al., 1998). Victims of clergy sexual abuse in childhood report increased difficulty with God as a Father or male figurehead (Walker et al., 2009b). Post trauma religious observation in the form of church attendance declines in both Catholic and Protestant persuasions (McLaughlin, 1994).

Furthermore, lingering effects of childhood sexual abuse often remain across the lifespan (Doyle, 2009; Herman, 1997; Koenig, 2012; Lawson et al., 1998; McLaughlin, 1994; Walker et al., 2009b). To the child (or adult) sexually abused by a religious authority, the sacred has become a place of sacrilege; the faithful, a symbol of faithlessness; and the good, a guise for egregious criminality. Similar to incest, clergy sexual abuse is a catastrophic betrayal trauma that damages the summative person: body, soul, and spirit (Doyle 2009; Dreßing et al., 2019; Guido, 2008). To that end, betrayal trauma theory, as proposed by Dr. Jennifer Freyd (1996), informs our research query.

Betrayal Trauma Theory

Freyd (1996) proposes that humans are exquisitely sensitive to betrayal under certain circumstances. We depend on each other on the basis of certain unwritten social contracts (Freyd, 1997, 2020). The empowered person is able to take protective action against betrayal, such as confrontation and demand change or remove themselves from relationship with the betrayer (Freyd, 2020). Likewise, we are socially dependent upon one another from infancy (in the most extreme form) to progressive interdependence as adults (Freyd, 1997). Infants and children present a highly unilateral dependency on adult caregivers (Freyd, 2020). Thus, any discussion on betrayal, necessarily must include a discussion on the abuse of authority, (Freyd, 1997) — including interpersonal harm from hierarchical religious rank fueled by clericalism (Swindle, 2017).

Attachment: The Roots of Relationship

Attachment theory posits that attachment, motivated by love, commences even prior to birth of children. Freyd (2020) suggests that the human infant's job is to love and to be loveable (cooing, eye contact, smiling, etc.). Both infants and children exhibit attachment systems that are activated early and are exhibited in varying degrees throughout the lifespan (Freyd, 2020).

Attachment theorists suggest that our attachment systems continue to be activated throughout the life course. To the extent that humans are dependent upon others, they are vulnerable (Bowlby, 1932, 1998; Clinton & Sibcy, 2002; Freyd, 2020).

Betrayal Detection & Betrayal Blindness

Betrayal detection demands withdrawal and confrontation in relationship (Freyd, 2020). In conflict and competition with betrayal detection sensitivity, are embedded human attachment systems. Attachment requires vulnerable humans to exhibit attributes that make them loveable to those who are in some way responsible for their care (Freyd, 1994, 1997, 1999). The human attachment systems are deemed necessary to the survival of a vulnerable, less powerful other (Freyd & Birrell, 2013; Freyd, 2020). Betrayal trauma theory states that when a vulnerable other (child, adult) deals with detection of betrayal, in a necessary (or perceived to be necessary) relationship, the vulnerable will enact the powerful survival mechanism of betrayal blindness (Freyd, 2020). Betrayal blindness refers a selective unknowing (knowledge isolation) that serves to maintain relationship with key attachment figures in the face of betrayal that might otherwise move the offended away from the offender (Freyd, 1999). This betrayal blindness allows the child (or adult) to feel safe in an unsafe situation (Freyd, 1994).

Dimensions of Betrayal Trauma Theory

Betrayal trauma theory includes dimensions of social betrayal and terror/fear, predicating that betrayal blindness would be greater for betrayal traumas (sexual abuse) than non-betrayal traumas (natural disaster) (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Several predications are also made by betrayal trauma theory, the most salient for our purposes is that “childhood abuse perpetrated by a caregiver will lead to more forgetting than will abuse perpetrated by a non-caregiver (Freyd et al., 2001). Additionally, betrayal trauma theory posits that a higher degree of caregiver fiduciary relationship (intimacy/trust/dependence) will result in a higher degree of betrayal trauma and traumatic symptomology (dissociation, numbness, forgetting) should that trust be breached (Goldberg & Freyd, 2006). Validated measures of betrayal trauma include the longer Betrayal Trauma Inventory (BTI) (Freyd et al., 2001) and the shorter Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey (BBTS) (Goldberg & Freyd, 2006).

