

Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse -

Survivors informing the care of children following abuse

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Thank you for inviting me to this study day on Spiritual Issues in Child Psychiatry. I think that professionals sorely overlook the area of Spirituality in our client's lives. It is indeed most gratifying that psychiatrists feel an importance in looking more closely at how children, growing up in faith communities, might feel during and after being sexually abused.

To say a little about myself first: I am a disabled woman, a committed Christian within the Catholic Church. My allegiance to 'Church' however, as a man-made structure, falls way short of my allegiance to God! Indeed I have grave difficulties with the Church I'm supposed to be part of. I was a nurse at Great Ormond Street after which I changed careers and became a social worker. My 32 years of professional work has been entirely with either very ill or disabled children and am presently an Independent Trainer & Consultant on the abuse of Disabled Children, an area of work for which I'm well renowned. I describe myself as a feminist practitioner.

In 1989 I founded a group for women and men who had been sexually abused within Christian homes. This organisation still operates, though this year I 'retired' from my role as co-ordinator. It is called CSSA or 'Christian Survivors of Sexual Abuse'. A second group I founded a little later, MACSAS or 'Minister and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors' is for women and men sexually abused by clergy either in their childhood or as adults. This group I Chair and co-ordinate, along with two new colleagues who joined me this year. As a result of my MACSAS work, I decided three years ago to focus my PhD research on 'Abuse of Adult Women by Clergy'. This analysis will be within a feminist sociological perspective. Perhaps a lecture for the future!

What I plan to speak about today is what I have learned over 15 years working mainly with female survivors. This includes facilitating a women's survivors group for ten years. The presentation will not look at spirituality in the broadest sense but at faith in God/Jesus within a Christian denomination, looking at how survivors articulate their experiences of a Christian home whilst being subjected to sexual abuse, often by declared committed Christians and in some cases by clergy. The women I have supported come from *all* mainstream Christian denominations and some not so mainstream. The majority of the women came from either Anglican or Catholic backgrounds. Most of the survivors still declare a faith in God, though most have trouble with 'Churches', not that surprising since all Churches, no matter the denomination, are patriarchal in culture and practice. This is a stark reminder immediately of the oppression of sexual violation. We do after all speak of the Church having 'founding fathers', not mothers!

What I want to do is to be the voice of all these female survivors I've supported, who have a wealth of experience that could and should be used by practitioners for the benefit of children. Time and time again survivors have told me they want children both to be safe and for adults to hear them so that we can change, for their benefit, the way we approach our work. Leaving adult survivors out of the learning loop as if they have nothing to contribute has been a professional insult to them.

Christianity & Abuse

There is considerable theological, academic and anecdotal material written about Christianity and Abuse. There is very little material however written on the Christian victim's subjective experience.

I want first of all to focus on some 'standard' Christian theological themes, articles of faith and practice, and how these might impact on children who are/were being abused. The following themes have been identified by Sheila Redmond (p. 63) in Manlowe (1995). The italics are my additions.

- The value of Suffering and self-sacrifice, *which is necessary for salvation*
- The value placed on obedience to authority figures: *male God, male 'headship', female submission. Honour your father & your mother*
- The necessity of remaining sexually pure (especially for little girls). *No sex before marriage.*
- The virtue of forgiveness and repentance
- *God will protect you*
- Suffering and self-sacrifice is necessary for salvation

'Jesus died on the cross to save us' must be the lynchpin of Christianity. Jesus' suffering was redemptive, therefore ours will be. There are three messages here:

- We should not therefore reject suffering, indeed we should in fact suffer
- Suffering is good
- To be of value we should sacrifice ourselves

Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker (1989) argue that these beliefs shape our acceptance of abuse. The central image of Christ on the cross as saviour of the world communicates that suffering is redemptive. If the best person who ever lived gave his life for others, then to be of value, we should likewise sacrifice ourselves. Any sense that we have *a right to care for our own needs* is in conflict with being a faithful follower of Jesus (p.2).

They further say: 'every theory of atonement commands suffering to the disciple. The Christian is to 'be like Jesus' – and imitation of Christ is first and foremost obedient willingness to endure pain'. (p. 4)

It is not unusual to find child abuse survivors believing they have no rights to protection - that suffering is somehow good, not bad. Carrying your cross is how it is put throughout childhood. Christian child and adult survivors of abuse are excellent victims, *servicing others, 'dying' (suffering) so others might live*, and believing that this is what a good Christian ought to do. They believed it as children and they continue to believe it as adults. It comes from the Christian messages both to serve and to suffer. Both lead to redemption.

