

Child Sexual Abuse, Society and the Future of the Church

Hilary Regan (editor)

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The context for this collection of essays is “the recently appointed Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse” (vii). The work of the Commission continues in uncovering a plethora of horror stories in relation to Church and other institutional failures in dealing with sexual abuse. In almost biblical terms, the poor and abused have been raised up, while the haughty and powerful have been brought low.

The essays themselves are from a variety of authors, some theologians and scholars, others of a more personal nature, reflecting on their own life experiences in encountering abuse within the churches. The collection begins with a personal reflection by Michelle Mulvihill, raised in a Catholic family in country NSW, and growing up to work as a psychologist involved as a mediator/facilitator in the “Towards Healing” process. This precipitated something of a conversion experience, away from reflexive support for the institution to one of hearing the voices of the victims. Mulvihill helpfully spells out ten practical steps for addressing the abuse problem in the churches.

Australian biblical scholar Alan Cadwallader laments the lack of a proper theology of the “child”, noting that in most attempts actual children “remain marginalized.” His aim is that the “primary emphasis needs to be redirected to the assertion that Jesus is the *child* of God, both in christological and Trinitarian expression” (15). Cadwallader provides ten fundamental starting points and six biblical contributions to this end. While interesting in itself it was unclear to this reader how this might impact on our christological and Trinitarian expression, and was relatively remote in its relationship to clerical sexual abuse.

Australian biblical scholar, Michael Trainor considers the story of Jesus’ passion and death under the claim that “Jesus is abused physically, verbally and sexually” (30). In particular he focusses on Luke’s account, arguing that “it is legitimate for us to consider the scenes of verbal aggression against Jesus as scenes also of sexual abuse” (32). Trainor brings out the dimensions of sexual humiliation endured during crucifixion, though he qualifies it later as “implicit sexual cruelty” (39). Still I did wonder just what a victim of abuse who had been repeatedly raped by a priest would make of these claims. There was nothing “implicit” in such sexual cruelty.

Denis Minns OP provides a perspective from the patristic era highlighting the early church’s treatment of various sins, including “clerical delinquency” (48). Apart from underlining the various penitential practices at the time I don’t think this piece shed much light on our current problems of sexual abuse in the churches and society.

Uniting Church minister Ann Drummond writes of her experience in the Uniting Church handling complaints of clerical professional misconduct. The focus here is clearly on adult rather than child sexual abuse. Perhaps this is the more common issue in the Uniting Church. She provides a helpful typology of perpetrators of such abuse as serial offenders—charmners or those insecure in their personal relationships—and wanderers who meander over their professional boundaries in particular circumstances. She does note, however, that the impact on the victim is the same.

Ex-priest Chris Geraghty spells out the painfully inadequate preparation given to priests in the 50s and 60s in the seminary system, almost designed to produce men who were psycho-sexually immature and ignorant. Moving beyond his personal experience, Geraghty takes aim at the anti-sexual attitudes of some Church Fathers. Clearly we need to move away from it, but where exactly are we moving? He concludes “it is time to find a way of the bog, back to the Gospels” (73), but on my reading we find little in the Gospel on the question of clergy abuse. Michael Kelly SJ likewise provides a personal perspective on the issue, his own feelings of “shame and sorry” at stories of clerical sexual abuse (75). He makes three suggestions for those in the church seeking to deal with similar feelings.

A long and detailed piece by Laira Krieg and Paul Babie shifts our focus onto the impact of various anti-discrimination legislations in Australia on religious freedom. This is an important piece given the various debates at present on issues such as gay marriage, spelling out the opportunities and limits for debate in Australia. Still it does not necessarily fit all that well in this collection.

The final essay by Bernard Treacy OP sheds some light on cases of institutional abuse in the Irish setting. There the Catholic Church is suffering greatly from its own institutional failures and like Australia is struggling to find a clear path forward. Major reports have been produced and significantly some bishops forced to resign.

Overall this is a patchy collection. To my mind it does not uphold the promise of the introduction to consider “sexual abuse from the perspectives of the survivors” (ix). In fact the voices of survivors are not heard. There are personal reflections, theological possibilities, and programmatic proposals, but little which reflects directly on the experience of the abused and its impact on their lives. Also there have been some original Australian contributions to this issue, by the present reviewer and by Patrick Parkinson, which are ignored. There are a few production problems with the text, notably unexplained and disconcerting changes in the font size.

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