Clergy Sexual Abuse as a Betrayal Trauma

Betrayal is a theme that is repeated over and over in clergy abuse literature (Swindle, 2017). Clergy sexual abuse as a betrayal trauma is underpinned by religious training that the cleric/religious authority represents God (the ultimate caregiver) and that any disobedience to religious authority is associated with, sin, damnation, loss of sonship, and eternal salvation (Doyle, 2009). According to betrayal trauma theory, “survivors of childhood sexual abuse (and adult betrayal traumas) have learned to cope with an inescapable social conflict through internal disconnection” (Freyd, 1999, p. 6). Clergy sexual abuse victims experience abuse as a severe social betrayal precisely because betrayal traumas occur in “intimate and trusting relationships” where intimacy is weaponized and trust is catastrophically breached (Freyd, 1999, p. 6). What could be more intimate and trusting than a relationship with a religious representative of an omnipotent and omniscient God who is love? In a single subject design, qualitative study that

used in-depth interviewing, a participant stated, “Tell them,” he insisted, “what he took away from me. Not just my innocence but my faith. I’m like a spiritual orphan, betrayed by what I loved, and I feel lost and alone” (Guido, 2008).

Further research is required on how sexual abuse by a religious authority may impact betrayal blindness. Betrayal trauma theory and associated valid measures may assist clinicians in framing the serious consequences of childhood sexual abuse perpetrated by a religious authority. Child sexual abuse research is most often retrospective and non-experimental in nature. The author is not aware if any studies that specifically explore clergy sexual abuse as a unique betrayal trauma. Preliminary studies should be conducted to explore how clergy sexual abuse survivors may experience sexual abuse by a religious authority as a unique betrayal trauma. Further exploration should involve the use of Brief Betrayal Trauma Inventory, Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire, and measurement tools for spirituality.

Clergy Sexual Abuse as a Betrayal Trauma

Clergy Malfeasance

A theory of clerical malfeasance is proposed by the late Anson Shupe, an American Sociologist. Shupe posits that clerical malfeasance is a “special type of elite deviance, from the Latin meaning bad or evil actions, committed by religious leaders. It signifies “the exploitation and abuse of a religious groups rank-and-file believers by the elites of that religion, in whom the former trust” (Shupe, 2008, p. 4). Clerical malfeasance can occur in three domains: financial, sexual, and spiritual abuse. Malfeasance refers to deviance as defined by the religious group’s standards, whereas clergy encompasses anyone with religious authority (official or unofficial). Central to Shupe’s theory of clerical malfeasance, religious leaders are by design, fiduciaries acting in the best interests of those they serve. Religious leaders thereby engage in a social

contact with their constituents, often exchanging support for spiritual services (Shupe, 2008). It is on this basis that clergy sexual abuse is a betrayal trauma as it breaches both the fiduciary nature of the relationship as well as the social contract using religious authority.

Spirituality and Betrayal trauma

Strong evidence suggests that betrayal trauma by someone known by and close to the victim is associated with a multitude of poor long-term outcomes (Allred, 2015). In a recent non-experimental study of sexual abuse survivors (religious and non) found that there are no within group differences in trauma symptomology of sexual abuse survivors by non-religious and religious authorities (Allred, 2015). However, sexual abuse by clergy/religious authorities does appear to present a unique spiritual wound and literature suggests clergy sexual abuse is equivalent to incest due to the associated level of betrayal trauma (Allred, 2015; McGraw et al., 2019). As mentioned previously, Freyd et al (2001) showed a clear correlation between the closeness of the victim/perpetrator relationship, and the degree of betrayal blindness (Freyd et al., 2001). There is evidence to suggest that clergy sexual abuse disclosure is, for victims, akin to telling on God (Bottoms et al., 2015).