Carlson & Parker further point out 'This glorification of suffering...encourages women who are being abused to be more concerned about their victimizer than about themselves.

This is evident in child abuse where children try to protect their usually male abusers, in domestic violence where women feel guilt about reporting their batterers (preferring to blame themselves), in clergy abuse where women protect the priest's ministry and so on. Serving others before self is learned well in the Christian household, particularly so for females who must both serve and obey the males around them.

Jesus then rose from death, was triumphant, victorious.

The common view is that our response to suffering should be patience as something good will come of it. There is 'purpose', though we don't yet know the purpose. Jesus' suffering had purpose, teaching us that ours will also.

Carlson & Parker reject these Christian views, as do I. Victimisation never leads to triumph. It can lead to extended pain if it is not refused or fought. It can lead to destruction of the human spirit through the death of a person's sense of power, worth, dignity, or creativity. It can lead to actual death (p. 7).

Many of the Christian survivors I worked with believed they *had* to suffer. Some were unclear why, though many talked about being or at least feeling 'bad', but suffering seemed the right thing in the context of their families' faith. If you are 'bad' then suffering is an understandable repercussion! This 'badness' feeling came from being abused, but in the Christian child/woman this is felt as sin. Being abused means you are 'bad', therefore 'bad' girls and boys are sinners - 'bad' and 'sinner' often meaning the same.

Manlowe (1995) tells of a woman saying 'it has always been my firm conviction that you are not born sinful, that someone had to plant a seed of sin deep inside you'. The imagery of a seed being planted is perhaps a memory of sexual violation. This belief is further compounded by patriarchal beliefs that girls and women are sexually sinful by nature, 'inheriting' Eve who tempted Adam in the Garden of Eden. Girls and women cause their own abuse to happen (a theology that doesn't quite make sense, since many boys are sexually abused also! It does 'fit' if we see how abused boys often feel emasculated following abuse). The female survivors in Manlowe's study prayed to God 'to purify themselves from their essential sinfulness' (Kennedy 2000).

Furthermore, just as Jesus did not 'complain' about his suffering, indeed he acquiesced, neither did they, since that too was the right thing to do. Carlson & Parker believe that if you believe that acceptance of suffering gives life, then your resources for confronting perpetrators of violence and abuse will be numbed (p.8).

In fact acceptance of suffering could well save your life, whereas telling could bring danger. Here theology, paradoxically, safeguards as well as numbs. It is un-Christian to complain, but this translates as un-Christian to report to professionals or anyone outside the family. This is evident in the response of both families and Christian communities when the victim reports. It is seen as un-Christian, disloyal, a betrayal and wrong not right! In one Church in Birmingham, victims were spat at in Sunday Mass after reporting a priest for abuse. I have had parents and survivors tell me their Pastor told them not to report, as it says in the Bible that if you have anything against your brother it is dealt with within the community - you must not go to 'court', meaning the secular agencies. Neither must you seek therapy, since God and prayer will heal you. These arguments are strong amongst the more fundamentalist/Pentecostal fellowships or House Churches.

Did God make sacred suffering? Did God sanction child abuse by 'allowing' his son to be killed on the cross? Some survivors really believe God caused their abuse precisely because he seemed to sanction Jesus death on the cross. *'If he didn't save Jesus he's not going to save me'*.

Authority figures, Male God, Male 'headship', female submission.

There is a strong Christian message that the adult is not to be questioned; *honour thy father and thy mother*. In a discordant family where there is abuse this stifles the child's ability both to challenge, question or report their abuse experience. Suffering is already a Christian virtue. So too, now is silence. Manlowe says 'the foundation for this attitude toward authority is established both in anthropomorphic conceptions of the Christian deity as male and in the human relationship to this God (p. 69).

Whilst Christian theology speaks of honouring both 'father and mother', in reality this generally translates *father*, who is deemed head of the household and in this case perhaps the abuser. The mother must obey the father of the household also. This special role is a direct result of the belief that the Christian God is male. This is not actually fully biblical. God has been portrayed in the bible as wind, fire, water, Mother Hen, Mother Bear, Mother Eagle, and Baker woman. Nevertheless the maleness of God is the predominant image.

How does this feel for the child abused by a male perpetrator? For, it still remains, that most abusers are male, and most victims are female. For one survivor the merging of God and Abuser was terrifying: 'I was taught that God was my father in heaven and that my own father was like God on Earth' (Kennedy 1991).



It does not take a genius to realise that this Christian survivor, as well as many others, may perceive God as an abuser, *just like her father*, and that her father is God *just like God the father in heaven*.

Difficult, then, to pray, to have faith or trust in a male God. Not surprising, therefore, that many Christian survivors change the gender of God or de-gender God completely. Perfectly Biblical it is too!

Changing to a female God is not always a helpful alternative, particularly if you perceive that your mother did not protect you and therefore female-God becomes the betrayer. The Male God abused you, but a female God betrays you or abandons and ignores you!

These are not articulated thoughts but subliminal messages absorbed over time in a Christian home, particularly in the more fundamentalist Christian home where 'headship' of the male is paramount.

A male God teaches female children that males are superior than women, more powerful than women, are more God-like than women. Male children are taught that they have this legacy awaiting them and they begin to assert it very soon. For male victims, the damage for them is the thought that they are somehow like a 'female' in being a

victim, not a 'powerful' male. The fact that Jesus was a 'victim' doesn't help either female or male child.

Catholic child and adult survivors have additional misogyny to deal with, where 'headship' of the male is taken much further. In the Catholic Church, only males can be priests, meaning that the male body (not the mind) is a true reflection of God and that only the Man-God can inseminate (with a spiritual penis) Christianity into the faithful. Within Catholic Christianity, the Mass for *some* (I emphasise 'some' as I'm not sure how widespread this sort of theology is) is essentially, therefore, a sexual act. I 'discovered' this 'brand' of theology when reading an article in a Catholic paper.

The author, who does not identify himself but is believed to be a Catholic priest, wants to clarify why women cannot be priests. He says, 'in Christ, God *penetrates* the world to *seed* a new creation – his bride, the Church. In the Mass, the male priest allows Christ to use him, to *penetrate* his creation (the congregation) once more – nourishing his Bride with his own flesh and blood. (Catholic Times November 5th 1995 (italics mine).

For the author, the penetration/seed metaphor is alluding to the male part in reproduction, whilst the congregation is the female part. Most congregations are predominantly female.

A survivor recently told me that her Catholic priest abuser told her when he lifted the host in the Mass that he saw naked female breasts in the host. This priest was later jailed for 6 years for 11 counts of sexual assaults against women.

I was so horrified to feel that survivors attending mass had to go to communion with this imagery that I asked Richard Sipe, a married priest and author of two books on Celibacy and crises in the Church whether I had misunderstood the author. No, he said, that many believed this and in his view it was a modern heresy. So Mass is no longer a banquet, but more recently portrayed as a divine sexual act. The priest/God has a spiritual penis at work. Not good imagery for survivors of abuse, male or female! No wonder some survivors don't go to Mass very often.

What does this do for female victims?

- They fear God who, with a penis has the potential to abuse them also. For this reason they may definitely fear Jesus.
- They fear priests who just like their male abuser have the potential to abuse them. They don't trust women who are really 'misbegotten males' (St. Augustine). Difficult then to tell women/your mother what is happening to you.
- They believe only men have the skills to help them, since they are man-God. Yet the double bind is that they can't be trusted.

For boy victims, abuse becomes a homosexual act, rather than an abusive one.

- They are not like the man-God as they are victims (like girls)
- They can't trust women who don't have the skills of the Man-God
- Neither can they trust the Man-God who is like their abuser

Jennifer Manlowe says, 'religious language which promotes a sacred victim (Jesus) male authority in the home, Church and State and a heavenly male saviour for long-sufferers, is dangerous discourse because it spiritualises political and social passivity and female victimization in the home (p. 62).

The whole structure of Christian Churches of all denominations, promotes patriarchal power. Abuse is about power, essentially, so for survivors a faith of 'freedom'

is required. Yet the very Church they attend promotes in subtle and not so subtle ways their inferiority.

The virtue of being sexually pure/no sex before marriage

One of the more controlling Christian beliefs surround the vision of purity and what this means, especially for girls/women. The shame of child sexual violation is pervasive and known by both male and female victims. Shame is linked with self-blame. Girls are socialised to guard their own virginity, boys are socialised to be strong, and so violation is considered not possible! Girls feel guilt for 'allowing' their violation; boys feel failure as a macho male. Their shame is 'being like a girl'. Both feel violated and both have shame. For women who carry the legacy of Eve, of being temptress, (even girl-children become temptresses in this belief) '... it is virtually a cross-cultural phenomenon that sexual transgressions against a woman reflect her own sexual shame even if she did not precipitate the transgression. (Sherry Ortner in Manlowe)

Maria Goretti was made a saint for preserving her virginity. She was stabbed repeatedly whilst trying to stop her rape. The Catholic Church gives the message here that it is better to die than be raped!