Twice Betrayed

The profound lifetime impact of abuse by religious authorities on the spirituality of the victims should stimulate faith communities to investigate and expose offenders and offending opportunities in their midst. Evidence does suggest that for individuals who experience sexual abuse within an institution often find themselves “twice betrayed” — first by the sexually offending individual and secondly by the offending institution (Doyle, 2009; Smith & Freyd, 2014; Veldhuis & Freyd, 1999), as well as by their own parishes communities who also seek to fall into their own form of betrayal blindness, and for their own reasons (Benyei, (1998).

Institutional Factors in Abuse

Upon exposure of religious offenders, it is oft suggested that these elite deviants are a few bad apples in an otherwise decent barrel (De Weger, 2020; Shupe, 2007). However, given the ubiquitous nature of child sexual abuse within institutions mandated with child protection, it is plausible that there is something within the nature of institutions themselves that provide cover for criminality (Salter, 2018b). Poorly defined or non-existent child protection policy, a culture of unquestioned obedience to (and trust in) religious authority, coercive control of children (or adults), and unsupervised access to vulnerable victims, have been elucidated as risk factors to abuse within religious institutions and organizations (Doyle et al., 2006; Doyle, 2009, 2012; Salter, 2018b; Swindle, 2017; Vieth et al., 2012).

Entitlement and Aggression

Salter (2018) posits that a clerical culture of “male sexual entitlement” in the form of “masculine power and sexual aggression” reinforces a culture of sexual cruelty within religious institutions (p.3). Salter (2018) goes on to make a robust case that institutional efficacy and bureaucracy may effectively set the stage for institutional abuse wherein the end simply justifies the means. Salter (2018) “argues that cruelty, neglect and deprivation have been widespread in children’s institutions, not because the people involved were inherently abusive per se, but because the organisational form itself disseminated and instantiated a form of rationality of which cruelty is a likely outcome” (p.5). A review of the available literature suggests that the church as an institution has employed “the fox guarding the henhouse” as a policy, public relations, and policing strategy (Vieth, 2020; Vieth et al., 2012).

Institution Over the Individual

Vieth et al. (2012) rightly suggest that “institutional centered cultures place institutional reputation over individual value” (p. 326). The authors further posit that institutions effectively erect three walls which encourage silence, and discourage disclosure: 1) disclosure is labelled gossip which is prohibited in Christian scripture, 2) a global lack of reporting to outside officials (child protection professionals/law enforcement), and 3) continued view that child sexual abuse is a sin versus a crime (Vieth et al., 2012). Over and over again institutions protect their own reputations the expense of the very victims they were mandated to protect (Vieth, 2005, 2020; Vieth et al., 2012).

Clericalism

Clericalism refers to the belief that religious leaders as members of the clergy have a specific sacred call and an anointing from the Almighty that makes them superior to those whom they purport to serve. Clericalism has far reaching consequences for sexual abuse victims, their families, and observers. In many families, villages, towns, schools, and institutions, clergy enjoy considerable political, spiritual, social, and economic influence. Clerics by very nature of religious/spiritual authority (official or unofficial) are granted sacramental power and trust, a power which religious offenders exploit and betray (Doyle, 2006). The author posits that Clericalism also contributes to betrayal blindness of the victim as well as the institution. “Betrayal by an authority that is believed to hold divine power is hardly able to be absorbed by the believer and is physically overpowering...” (Sipe in Shupe, 2007, preface). Clergy sexual abuse victims can hardly believe not only what has happened to them, but also whom it happened *with*. A man of God would not do such a thing, except when he does.

“Clericalism has a profound emotional and psychological influence on victims, church leadership, and secular society. It has enabled the psychological duress experienced by victims

which explains why many have remained silent for years. It has also inspired societal denial which has impeded many from accepting clergy sexual abuse as a serious and even horrific crime” (Doyle, 2006, p. 1).

A deeper study into the darker side of clericalism, and the nature of institutional abuse may be of interest to the reader. The esteemed Richard Sipe did exhaustive and exhausting research on Catholic Clericalism before he died (Doyle et al., 2006; Sipe, 1995; Sipe, 1990; Sipe, 2008). American sociologist Anson Shupe has a collection of works that sheds further sociological light the etiology of clergy sexual abuse that includes, but is not limited to, American Protestantism (Shupe, 1991, 1995, 1998, 2007, 2008).