Should all Catholic female child abuse victims 'allow' themselves to be killed? I took a group of female survivors on retreat and discovered that each bedroom had saints' names. None of the survivors were willing to sleep in the Maria Goretti room! Though we laughed about it, indeed it was hilarious, they were very angry. They perceived it as a direct message that *shame is due* if you allow sexual assault or rape, that it is *your fault* if you do not stop it.

Many survivors have told me that some people even ask them 'what did you do to encourage it?' One Catholic woman I know was told to 'go to confession to confess your sin of impurity'. She had been 12 when sexually abused by her brother.

No sex before marriage...well, 1 in 4 women and 1 in 10 men have been sexually abused in childhood. How then can the Church deal with the 'no sex before marriage' bit? All I know is that it worries and frightens Christian children and adults who believe they have sinned. It's never the abuser's responsibility, it is theirs.

The physical fact of virginity has historically indicated spiritual valour...the loss of the hymen diminishes the chances for eternal salvation (Manlowe).

The suffering that follows rape is not just physical but also metaphysical and spiritual. The spiritual importance placed upon virginity makes (religious) women especially vulnerable following rape or incest (Kathleen Young in Manlowe).

I have discovered that the women I worked with when children did not view virginity as lack of vaginal penetration but that any sexual act for them breached this virginity 'rule'. It seems it was the element of 'purity' (or rather the lack of it) that they took on board. 'Dirty' is how many victims feel, and this dovetails alarmingly with the theological call to be pure. The confusion is deep.

Forgiveness and repentance

Of all the Christian doctrines, the one regarding forgiveness is probably the most important and enduring. It is also the most harmful for survivors. There is no discussion. One must forgive. As it is promulgated this must be 'unconditional'. You forgive no matter what. This is not strictly how it is supposed to be. Pop theology has actually distorted the teaching. In Luke 17: 1-3 it actually says: 'If your brother does something wrong, reprove him, and *if he is sorry*, forgive him'.

Some translations use the word 'repents' in place of 'sorry'. We are only asked to forgive when the offender is sorry. This generally means fully, deeply, with metanoia, a firm commitment of repentance and change. This is a rare, very rare occurrence with sex

offenders. It mostly only happens prior to court cases! Those who work with sex offenders know why.

Christian children and adults are taught (erroneously) to forgive without repentance from their transgressors. If they cannot, then *they* become the sinners. Once a child or adult says they've been abused they are immediately enjoined to forgive. It's the classic response. Why? Because the hearer cannot bear the subject, does not want to discuss it or bear it, so asks *the victim to do something to finish it all off*. Forgiveness is seen as the end. This will cause everything to be both forgotten and finished. The Church, the family, friends (particularly Christians) have decided this is the quickest, most guilt-ridden way of 'shutting the victim up'.

Two groups of survivors on retreat were asked their views about forgiveness. They answered 'fuck forgiveness'

Churches use this (forgiveness) to deny their own feelings by focusing in a negative way on the victim, so that the survivor is left to carry not only the abuser's 'shit' but also the shock, fear, denial, anger, etc., of others (Kennedy 1999). We all agree that 'healing' from child sexual abuse is a process, that it takes time. Churches, however, feel that forgiveness is the magic bullet - the 'pill' of cure. For many survivors, asking them to forgive is suggesting they have responsibility for clearing up the shit, for 'finishing' it off tidily. It doesn't work like this; indeed this 'quick fix' is dangerous, for it stifles healing, which is a long haul.

God will protect

Victims of abuse find it incredibly difficult to understand why it is that God/Jesus did not protect them. They blame God/Jesus for their abuse. It's quite something to feel betrayed by your human family, but really huge to feel betrayed by an all-powerful deity. We are told as children to pray to God for our needs and our protection, that God can do anything. Children and many Christian adults do not understand the 'powerlessness' of God. An understanding of Liberation theology, in which we believe Jesus suffers *with* his people, comes very much later. 'Free will', as a notion is forgotten about, or not fully thought through. This is a pity because the 'free will' notion would be helpful to survivors in understanding God's apparent inaction against their abuser. Here is how one survivor feels:

'God is the Father in heaven who does everything for His children because He loves them. That's what some people say. Well I'm going to tell you exactly what I think of Him. God gave me a mother who didn't want me. She always told me I ruined her life. God gave me a father who raped and abused me for 30 years. God gave me a husband who constantly abused my children and me. God gave my little girl a father who wanted to rape her when she was three and a half. Well thank you very much, God, that you wanted to give me all of this and that you loved me so very much. But God I need nothing more from you, do you hear me? I want absolutely nothing more from you – just leave me alone, please'. (Imbens & Jonker, 1992)

How do you explain free will to the survivor teenager or adult? Liberation theology? Do you say there must be a 'purpose'? Or fall back on 'carrying our cross'.