Not Condoned but Not Condemned

Gardener (2012) suggests that while most faith-based organizations do not condone sexual abuse with their words, neither have they condemned it with their actions. In a similar theme of institutional complicity, Smith & Freyd (2014) suggest that there are specific institutional characteristics that cultivate a culture where betrayal blooms: exclusive membership to a group with rigorous entrance requirements; the prestige of the institution; and a culture where productivity is more important than people. Failure to prevent abuse, punishing the whistleblower, the normalization of abuse as a culture, inadequate or inconsistent reporting procedures, as well as institutional support of abuse cover ups, all play a role in institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd). These institutional factors combined with religious rigor, narcissism, prevalence of paraphilias, and centuries of clericalism, create a favorable environment for sexual abuse in faith communities.

False Assumptions of the Evangelical Faithful

In one of his seminal works *Spoils of the Kingdom*, American sociologist Anson Shupe suggests that there are very specific reasons why the faithful are blind to betrayal in their midst. Shupe (1995) proposes that Evangelical Protestant devotees have a range of false assumptions that include “naïve trust in fellow religionists” while being prone to theological triumphalism (Shupe, 2007, p. 18). Shupe (1995) assures the reader that “Con artists and schemesters know well how to infiltrate these groups and manipulate...” (p.18).

Centuries of Catholic Secrecy

Scholars report centuries of secrecy within the Catholic church with a canonical mandate to never bring shame upon the church (Doyle et al., 2006; Shupe, 1995, 1998, 2007, 2008; Sipe, 1995). The church as an institution takes this shameless mandate seriously, over and above the protection of parishioners from pastoral predation. Doyle (2009) suggests that Christian theological tenants of sin, confession, penance and forgiveness, also play a substantial role in keeping pastoral sexual offenders from being held accountable for their criminality.

Disclosure Disasters

Clergy sexual abuse victims must do the very hard work of shedding betrayal blindness to permit themselves to know that they have known. Becoming aware of betrayal trauma may create a crisis of faith and action for the victim, possibly triggering abuse disclosure. Disclosure of sexual abuse by a religious authority sends the institution into a proverbial tailspin, upon which effective neutralization by any means possible is the most reflexive institutional risk management strategy (de Weger, 2020; Mullen, 2018; Shupe, 1995, 1998, 2007, 2008). Most clergy sexual abuse victims were very devout at the time of their sexual victimization, therefore, disclosure of sexual abuse (however delayed) was typically done by the survivor with the

unwavering expectation that men and women of faith would believe them and seek to do what is right in the eyes of an all-seeing God (Doyle et al., 2006; Doyle, 2009).

The overwhelming majority of sexual abuse victims have been met with indifference, disbelief, deferral, and DARVO — institutional betrayal (Brown, 2009; de Weger, 2020; Doyle, 2009; Harsey & Freyd, 2020; Harsey et al., 2017). DARVO (Denial of abuse, Attacking the victim, Reversing Victim and Offender roles) seems to be purview of offending individuals and institutions (Harsey & Freyd, 2020; Harsey et al., 2017). Doing so reduces victim credibility (Harsey & Freyd, 2020) while selectively preserving institutional image (Mullen, 2018). Fiona Gardener, who oversaw child safeguarding in the Church of England, posits that institutional narcissism and defensiveness upon abuse disclosure is the defining response of faith communities (Gardner, 2012). It seems as if silence and betrayal blindness is the easiest possible option for survivors of clergy sexual abuse. Yet, “few organisations move to redress sexual abuse, harassment, and exploitation if the victims remain silent” (Tschan, 2004, p. 25).

Betrayal trauma theory posits that the closer the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, the higher the degree of betrayal trauma is incurred. While not specific to clergy sexual abuse, the theory does suggest that perpetrators are most often in a position of intimacy and trust, for example, a parent, coach, teacher or cleric. Freyd and colleagues have completed numerous quazi-experimental studies that support betrayal trauma as a theory. This research, while not specific to clergy sexual abuse, includes clergy as perpetrators of betrayal and clergy sexual abuse victims as victims of betrayal trauma.

Institutional Betrayal

Smith & Freyd (2014) define institutional betrayal as an “institutional failure to prevent sexual assault or respond supportively when it occurs” (p.1). In the face of high betrayal trauma,

individuals may engage in betrayal blindness, whereas institutional responses or lack thereof may exacerbate the betrayal trauma symptomology (Smith & Freyd, 2014). While individual sexual abuses most often occur in a trust relationship, sexual offenders may also commit their crimes in the context of a trusted institution where the victim presumed their safety and protection. In keeping with betrayal trauma theory, a higher degree of trauma symptomology should occur if sexual abuse occurs in a previously presumed place of protection (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Institutional betrayal occurs when the once trusted organization acts in a manner which betrays the trust of the victim — a type of double jeopardy (Freyd, 2020; Smith & Freyd, 2014).

While this is a new field of study, available empirical evidence from quazi-experimental studies supports the assertions of betrayal trauma theory and institutional betrayal as an exacerbator of trauma symptomology (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Using the Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire (IBQ) and Trauma Symptom Checklist (TSC), Smith & Freyd (2014) found that victims of institutional betrayal experience higher levels of anxiety, trauma-specific sexual symptoms, dissociation, and problematic sexual functioning” (p.1). This is in keeping with the increased severity of traumatic symptomology as experienced by cleric sexual abuse survivors (Allred, 2015; Doyle, 2009; Dreßing et al., 2019; Folger & Shiperd, 2008). While no direct inferences can be drawn from institutional betrayal evidence to the trauma symptoms that clergy sexual abuse victims incur, the paucity of evidence demands specific research to elucidate the relationship between clergy sexual abuse as a unique betrayal trauma with institutional betrayal as an exacerbating factor.

A Call for Institutional Courage

The very center of the Christian faith is purported to be a sacred love. Available evidence suggests that this sacred love has been twisted and used to traumatize (Swindle, 2017).

Communities of faith offer compelling and unique spiritual cover for religiously inclined offenders to sexualize the sacred and traumatically betray unwitting victims. What is more, due to the high degree of trust in the clergyman as a representative of the Almighty, the consequences of abuse by a religious authority have far reaching consequences for the physical, emotional, psychological and long-term spiritual health of victims. Religious institutions who purport to support the orphan have instead made spiritual orphans of far too many.

Faith based institutions must look forensically at the malfeasance in their midst as well as their own abuse enabling culture and complicity. This course of action will require much courage and humility, resources which seem sorely lacking in communities which most enthusiastically proclaim possession. Christian scripture exhorts believers to fear not, yet time and again individuals and institutions have been cowards, protecting and venerating offenders, and leaving victims behind in the ‘bloodied dust’ of betrayal.

A call to courage is just that — a call; a call to be answered; a call as yet unheard. Institutional courage is so rare as to be untraceable, unable to be robustly researched or well documented (Freyd, 2020). Small based advocacy efforts appear around the globe; however, they are not linked to any specific denomination or faith persuasion (Vieth et al., 2012).

Smith & Freyd (2014) suggests that institutional courage includes cherishing the whistleblower, creating a culture of transparency, and using institutional power to protect members not molesters. Vieth (2012) suggests that individual courage includes an acknowledgement that abuse can happen everywhere, because it does. Courage recognizes that while sexual abuse is a sin, it is also a crime and as such should always be reported to child

protection (Vieth et al., 2012). Courage recognizes children (and adults) who are sexually victimized, are victims, not sinners (Vieth, 2005). Courage stands with victims, not offenders. Courage takes the side of the oppressed, not the oppressor. Courage protects the vulnerable over the venerated. Courage treats religious abusers according to the letter of civil and ecclesiastical law while treating victims by the spirit of the same (Vieth, 2012). Freyd (2020), Vieth (2020), and Doyle (2020) all acknowledge that institutional courage may be as rare as sexual abuse is ubiquitous. This brief literature review is a call for the Christian church to hit reverse, and once again (or for once) courageously lead the way.

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