No, this is trite, crass, insulting. In time some survivors will eventually understand that God did not *cause* their abuse, a human being did. Many never get to this point and abandon faith & God completely. For survivors their suffering is therefore in two realms, the human and the spiritual:

Human Experience		Spiritual Experience
Mum will punish me, dad will punish me	Fear	I will go to hell Even God hates me
I'll never trust men/women again	Trust	I can't trust God - He'll let me down too
Why is this happening? Why me?	Anger	Where is God? Why does He not stop it? He has the, power to stop it
My abuser is stronger than me	Power	God is bigger - Divine - greater than me - He has control over my life, can do anything with/to me
Everyone thinks it was my Fault. I'm dirty/horrible	Stigma	I have "sinned" sexually - I must go to confession'
For 'allowing' abuse	Guilt	For feelings of anger, hatred, bitterness for not being able to forgive
They think I'm mad	Self Injury	The ultimate sin'

The above diagram shows how feelings permeate both realms and make for a cocktail of trauma not seen in secular survivors. The Spiritual/theological dimension I argue makes the trauma infinitely more pervasive and intractable. One cannot have a conversation with God about these issues all that easily!

Survivors Speaking

I have spoken about elements of Christianity that pose great difficulties for survivors. Yes, they did think of themselves as God/Jesus' Children. Some felt comforted by their faith, some felt abandoned and betrayed. Here are some comments:

People in Church don't want to know, they blame me'.

I couldn't even trust God not to hurt me.

I figured God couldn't love me – I was going to go to hell no matter what I did, so it didn't matter whether I lived or died.

Father for me is the most frightening name for God I can think of.

I thought the devil had got me.

I felt the evil of abuse had made me evil and that there was no place for me in the Church, only children who were good and pure were loved by God.

I knew I had committed a terrible sin of some kind and that I was evil, I was going to go to hell.

I'd say to myself if I was good from now on God will stop him doing these things to me. So whenever he came into my room I knew I must have been bad.

When I was being abused I saw a crucifix on the bedroom wall – if I go into a Church and see a crucifix I'm right back in my bedroom.

I was taught that God was my father in heaven, and that my own father was like God on earth, I was terrified of God.

I was wondering where God was when I was being abused? I mean he totally ignored me when I was a child.

I prayed but nothing happened.

This was the guilt, the shame that I'd burn in hell. I thought that I must have deserved it. Why would God do this if I didn't deserve it? If there were a God he would have told the priests and nuns that what they were doing was wrong?

Over and over I went to confession, and each time I confessed that my brother and sister were touching me. The priest got angry and gave me a penance. I used to sit in Church and feel like the worst little girl in the world.

My Christianity didn't really help. At times I really wanted to die, but Catholic children then were taught what a terrible sin suicide was. I never felt part of the Church, or school, or anything else.

I was very angry with God, because I used to pray to him every day to help me. I felt abandoned and unloved by God.

I consciously try not to consider God chose this family for me because that would mean I have to consider too painful a reality. I want a God who doesn't do this.

Many children and adults gain strength and support in their faith. I have presented the difficulties. CSSA & MACSAS testify to the hundreds of survivors, both women and men, who struggle daily following abuse in a Christian home. We do need to consider these faith issues; it can be part of the suffering or part of the healing. For each person, it will be different.

There is a prayer, by Jim Cotter, we use a lot in our retreats. I want to read it because this prayer is very acceptable to survivors. Praying is difficult but this prayer relates well and powerfully to how many adult Christian Survivors feel, so it is a healing moment for many.

I cannot speak here about the Liturgical difficulties for survivors. I've written about that in my book but as you listen to this prayer, you can hear the non-threatening tone, and the lack of patriarchal language that helps the survivor listen and to be *with* the prayer:

Survivor, let the light of this candle be for you the light of God, as you meet the darkness in the deep place of your being.

See the hidden things, the creatures of your dreams, the storehouse of your forgotten memories, the gifts you never knew you had been given.

Touch the wellspring of your life, and hear your own true nature and your own true name.

Take the freedom to grow into that self, the seed of which was planted at your making.

Listen to the language of your wounds. Do not pine away in the pain of them, but seek to live from the depths of them.

Make the extent of your desolation the extent of your realm. Take into your arms your wounded, frightened child within.

Give her your adult caring strength, for your child has protected your gifts until the time they can be given and not be betrayed.

May your only wounds be these:

The wound we cannot avoid because we belong to one another and feel and hear the murmur of the world's pain,

The wound of a sense of compassion for others,

The wound of a sense of longing for God, the source of life and love deep within us and beyond us...

Thank You.

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